

Understanding Images of Violence in Revelation

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Introduction

It often seems as if people have one of two responses to Revelation: fight or flight. Those who are prone to fight might be found with Revelation in one hand, the day's newspaper in the other, expecting the arrival of Soviet tanks (or a contemporary equivalent) at any moment. For most, however, the response is flight. Once they read about locusts who look like horses and have scorpion tails, it is all over. They quickly close their Bibles and hope never to turn to those pages again.

Realizing the difficulties associated with Revelation, the main point of this essay is that images of violence in Revelation must be understood in the overall context of the Bible as the culmination of an overarching narrative, or plot, of God's ultimate purposes. These purposes are first revealed in Genesis 1-2, which describe perfect peace (or shalom), expressed in flourishing relationships between human beings and God, each other, and the rest of creation.² Humanity's rejection of God's plan (Genesis 3) ruptures of each of these relationships. Hence the "plot" of what God is doing concerns restoring creation, and humanity's intended purpose within it. The New Testament presents this in terms reconciliation through Jesus Christ (Col 1:20). Thus violence in Revelation is God's final response to human sin and violence that culminates the larger purposes of

¹ I want to express my thanks to Hallvard Hagelia, Markus Zehnder, and the Ansgar College and Theological Seminary, for facilitating this conference and for inviting my participation in it.

² It is beyond the scope of this essay to defend the claim of an "overarching narrative" for the Bible. Some claim that "metanarratives" provide a platform for domination and power or that such narratives are not even possible. In this regard, it is important to note that the narrative of the Bible seeks to bring about repentance and conversion by means of witness not by means of coercion. For an incisive treatment of this issue, see Richard Bauckham, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003). In this essay, I am also setting aside questions concerning sources, redaction, and canon, and am considering the Bible in its final form.

reconciliation and the eradication of evil. This canonical context, as well as the historical context of Revelation, is essential for understanding its violent images.

Essential Contexts

Images of violence in Revelation include both divine and human violence.³ Divine violence involves God using agents (human and other-worldly creatures) to execute his judgment on those who side with evil in opposition to him and to effect the ultimate eradication of evil. Human violence concerns the oppressive and blasphemous atrocities perpetrated by the Roman Empire and those aligned with it.

Discussion of violence in Revelation naturally brings up the issue of violence in the Bible, which is nearly always seen as problematic.⁴ For some, biblical violence condones human violence (often through decontextualized appropriations of the biblical text), whereas others reject the Bible as a whole because of its violence. This “problem” does not go away, however, by bifurcating the Bible between a wrathful and violent “God of the OT” and a peace-loving and merciful “God of the NT.” Those who see Jesus as the epitome of nonviolence and nonretaliation have difficulty

³ Defining violence is difficult, but approaches that are helpful include Hans Boersma’s broad definition of violence as “[a]ny use of force or coercion that involves some type of hurt or injury—whether the coercion is physical or nonphysical” (*Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004], 47). Similarly, Terence Fretheim also defines violence broadly as “any action, verbal or nonverbal, oral or written, physical or psychical, active or passive, public or private, individual or institutional/societal, human or divine, in what-ever degree of intensity that abuses violated, injures, or kills” (Terence E. Fretheim, “God and Violence in the Old Testament,” *Word & World* 24 [2004]: 19). As this paper will show, however, applying these definitions to divine violence is problematic.

⁴ Although the concept of divine judgment is problematic for many today, this does not appear to have been a problem for the original audiences of the Bible. Thomas Neufeld observes: “Interestingly, whereas today it is the violence of judgement and the imagery of a forcefully intervening God that causes offence, in the Bible itself it is at least as often the patience and forbearance of God in view of injustice and violence that puzzles and enrages victims” (Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, *Killing Enmity: Violence and the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011], 32).

reconciling such an image of Jesus with “the Jesus” in Revelation 19.⁵ Yet the divine warrior in Revelation 19 is not an aberration, but is part of a long trajectory that extends through the Bible and culminates in this final judgment that brings about “the end of the beginning”⁶ and ushers in the new creation.⁷ Other images of violence in Revelation should be understood similarly. A failure to consider this canonical context nearly always leads to a distorted understanding of the nature God and divine violence in Revelation, and a misguided, if not dangerous, appropriation of the text.⁸

The Storyline of Bible

The Bible opens with the account of God creating the world and humanity. Genesis 1-2 focuses more on presenting *who God is* and *what his intentions are for creation* than on providing a detailed account of *how* God created or *how long* the process took.⁹ The account stresses that God

⁵ Cf. the somewhat similar comment in Richard A. Spencer, “Violence and Vengeance in Revelation,” *Review and Expositor* 98 (2001): 60.

⁶ This expression is taken from William J. Dumbrell, *The End of the Beginning: Revelation 21–22 and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985).

