

The War of the Lamb

BY HARRY O. MAIER

Shaking us from our comfortable culturally-accommodating sleep of civil religion, the book of Revelation cross-examines the claims of divine blessing upon Caesar's order, especially when it is violent and economically exploitative. The War of the Lamb is a call to arms, to wage war with what at first glance seems to be no weapons at all—the words of faithful testimony.

The Book of Revelation is the book of war. There is no writing in the New Testament as occupied with warfare as John's Revelation, nor is there any book as violent. The statistics are startling. Of the twenty-five New Testament instances of the Greek word for "war," *polemos*, or "to make war/fight," *polemein*, almost two-thirds of them (fifteen) are in the Book of Revelation. On the other hand, the word for "peace," *eirene*, found ninety-two times in the New Testament, appears in Revelation only twice (1:4; 6:4).

To some degree its emphasis on warfare and violence is characteristic of ancient apocalyptic literature. The Old Testament uses apocalyptic warfare imagery to dramatize human wickedness and the inevitable victory of God over those opposed to his purposes (e.g., Isaiah 24:1-23; Daniel 11:2-12:4; Joel 2:1-20; Zechariah 9:14-16). Visions of war and battle imagery are similarly a typical feature of the dozen-and-a-half non-canonical apocalyptic writings from the inter-testamental period (200 B.C. - 200 A.D.) onward, some of which, like the Apocrypha's 4 Ezra, are roughly contemporary with John's Revelation.¹ Taken together, the recurring uses of warfare imagery in this literature should caution us against a literal reading of John's references to war and to interpret them instead as a characteristic feature of an ancient literary genre deployed to achieve a certain end.

Still, these statistics take on added weight when we compare the content of Revelation's references to war with the other New Testament uses of battle imagery. Whereas Jesus promises believers that there will always be "wars and rumors of wars" (accounting for five of the references to war outside Revelation—Matthew 24:6; Mark 13:7; Luke 21:9), only in Revelation are there visions of Jesus personally waging war. "Then I saw heaven opened, and there was a white horse! Its rider is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war (*polemei*)" (19:11). There are allusions to Jesus as apocalyptic conqueror elsewhere in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 15:24-28; 1 Thessalonians 4:16; 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10; 2 Peter 3:10-13). But only in Revelation does he "tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty" (19:15) so that blood flows "as high as a horse's bridle, for a distance of about two hundred miles" (14:20). While other New Testament writers borrow military metaphors to urge Christians to battle evil and spiritual forces of wickedness (e.g. Ephesians 6:10-17), only in Revelation is warfare threatened against members of the church (2:16). Representations of war typify ancient apocalyptic literature, with visions of nation rising against nation and a warrior God intervening to punish idolatry and sinfulness. But in the Bible's last book divine warfare reaches a new level. Apocalyptic application of holy war, drawing on Old Testament traditions of God fighting evil with a heavenly army (Joel 3:11b; Zechariah 14:5b), now has Jesus as a divine warrior going forth with the faithful behind him to wage battle (19:14).

As a consequence, Revelation receives mixed reviews, as indeed does the whole apocalyptic tradition representing God as warrior. On the one hand are those who embrace apocalyptic warfare imagery as a potent vision for the church militant. Apocalyptic violence, whether originating with God or Satan or unrepentant humankind, is a sobering reminder that Christians are in a spiritual battle—in Revelation, with the Devil, the serpent who "makes war" on the faithful (12:17). Augustine of Hippo interpreted the militaristic imagery of Revelation, together with apocalyptic references to divine warfare in the rest of the Bible, as representing the war between the City of Man and the divinely elect City of God—the invisible Church—that has been waged from the time that Cain slew Abel (*City of God*, book 19). His was a call to Christians to be disciplined in resisting evil, whether personal or societal, and to be vigilant in pursuing justice and love of neighbor. Augustine offered a sophisticated reading of apocalyptic violence that resisted a straightforward literal interpretation to arrive at a deeper, more spiritual and theological truth. Others were more direct in applying apocalyptic visions to both religious and secular visions of world history. Biblical warfare imagery was invoked to rally support for the Crusades. Medieval and Reformation prophets were inspired by warfare texts to justify the use of the sword to engineer theocratic utopian states. Religious representations of divine warfare against unjust rulers helped fire

American patriots to revolt against the king in the War of Independence. Famously Revelation 19:15 inspired Julia Ward Howe to write “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” and portray the Civil War against slavery as a war of righteousness, truth, and justice.² Apocalyptic imagery and the theory of a just war were recently combined with American civil religion to rally public support for a pre-emptive strike against enemies. President George

Revelation’s warring Jesus seems in conflict with the Christ of the Sermon on the Mount who urges disciples to love their enemies. How can we harmonize John 3:16 with the book’s militaristic visions of divine judgment and violent subjugation of enemies?