⁷ Indeed it worth noting that most of the background of thought in Revelation is found in the OT. For example, the image of the sword proceeding from Christ’s mouth as the agent of slaying his enemies in Revelation 19 is an allusion to Hos 6:5, 6: “I killed you with the words of my mouth; my judgments flashed like lightning on you.” (All scriptural citations are taken from the NIV unless otherwise noted). Additional NT passages that challenge the claim of the “God of the NT” is only love and mercy include the disturbing portrayals of divine violence in Luke 19:41-44; Matt 13:23; and Acts 5:1-11 (see the helpful discussion of these passages by Fretheim, “God and Violence in the Old Testament,” 18). Moreover, many OT passages (e.g., Exod 34:6-7) present the essential character of God to be merciful and compassionate.

⁸ By canonical approach, I am also assuming that the Bible is divinely inspired and thus represents a unified narrative, although the dual authorship in the Bible, namely, the divine author working through human authors must be taken seriously. Furthermore, I believe that a given text’s meaning is the one intended by the divine and human authors, which can be understood (adequately, if not absolutely) by careful exegesis that seeks to locate a passage in its historical, literary, linguistic, and canonical context. (See the helpful discussion in the regard by Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998], esp. 458).

⁹ Genesis 1-2 presents the biblical account of creation in language that appears to depict a historical (not mythical) narrative, although this account is not intended to be read in a literalistic, “scientific” manner. This point cannot be argued further here. For further discussion, see XXX. Similarly, Adam and Eve are assumed to represent

purposefully brings order and fullness out of nothing and repeatedly assesses the result as “good,” thereby suggesting an inherent moral attribute of God.¹⁰ The apex of creation, the creation of Adam and Eve, is deemed “very good.” This account presents the perfect shalom that existed at the completion of creation—shalom expressed in flourishing human relationships in every dimension.¹¹ Genesis 1-2 also portrays humans as enjoying unmediated access to God’s presence, suggesting the garden is a holy space along lines that anticipate the tabernacle, the Temple, and ultimately the new creation (Revelation 21-22).¹²

The first creation account (Gen 1:1–2:3) stresses the essential character of God, whereas the second account (Gen 2:4–25) focuses on humanity and presents God’s intentions for humanity. When God “rests,” he ceases his own work of creation so that humanity might begin its own creation work.¹³ The dominion entrusted to Adam and Eve was thus for the purpose of extending God’s

historical individuals—an assumption that is also apparently made by later biblical writers views (e.g., Paul’s arguments about Jesus as the second Adam in Romans 5).

¹⁰ Klaas Spronk aptly notes, “The canonical context should also be taken seriously when it comes to describe the image of God. The Bible is handed over to us in a tradition which has as its basic conviction that the God this book talks about is a good god. . . . The ideal earth as the kingdom of God is a good place for humans. This positive standpoint concerning God indicates that biblical text describing God as violent and describing violence performed in the name of God are regarded as problematic, but also that the source of the problem is probably not God but man. When God uses violence it is usually to punish transgressors or to bring liberation. . . . Applying [these texts] to one’s present situation and using them as indication that in a given situation violence can be used in the name of God is dangerous and may be blasphemous” (Klaas Spronk, “The Violent God of the Bible: A Study on the Historical Background and Its Impact on the Discussion of Human Dignity,” *Scriptura* 101 [2009]: 464).

¹¹ Although I have used the language of shalom to describe God’s ultimate purposes for creation, I have arrived at this understanding independently of Graham A. Cole’s monograph, *God the Peacemaker: How Atonement Brings Shalom* (NSBT; Downers Grove, IL: Apollos, 2009), although my own understanding of shalom as central scriptural concept was enhanced by his work.

¹² This is the main thesis of Gregory K. Beale’s monograph, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (NSBT; Downers Grove, IL: Apollos, 2004).

¹³ H. A. Lombard (“Katápausis in the Letter to the Hebrews,” *Neot* 5 [1971]: 65) notes, “*God ceased one activity in order to continue in another*” (italics original). Consider also Terrence Fretheim’s helpful comments about the “self-limitation” of God with regard to the creation account: “What if the God of the creation accounts is imaged more as one who, in creating, chooses to share power in relationship, with a consequent self-limitation in the use of divine power and freedom?” (“The Self-Limiting God of the Old Testament,” in *Raising Up a Faithful Exegete: Essays in Honor of Richard D. Nelson* [ed. K. L. Noll and Brooks Schramm; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010], 181). He adds (182):

creation over the world.¹⁴ Additionally, terms used to denote Adam’s care for the garden suggest that this was a priestly role.¹⁵ Thus, Genesis 1-2 outline God’s priestly and kingly intentions for humanity. Later biblical writers associated this dominion with glory (e.g., Psalm 8 and Hebrews 2). It should be noted that violence is not present in Genesis 1-2.