W. Bush’s promises to be victorious in the War on Terrorism, as well as the belief that America is at war with an invisible enemy, and that “God is not indifferent” in the battle of a righteous and just nation against the enemies of Liberty, resonates with themes that can be traced back to Revelation, if not Old Testament apocalyptic visions of God’s use of a holy Is-

rael to punish unrighteousness. On these accounts John’s Apocalypse, like the apocalyptic warfare traditions from which it draws, is a sobering reminder to not be naïve about evil and to be vigilant and decisive in a divinely appointed fight against wickedness.

On the other hand, many Christians have resisted such militant visions as opposed to the Gospel. In the case of Revelation, John’s warring Jesus seems in conflict with the Christ of the Sermon on the Mount who urges disciples to turn the other cheek and to love their enemies (Matthew 5:38-39, 43-44). How can we harmonize the affirmation of John 3:16 with the book’s militaristic visions of divine judgment and violent subjugation of enemies? Some have found the accounts in Revelation so contradictory that they question whether it should be in the Bible at all. Because of its violent imagery and easily misinterpreted visions, its inclusion in the canon was still a matter of debate as late as the sixth century. One strand of the Orthodox Christian tradition explicitly rejects its authority as Scripture. The nineteenth-century American philosopher C. S. Peirce well sums up the ethical and theological discomfort with Revelation as well as apocalyptic violence more generally:

Little by little the bitterness increases until in the last book of the New Testament, its poor distracted author represents that all the time Christ was talking about having come to save the world, the secret design was to catch the entire human race, with the exception of a paltry 144,000, and souse them all in a brimstone lake, and as

the smoke of their torment went up for ever and ever, to turn and remark, 'There is no curse anymore.' Would it be an insensible smirk or a fiendish grin that should accompany such an utterance? I wish I could believe St. John did not write it.³

"Its existence and its place in the Bible," remarks New Testament exegete Jack T. Sanders, "are, in the fullest sense of the word, evil."⁴

Revelation with its potent application of apocalyptic warfare imagery is a book that invites extreme reactions. If the Book of Revelation is a call to arms to join God in battling evil, what are the weapons of the faithful? Does it ask Christians to renounce Jesus' command to love their enemies? Does it replace Jesus' life of non-retaliation with an ethics of violence? If Jesus blesses the peacemakers (Matthew 5:9), does Revelation's holy war imagery imply that God blesses warmongering? In wrestling with these questions, attention to genre and the literary application of apocalyptic warfare imagery is especially important. One of the chief rhetorical aims of that imagery in ancient apocalyptic literature is to urge the faithful to decision and commitment in resisting evil and sin. As a literary device it seeks to persuade those who might be tempted to despair in the face of the world's suffering and injustice to have courage and to live faithfully in the conviction that God's good purposes will prevail. Most importantly, it demands that the faithful take an active role in resisting wickedness, especially when the state promotes evil or endorses injustice, even if that means ridicule, the loss of material security, or one's life. The warfare imagery of apocalyptic literature and of Revelation in particular is a serious call to a devout and holy life of public witness. As we shall see, Revelation is far from renouncing Jesus' call to a peculiar life of non-violent witness as the counter-cultural sign of God's presence in the world and passionate love for it. Rather, it deploys a paradoxical use of warfare imagery to insist that it is through Jesus' way of costly witness that evil is overcome and God's purposes prevail.⁵

FOLLOWING THE SLAIN LAMB

John's representation of war draws directly from ancient apocalyptic traditions that build on Old Testament holy war traditions.⁶ These typically present God as a divine warrior surrounded by cosmic powers and characters, wielding divine power—often represented in highly charged symbolism and associated with social and natural calamity—to punish evildoers and reward the faithful. John, however, does something remarkable with that imagery. He unites the traditional apocalyptic portrait of a warring Yahweh with the unlikely image of a conquering slain lamb (Revelation 5:5-6; 6:15-17; 12:11; 14:4-5; 19:6-8). It is as the slain lamb that John's apocalyptic Lord wages war. Perhaps the most terrifying image of the Apocalypse—the vision of the warrior with eyes like a flame of fire,

clothed in a blood-stained garment, and riding forth on the white horse to wage war on God's enemies (19:11-16)—similarly moves, upon close examination, in a completely counter-intuitive direction. At first glance, with its reference to the wine-press of God's wrath, this is a recapitulation of the vision of the warring Lord of Isaiah 63:1-6, with Yahweh's garments spattered with the blood of his enemies. But a closer reading of that vision in