Despite the fact that the world that God created embodied perfect shalom, Genesis 3 records humanity’s susceptibility to doubt God’s goodness and reject his perfect provision.¹⁶ This rejection ruptured the original shalom and humanity became alienated from God, each other, and creation. God’s judgment—the expulsion from his holy presence—underscores the consequences of sin and the reality of personal accountability.¹⁷ The consequences of human sin were also cosmic (e.g., Rom 8:18-22), yet God’s redemptive plan emerges with the promise that evil will not ultimately prevail (Gen 3:15)—a promise is developed, clarified, and expanded throughout the rest of the Bible.

The next key event is the Abrahamic promises. The juxtaposition of the blessings of these promises in Genesis 12 with the curses pronounced in the Tower of Babel incident (Genesis 11) suggest that the Abrahamic promises are the means by which God will restore the shalom

“God gives up a monopoly on power for the sake of a genuine relationship with the world.” A somewhat similar idea is found in Cole’s comments (56) about the “divine generosity” that are evident in Genesis 2.

¹⁴This is a significant part of Beale’s overall argument (e.g., 81–87). It is also suggested by William J. Dumbrell (*Covenant and Creation: A Theology of Old Testament Covenants* [Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1984], 35), who describes the garden as the “center of world blessing,” to which he parallels Israel’s call to be a center of blessing for the nations. This blessing is later developed in explicitly priestly terms (e.g., Exod 19:5-6).

¹⁵ Beale (369): “Adam’s purpose in that first garden-temple was to expand its boundaries until it circumscribed the earth, so that the earth would be completely filled with God’s glorious presence.” See also the discussion in Cole, 55.

¹⁶The serpent and the intrusion of evil appear suddenly appear in the biblical text without explanation. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the difficult issues of the origin and continued presence of evil in the world. As Cole notes, the scriptural record is less interested in explaining the presence of evil in God’s good creation that it is in recording what God intends to do about evil (Cole, 19 fn. 2).

¹⁷Although this point cannot be argued here, personal accountability affirms the dignity that God bestowed upon humanity at creation and the reality of human free will. This same reality of personal judgment anticipates the final judgment of human beings outlined in Rev 20:11-15 (cf. Cole, 77-78).

experienced in Eden.¹⁸ The covenant and divine oath associated with this promise later ground God’s assurances to Moses (e.g., Exod 6:4-5). Safely delivered from Egypt, the real identity of God’s people is revealed in priestly and kingly terms on Sinai (Exodus 19), recalling the original intention for humanity presented in Genesis 1-2.¹⁹ Additionally, both the tabernacle and the promised land draw upon Edenic imagery (e.g., a land flowing with milk and honey). Thus, to a certain extent, the conquest represents the initial fulfillment of the Abrahamic promises and suggest a limited restoration of Eden. Yet human sin necessitated restricted levels of access in the tabernacle and an elaborate sacrificial system required to restore fellowship with God and others.

Significant development of the Abrahamic promises occurs with their linkage with the Davidic dynasty, the temple, and Zion. Not only does the scope of the divine promise expand cosmically from Israel to the ends of the earth (Psalm 2), but the heir of the promise begins to crystallize in one Abrahamic descendent, the Davidic messiah (also Psalm 2). Other significant developments occur in the prophets, especially Isaiah, where God’s promise of restoration draws upon Exodus imagery and describes a restored creation, the new heavens and new earth (e.g., Isaiah 65-66), often using Edenic language. Also important in Isaiah is the promised Servant, upon whom the Spirit would rest in an unprecedented way and who would be instrumental in bringing the promised restoration of shalom.

With the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, these promises find their ultimate expression. Jesus is simultaneously the Son of God and the perfect human being who reverses the effects of Adam’s sin (Romans 5) and who restores the glory that was originally

¹⁸The land promise (Gen 12:7) reverses the expulsion from the garden (Genesis 3); cf. James McKeown, “The Theme of Land in Genesis 1–11 and Its Significance for the Abraham Narrative,” *IBS* 19 (1997): 133. O. Palmer Robertson (“A New-Covenant Perspective on the Land,” in *Land of Promise*, 125) notes, “This ... restoration to Paradise provides the proper biblical context for understanding God’s promise of a land to Abraham.”

¹⁹Dumbrell (*Covenant*, 45) notes, “The priestly/king role that Adam exercised in Genesis 1-2 devolved upon Israel at Sinai.”

intended for humanity (Hebrews 2). By fully efficacious sacrifice, he effects the ultimate deliverance from bondage (e.g., Mark 10:45; 1 Pet 1:18-19). Thus in Christ, the key conflict in the biblical narrative is resolved. Reconciliation between fallen humanity and God is now possible (Col 1:20; Rom 5:1-10) as well as between human beings (2 Cor 5:11; Eph 2:11-22). Even so, creation itself still awaits deliverance from the futility to which it was subjected by human sin (Rom 8:18-22).

Thus Jesus is the pivot between the present age and the age to come. Having effected redemption and reconciliation in his first advent, he will return to bring about the final eradication of evil and the restoration of creation in his second advent. The Book of Revelation culminates this overarching narrative by presenting the victorious, risen Christ who will bring about the final defeat of Satan and the eradication of evil. Once this has been accomplished, the new creation is ushered in, wherein heaven and earth are rejoined and redeemed humanity once again enjoys unmediated shalom with God, thereby restoring the glory and worship that originally existed.

With this plot outline, it becomes clear that the Bible presents violence the consequence of sin and an intrusion into God's creation and his intentions for it. Yet this plot is teleological—moving forward to that time when there will be no more violence.²⁰

Developing the Themes

A few key themes emerge in this narrative that are essential for understanding Revelation. First, the Bible consistently depicts God as good, holy, and loving (e.g., Exod 34:6-7; 1 John 4:8; 1 John 1:5-7; Isa 6:1-3; Rev 4:8; cf. John 17:11-26; Isa 51:3-11). Corresponding passages about the essential, eternal nature of God's wrath and judgment are not found in the Bible, indicating that

²⁰As Fretheim ("God and Violence in the Old Testament," 21) aptly observes: "In sum: if there were no human violence, there would be no divine violence." He adds (18) that texts such as Isa 2:2-4 and 65:17-25 "constitute a fundamental witness that violence is an unwanted intruder in God's world."

God's wrath and judgment are a response to human sin and evil, but not essential characteristics of God.

Second, given the reality of sin and human violence, the image of God as the divine warrior, who both fights for his people against evil and against his people when they reject him for evil, begins to emerge. This is developed in the Exodus account, where God the divine warrior is inextricably linked with God the liberator and savior, who uses violence to rescue his people from those who violently oppress them.²¹ This imagery is subsequently developed in terms of the Redeemer God who delivers his people from the bondage of exile and judges his enemies (e.g., Isaiah 63; Hosea 11; Daniel 7). In the NT, Exodus typology is appropriated extensively in conjunction with the redemption from sin that Jesus makes possible (e.g., Colossians 1; Hebrews 2; Revelation is discussed below). Additionally, Jesus is portrayed as the divine warrior who conquers the spiritual powers and authorities (e.g., Col 2:13-15)—imagery that is extensively developed in Revelation. Closely related to the depiction of God as divine warrior is God the divine judge.²² In summary, then the divine warrior image presents divine violence (better expressed as righteous wrath) as both purposeful and redemptive.²³

A third theme to emerge is the future expectation of the eradication of evil (e.g., Isaiah 57, 65), which is closely linked with a future restoration of creation (Isaiah 54, 57, 65). Both hopes are increasingly portrayed in eschatological terms throughout the scriptural witness.

²¹ Thus violence against Egypt redeems Israel from Egypt's violence (Fretheim, "God and Violence in the Old Testament," 25). See the similar discussion by Kah-Jin Jeffrey Kuan, "Biblical Interpretation and the Rhetoric of Violence and War" (Asia Journal of Theology [2009]), 194.

²² Similarly Fretheim ("God and Violence in the Old Testament," 22-23) notes: "God's uses of violence . . . are associated with two basic purposes: judgment and salvation."

²³ As Fretheim ("God and Violence in the Old Testament," 25-26) observes, "God's wrath means the deliverance of slaves (Exod 15:7), the righteous from their enemies (Ps 7:6-11), the poor and needy from their abusers (Exod 22:21-24), and Israel from its enemies (Isa 30:27-30)."

Two brief conclusions can be drawn from these three themes. First, the scriptural witness indicates that violence is not an essential character of God. Second, the scriptural witness also indicates that divine violence is purposeful and never gratuitous.²⁴

Key Passages from Revelation

As noted, the difficulties and controversies associated with interpreting Revelation are numerous, in part because of the complexities associated with apocalyptic literature in general, but also due to uniqueness of Revelation itself.²⁵ Although the origins of apocalyptic literature are complex and debated, it seems likely that apocalyptic writings emerged during periods of crisis when pious Jews sought to reconcile contemporary realities, such as foreign occupation and violent oppression, with God’s promises.²⁶ During such times, hopes for the fulfillment of these promises began to shift from the present age to the age to come, when a cataclysmic end of present world by God’s intervention would usher in the new heavens and earth. A closely related hope is the judgment of one’s oppressors and the eradication of evil.²⁷

²⁴ Both observations address a common objection that divine violence somehow promotes or endorses human violence. As Boersma (43) notes, “The underlying assumption in many discussions of divine violence appears to be that violence is inherently evil and immoral: A violent God necessarily leads to a violent society, since ‘what happens above happens below.’” Fretheim (“God and Violence in the Old Testament,” 25) adds, “God’s violence . . . is never an end in itself, but is always exercised in the service of God’s more comprehensive *salvific* purposes for creation” (italics original).