The metaphor of a war waged and won by a slain lamb is one of the most paradoxical and jarring images in the Bible. It transforms holy war in a way that finally renounces violence as the means by which God's purposes are achieved.

the context of Revelation as a whole reveals that the robe dipped in blood (19:13) is not that of enemies, but Jesus' own (5:9; 12:11) shed on account of his life of faithful witness (1:5; 3:14). Likewise, those who ride after him and similarly conquer are those who have given up their lives in faithful witness (7:14-17; 12:11; 14:4-5).

When we look to see the weapon that he and his army wields, it is nothing other than a two-edged sword issuing forth from his mouth (19:15; see 2:16)—the bold and vocal witness before enemies in faithfulness to God's purposes (see also 12:11).

Revelation's metaphor of a war waged and won by a slain lamb is one of the most paradoxical and jarring images in the New Testament, if not the Bible as whole, and is perhaps the most dramatic reconfiguration of apocalyptic war imagery in antiquity. Holy war waged by word of testimony takes up the violent imagery belonging to the tradition of apocalyptic warfare and transforms it in a way that finally renounces violence as the means by which God's purposes are achieved. This dramatic reconfiguration brings us face to face with the Apocalypse's ethical demand on Christians to follow on the way of Jesus in loud and faithful witness before all that opposes God's purposes in the world.

That ethical demand takes on startling relief when read against the backdrop of the militaristic and triumphalist political culture of the Roman Empire. As we shall see, John's adaptation of the divine warrior as conquering slain lamb challenges Roman might and asks Christians to consider what counts for power and victory in the world. Reading Revelation against the backdrop of its cultural, especially political, setting helps to draw out how John uses military imagery rhetorically to urge his audience toward faithful Christian identity. Such a historical and political reading helps to bring out the enduring power of Revelation's paradoxical warfare imagery to shape public witness in our own day.

RESISTING THE EMPIRE'S CIVIL RELIGION

John's Revelation was offered to early Christian communities of ancient Asia Minor (contemporary Turkey) inhabiting one of the most powerful and economically prosperous empires in recorded history. It is often suggested that his visions address a situation of Roman persecution of Christians; Revelation's violence has sometimes been explained as the unfortunate but understandable desire of a persecuted community wanting to get even with its persecutors.⁷ But a closer look at the evidence indicates that the audience of Revelation inhabited a situation a good deal more ambiguous than the traditional reading assumes.

Of the seven churches mentioned by John (2:1-3:15), five are criticized for lack of faithfulness. Two of them he censures for the consumption of food sacrificed to idols and immorality (2:14, 20); a third is condemned because it says "I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing" and does not know that it is "wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked" (3:17). These charges offer a fascinating snapshot of early Christians wrestling with remaining faithful in a pagan environment. Unlike contemporary secular society where religion, state, and economics are strictly separated, in the Roman Empire they were intimately interwoven. The charges against the Laodicean Church for its self-reliant prosperity and against the Churches at Pergamum and Thyatira for eating food sacrificed to idols reflects an ancient culture in which economic prosperity and civic harmony depended on right religious observance.⁸ Participation in civic religious festivals, which often included consumption of offerings dedicated to patron deities, allowed the inhabitants of ancient cities to celebrate civic identity and assure divine blessing on their common life. Improper observance or religious neglect threatened economic and political disaster by risking the wrath of the gods. The criticisms against the seven churches should be read against this backdrop. John's charges of idolatry and self-assurance reveal communities divided over the proper response to their pagan environment. Some perhaps took a more accommodating stance, allowing some degree of participation in local civic culture, while others, like John, rejected such accommodation in principle.