²⁵ I am assuming that the author of Revelation is the same individual who wrote the Gospel of John and the Johannine epistles, in part based on internal claims in Revelation (e.g., 1:1,4:9; 22:8) as well as early tradition (e.g., Papias). Moreover, there are several important conceptual similarities in these writings, such as the designation “Word” and “lamb” to describe Jesus. Ultimately, the points offered in this paper do not depend on Johannine authorship of Revelation.

²⁶ Neufeld (9) observes, “It is not an exaggeration to say that violence pervaded the world of Jesus and his followers.” This was certainly true in much of Palestine in the first century, especially in the years just prior to and just after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. But it was likely also true for many (although not all) of the original recipients of Revelation.

²⁷ For extended discussion of these themes, see Dumbrell, *The End of the Beginning*.

The commonly accepted date for Revelation is toward the end of Domitian's reign (AD 81-96), which is supported by his aggressive promotion of emperor cult and his blasphemous insistence on being addressed as "lord and god."²⁸ In this historical context, the depiction of divine judgment offered tremendous encouragement for those experiencing persecution, while at the same time challenged those who were complacent or compliant with the Roman Empire.²⁹ The main purpose of Revelation is thus both to encourage and to warn its audience.

Related is the implicit question that runs throughout Revelation: who really is control of the universe ... the Roman Empire or God? Or to phrase the question differently, who is the true Lord? Repeated use of the phrase "it was given" (ἐδόθη) stresses that any power exercised by the Roman Empire has ultimately been granted by the One True Creator God (e.g., Revelation 18). Moreover, the real force behind the Roman Empire is shown to be Satan, whose own evil power is ultimately circumscribed by the Triune God. Thus Revelation reveals that the One who is fully in control of all (including the Roman Empire) is the Triune God, hence he alone must be worshipped and followed. (Worship and allegiance are inseparable in Revelation). Revelation also encourages its audience to understand that the true realm is the transcendent realm of God and not the present, temporary world in which evil appears to triumph. The audience is invited to be overcomers, who persevere by

²⁸ This is based on testimony of Irenaeus (Adv. haer. 5.30.3). In general, scholars have not found compelling reasons to doubt this date (cf. Adela Yarbro-Collins, "The Political Perspective of the Revelation to John" in *Cosmology and Eschatology in Jewish and Christian Apocalypticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 205.

²⁹ Although it is commonly maintained that the purpose of Revelation was to encourage believers who were facing persecution, Craig Koester makes a compelling case for the problem of complacency and (perhaps unconscious) collusion with the empire. He discusses the problems of assimilation, especially in the context of public festivals honoring various deities and trade guilds, and complacency due to wealth that posed real temptations and threats for first-century believers ("Revelation's Visionary Challenge to Ordinary Empire," *Interpretation* 63 [2009], 7-9) Thus, Revelation intends to warn those who may have been unaware of the degree to which they were cooperating with and benefitting from an empire that was fundamentally opposed to God's character and purposes. He also outlines the various ways that the Roman Empire sought to portray itself as both divinely blessed and divine: "This pattern of identifying the political order with the divine order is challenged by Revelation" (Koester, 11).

focusing on this transcendent realm and who “conquer” in the present realm by their witness and suffering.

Throughout Revelation, this transcendent realm is depicted in symbolic language, which is often signaled by the use of “like” or “as” (ὡς), indicating that the realities in view are being described rather than depicted in a literal (or literalistic) way. This does not mean that there is no historical reality behind the symbols, but rather that the symbols cannot be mapped in a one-to-one way to a specific, literal referent. Thus the depiction of Jesus as a slain Lamb with seven eyes (Rev 5:6) describes the reality of Jesus’ sacrificial death and his perfect omniscience, but it does not offer a literal, objective picture of how Jesus looks. Symbols in Revelation are highly evocative, and are often intended to elicit a response of worship or repentance. There are at least three reasons for their graphic nature: 1) the nature of apocalyptic literature; 2) the real horror of sin and evil; and 3) the desire to show that beyond all the frightening realities of the first century (such as the oppressive Roman Empire) was the Lord God Almighty, the one who is, who was, and who is to come. Human domination is ultimately illusory—there were empires before Rome and there would be empires after. Moreover, the elasticity of the symbolic language that presents the Roman Empire indirectly has enabled subsequent audiences to see contemporary application of the symbols. Even so, there are keys for unlocking this symbolic language, some of which are found within the text itself (e.g., Rev 1:20). Other backgrounds include the Old Testament, conventional usage within contemporary apocalyptic literature, or some historical reality of the Roman Empire.

Finally, Revelation itself is an extended narrative that contains a discernible plot, although this plot unfolds through a series of visions, which have a cyclical, rather than sequential

orientation.³⁰ Hence the vision of trumpets builds on the prior vision of the seals, recapitulating some of the material but adding new details. Thus the framework in Revelation is progressive intensification in which repeated cycles of judgment eventually lead to a final culmination of the plot. With this understanding of Revelation in place, it is now possible to consider the violent images in Revelation.

The Risen Christ (Revelation 1)

The opening vision of Revelation presents a number of key images that are subsequently developed in the rest of the book. First, there is the suffering servant and witness, who prevails by faithfulness and obedience, not by domination and coercion. This is initially associated with John (v. 2), but is then applied to Jesus, who is the faithful and true witness, who has prevailed by means of his sacrificial death, and who has become the ruler of the kings of the earth (v. 5). This witness image becomes basis for other witnesses or martyrs in Revelation, such as the martyrs in Revelation 6 or the witnesses in Revelation 12, who overcome because of shed blood of Lamb and his faithful witness. Together these images show encourage a response of perseverance and witness in the face of evil and human violence.

The depiction of Jesus as the ruler of the kings of the earth introduces the key question of who is truly the Lord of the universe. Unlike Rome who ruled by violent oppression, Jesus is the universal ruler by means of his own death. Moreover, his death is actually the basis for the deliverance of those bound by sin, recalling the paradigmatic Exodus event. An allusion to Exodus 19 is also found in the result of Jesus' redemptive death, namely that his followers are now a

³⁰ For helpful discussions of the structure of Revelation, see Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies in the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993; esp. 1-37) and Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

kingdom and priests who serve God (v. 6). This also suggests a connection to the original intention for humanity in Genesis 1-2.

The allusion to Daniel 7 (v. 7; developed in v. 12) introduces the divine warrior theme, which is then followed by the image of the Alpha and Omega, the one who is, was, and is to come, the Almighty (v. 8). The subsequent images in verses 11-16 all underscore the absolute sovereignty and authority of the risen Christ, and draw upon both kingly and priestly symbols, such as the robe with a golden sash, the pure white hair. Additionally, eyes of fire depict omniscience, feet like bronze depict immovability, and a voice like rushing waters depicts glory and strength. His sovereignty is underscored by the fact that he holds seven stars, subsequently explained as the seven churches and from his mouth comes a double-edged sword. Moreover, he holds the keys of death and Hades (v. 18); therefore he, not Rome, has the power of life and death. Thus in every way, this opening vision depicts the risen Jesus as the only one who can be trusted to accomplish God's redemptive purposes. He alone is worthy of worship and allegiance. The cosmic implications of this are indicated by the statement that all the peoples of the earth will see and mourn because of him (v. 7). Many of these themes are subsequently developed in the rest of Revelation.

The Seven Churches (Revelation 2-3)

The themes of witness and overcoming are developed in these seven letters. Thus churches that have not compromised are assured of ultimate vindication and are exhorted to persevere. Churches that have grown weary or complacent are warned and urged to repent. In both cases, the prospect of divine violence is depicted as redemptive, either delivering God's people from evil or judging them for the purpose of repentance. Despite the realities of Roman oppression, believers are urged to overcome by witness and faithfulness, not violence.

The Slain Lamb (Revelation 4-5)

Although Revelation 4 and 5 present one unified vision, there is a clear distinction drawn between the two chapters. In Revelation 4, the focus is on the holy, transcendent God. Nowhere this chapter is humanity obviously present. Instead, the focus is on the other-worldly beings who surround the throne of God in unending worship. A clear implication of this imagery is that the Creator God alone is worthy of worship, and that the claims of Roman emperors to be the Lord God Almighty or the one worthy of all honor and glory were blasphemous to the core. Another implication, however, is that unless God intervenes, humanity cannot gain access to the heavenly throne room.

This is amplified by the presence of the scroll in Revelation 5 and the inability of anyone in all of creation to open that scroll and thereby accomplish God's ultimate purposes. The words of the elder to John—"See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah . . . has triumphed" (v. 5)—suggest that power and strength qualify one open the scroll. Hence the appearance of the slain Lamb (v. 6) heightens the reality depicted in Revelation that ultimate victory comes through suffering and sacrifice. The image of a lamb recalls the sacrificial Passover Lamb,³¹ and introduces Exodus imagery, alluding to God's previous works of redemption. This scene presents the perfect King in the line of David who assumes the throne by virtue of self-sacrifice, not brute power, despite the ironic fact that Jesus was slain under Roman rule.

The powerful image of the slain Lamb underscores the reality that divine violence is never gratuitous, but is redemptive. This suggests that divine violence is ultimately necessary to overcome human violence and sin. Moreover, the image of Jesus as the slain Lamb underscores the shocking

³¹ "By placing the image of the sacrificial victim alongside those of the military conqueror, John forges a new symbol of conquest by sacrificial death" (Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 215).

reality that God himself offered the sacrifice that would redeem and reconcile sinful humanity. This was what was required to restore the original relationship that existed in the garden.

God's Judgment of the World (Revelation 6-16)

This section of Revelation breaks significantly from previous sections. There is a stark contrast between those who follow the Lamb and those who oppose him as well as a stark contrast between what is happening on earth (divine judgment and the end of history) and what is happening in heaven (the vindication of the saints and unending praise before God's throne). Events in these chapters are often punctuated by a series of interludes that contrast the destruction of the present order with the eternal reality of heaven.

As noted earlier, the seals, trumpets, and bowls, are best understood as intensifying or recapitulating rather than occurring in a strictly chronological order. Thus the seventh seal gives way to the seven trumpets. The images are intended to be cumulative and to stress the reality of divine judgment so as to urge repentance. It is also clear that those agents who execute divine judgment are given power from God that is circumscribed both temporally and spatially, as is indicated by the repeated use of "it was given" (ἐδόθη). For example, the fourth horseman in Revelation 6 is given power to slay one-fourth of the earth. Fractions indicate that there is still time for repentance—the judgment is not final and comprehensive—thereby suggesting that these series of judgments have redemptive purposes. The progressive intensification of these judgments is likely intended to increase the possibility of repentance. Parallel to the plagues upon Egypt, these judgments are directed toward a world that has steadfastly refused God and has become resolute in its rebellion against him. Just as plagues preceded the Exodus of Israelites from Egypt, so too here plagues precede the final release of God's people from a violent world that is under judgment and will be

destroyed. In this regard, these judgments represent the undoing of creation so as to prepare the way for the new creation. Despite the violence of these judgments, their redemptive nature is also evident.

In Revelation 7, one the great multitude before throne of God, likely an allusion to the Abrahamic promise descendants as innumerable as the stars and sand (Gen 13:16; 15:5). The martyrdom of the great multitude is actually their victory, offering a parallel to Jesus, the slain Lamb. In contrast to this heavenly multitude is the growing assembly of those who oppose God and gather against him at Armageddon (Rev 16:16). They are led by the two beasts (one from the sea and one from the earth) who join the dragon to form an unholy, counterfeit alliance that parodies the Triune God. Throughout these chapters in Revelation, there are numerous allusions to the Roman Empire, underscoring its ultimately blasphemous nature and allegiance to Satan and his agents.

Finally, in Revelation 12, the ultimate aim of Satan is starkly presented in terms of the sign of the woman and the child. The woman is most likely the messianic community or faithful Israel, from whom the Messiah emerges. The vision makes clear that Satan's unrelenting goal has been the destruction of Jesus, which he attempted at Jesus' birth and ostensibly achieved on the cross. Yet Jesus' exaltation to heaven vindicated his death and revealed his ultimate victory. The image of the woman in the desert, symbolizing the church, stresses God's care and protection of the persecuted church. This vision also reveals that those who have overcome by the by blood of Lamb signal Satan's ultimate defeat and evoke his fury until that time.

The Eradication of Evil (Revelation 17-20)

In Revelation 17-18, the Roman Empire is depicted as brazen harlot who flaunts her violent lust for blood and insatiable desire for luxury. The blasphemous names that cover the beast upon

which she sit recall epithets taken by Roman emperors, such *theios* (divine), *soter* (savior), and *kurios* (lord), indicating their self-deification. The image of the harlot contrasts with the subsequent image of the bride of Christ in Revelation 19. Whereas the harlot is clothed in luxurious garments of gold and pearls (depicting the unbelievable wealth of the Roman Empire, but which was obtained at price of human lives), the bride is clothed with righteous acts (Rev 19:8). The depiction of the harlot underscores the terrible arrogance of Rome, with its unquestioned confidence in its own abilities and resources. This is also reflected in the list of cargoes outlined in Revelation 18, which ominously ends with the expression, “the souls of humans.” Thus Rome epitomized opposition to True God at every level: it gloried itself, indulged itself in every possible way, exploited human beings and creation, and violently suppressed those who opposed it. Yet the sudden destruction that comes upon the city that claimed to be “eternal” reveals the true Lord of the universe (Rev 18:8).

The so-called Hallelujah Chorus is actually the antiphonal, heavenly response to the destruction and judgment of the harlot. The laments in Revelation 18 of three groups who will no longer profit from the harlot are answered by the three groups who worship before the throne, praising God for his perfect justice and vindication. This chorus is followed by preparations for the marriage feast of the Lamb (vv. 6-10). This passage clearly anticipates the arrival of the bridegroom, but instead, in v. 11 the victorious, divine warrior appears, indicating that the banquet cannot begin until evil has been eradicated.

Every element of the depiction of Christ in Rev 19:11-16 underscores his complete victory. He appears on a white horse, with blazing eyes (emphasizing his omniscience). He wears numerous crowns (depicting his limitless authority) and a robe dipped in the blood of those who have yet to be slain (emphasizing his certain victory). He is the King of Kings come to judge and to wage war in righteousness and to tread upon evil. From his mouth proceeds a sharp sword of judgment. The

certainty of his victory is further indicated by the invitation of the carrion birds to come and feast before the actual battle has begun. Moreover, the opposing army is slain by a word from Christ (v. 21), offering an important connection to the creation account. Just as God spoke the world into existence, here Christ reverses the intrusion of evil with a word. The host who accompany Christ are dressed in fine linen, suggesting that they are dressed for the marriage banquet and not for war. Thus Christ alone fights and wins the battle. Those who lead the evil army are thrown alive into the fiery lake, anticipating the eternal punishment of Satan that is outlined in Revelation 20.

The Restoration of Shalom (Revelation 21-22)

Once the final judgment and eradication of evil has taken place, the final restoration of shalom is possible. Revelation 21-22 presents one vision, which is outlined in Rev 21:1–8. This is followed by two elaborations of this vision, which are presented in Rev 21:9-27 and Rev 22:1–6 and which emphasizes different aspects of the new creation.

The statement that there is no sea in Rev 21:1 symbolized the eradication of evil as the sea was commonly understood as a symbol of evil. Additionally, the depiction of the heavenly Jerusalem coming down from heaven suggests a merging of that which was ruptured at the fall as well as a reversal of effects of Babel when humanity sought to get to God on its own terms by building a tower up to heaven. Moreover, Rev 21:1 describes the new heaven and new earth, whereas verse 2 presents the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, and verse 3 shifts to tabernacle imagery, suggesting that all three images describe the same reality.³² Verse 3 then describes God's presence among his people in terms that echo earlier covenantal promises of dwelling with his people. Thus Rev 21:1-8 outlines the promised restoration of the perfect shalom that originally existed. The statement that the unclean

³² It is well noted that, in the OT, Jerusalem, Zion, and the Temple, can be used interchangeably. ADD.

cannot enter the city emphasizes that nothing unclean is part of the new creation, which is restated in Rev 21:27.³³

The first elaboration of the vision of the new creation in Rev 21:9-27 presents the perfect dimensions of the heavenly Jerusalem, depicting the new Jerusalem as a cosmic holy of holies, although the passage makes clear that there is no temple in the heavenly city (v. 22). This indicates that at last unmediated access to God's presence has been restored and his glory fills every aspect of the new creation. The perfect dimensions also likely indicate that there is ample space for the bride who will dwell in the city, and who is at the same time described *as* the city itself (Rev 21:2). Thus the injustices and deprivations that characterize life in the present age do not exist in the new creation. The second elaboration of the opening vision in Rev 22:1-6 underscores the restoration of Eden, where the water of life flows from the throne of God, bringing forth abundance along its way. Together, this vision and the two elaborations of it show the restoration of the holy space that originally existed in the garden and the restoration of the divine intention for humanity, namely a kingdom of priests who serve God before his throne.

Conclusions and Implications

Several implications flow from this overview of Revelation. First, although the divine violence depicted in Revelation is graphic, it is never gratuitous. Revelation presents divine violence as redemptive and purposeful, both delivering and vindicating those who have faithfully followed the Lamb and judging those who have steadfastly opposed him. Moreover, divine violence ultimately overcomes violence, first by means of the atonement, but then through the eradication of

³³ Beale (23-24) develops this shift from new creation to an "arboreal city-temple." He also notes that the statement in Rev 21:27 that nothing unclean shall enter the new Jerusalem makes best sense when the city is understood along the lines of the OT temple (e.g., 2 Chr 23:19; 29:16; 30:1-20) and suggests that all of the new creation should be understood the restored "city-temple."

evil, the end of death, and the ultimate restoration of Eden. Understood this way, Revelation offers tremendous hope for those who follow the Lamb in a world of violence and injustice. It also challenges believers to consider their own complicity with the evil and violent world powers and systems. Indeed, it may challenge those who are unaware or uncritical of such complicity to reevaluation allegiances and objects of worship.

Another important implication that flows from Revelation is that God alone judges. Nowhere in Revelation are believers called to execute divine justice.³⁴ As noted, believers do not have a participatory role in the final, eschatological conflict. Human violence in this book is perpetrated by those who oppose the Lamb, not those who follow him. This does not mean that human violence is never warranted; indeed, this side of the new creation, violence may indeed be necessary to stop or prevent other violence. But it is also clear that Revelation does not offer a warrant for human judgment and violence.

Thus neither fight nor flight are appropriate responses to Revelation, but rather confidence that there will be a time when there is no more death or mourning, assurance that evil will not prevail, and humility in how one interprets and appropriates this part of the Bible.

³⁴ John E. Phelan Jr. observes, “The book of Revelation does not offer the slightest support to Christians acting violently toward their enemies” (“Revelation, Empire, and the Violence of God,” *Ex Auditu* 20 [2004], 78). In his response, Grant Osborne adds, “It is clear that the only human violence in the book is enacted by the evildoers, not the saints” (“Response to Phelan,” *Ex Auditu* 20 [2004], 86).