The attraction of accommodation must have been difficult to resist. And it was reinforced by Roman imperial ideology. The genius of Roman imperial rule was its ability to insert itself in local cultures, to draw upon civic religious, cultural, and political structures, but to reconfigure them so that support of them became a vehicle to express devotion to Rome. Each of the seven cities named by John erected temples dedicated to the worship of the emperor or the imperial family. From a pagan perspective this was for good reason—thanks to their Roman overlords, these cities had not seen war for more than a century. Situated along major trade routes delivering goods to Rome, those cities were economic centers prospering

from imperial patterns of commercial enterprise. Rome promoted a vision of its rule that capitalized on its economic and military successes. On coins, monuments, in civic rituals, even in public amusement, Rome was celebrated as a political order established by the gods triumphing over all enemies and bringing a cornucopia of material goods. It sought to convince those under its rule that it was divinely appointed militarily to pacify and

Revelation critiques Roman rule as an idolatrous, economically exploitative, and violently tyrannical military order. Like other ancient critics, John lambastes it as a cruel and unjust order destined to destruction.

govern the world because of Roman moral superiority, religious faithfulness, and devotion to the rule of law. The *pax romana* (Roman peace)—again a military pacification of subject peoples—was interpreted as bringing to the inhabitants of the world the mirror image of a heavenly peace, a *pax*

deum (peace of the gods). “Peace and security,” or “peace and concord,” favorite phrases used to represent Rome rule, were the visible result of that heavenly blessing and imperial piety.⁹

It is no accident, then, that the Book of Revelation repeatedly critiques Roman rule as an idolatrous, economically exploitative, and violently tyrannical military order. John is not the only ancient author to call Rome’s glowing account of its rule a lie, nor is he alone in using apocalyptic to unmask it as idolatrous.¹⁰ Like other critics, John lambastes Roman rule as a cruel and unjust order destined to destruction. The famous vision of the “mark of the beast” (13:16-18) links the ability to buy and sell with idolatrous emperor worship (13:11-15). John’s vision of the destruction of Babylon centers on the laments of kings, merchants, and sea merchants—significantly those who have benefited most from Roman trade (18:9-24), and pointedly those who have dealt in slavery (18:13). In no way the morally superior, pious embodiment of a divinely appointed rule of law, Rome is a blasphemous, idolatrous whore astride the scarlet beast (associated with the serpent/dragon of 12:15-17 in 13:2), fornicating with rulers, and drunk on the blood of believers (17:1-6). Far from representing a heavenly “peace of the gods,” her rule is the fruit of a war in heaven (12:7); she makes war “on the Lamb” (17:14), and is destined to collapse in civil war (17:15-17). The emperor is not, as in political celebrations of the day, a divine descendant of the gods, placed on earth to be their vice-regent. He is rather a counterfeit of God, who seeks to deceive the nations with his divine claims (13:11-15).

John’s Revelation is a frontal assault on Roman impiety and tyranny. For those of his original audience who were tempted to take a more ac-

commodating position with respect to their imperial civic environment, Revelation must have come as a shock. Indeed, Revelation's power historically has been its ability to wake Christians from a comfortable culturally-accommodating sleep to embrace lives of bold witness and vigilant discipleship. As the most subversive political writing in the New Testament it has inspired generations of Christians to cross-examine the glowing progress reports of civil government and to be suspicious when Caesar invokes divine blessing upon his order, especially when that order is economically exploitative and centered in violence.

THE CALL TO FAITHFUL TESTIMONY

Revelation calls Christians to embrace their counter-cultural identity. Its use of apocalyptic holy war tradition in urging resistance to Roman rule and its imperial economic and religious culture is startling. For John claims that God does not overturn the tyrannical military and idolatrous might of Caesar with an even greater display of brute force. Given the context of the militaristic culture of ancient Rome, this is especially remarkable. It is as the slain lamb and in the power of his faithful testimony to God's loving purpose that Jesus conquers, and it is as courageous disciples who bear public testimony to the pattern of love on the cross that evil and injustice are overcome in the world (12:10-11).

In Revelation the War of the Lamb is waged and won on the field of worship of the victim of Empire, Jesus of Nazareth. The Book of Revelation reverberates with the sounds of heavenly worship (4:8-11; 5:8-14; 7:15-17; 11:15-18; 12:10-12; 14:2-3; 15:2-4; 19:1-8; 22:3). It is no accident that much Christian hymnody has its origins in the imagery of the Bible's last book. But it is important to note that worship here is no parochial matter and that heavenly-minded praise of God in Revelation always has earthly goods in view. This is the biblical book whose final vision includes those erstwhile economic and military exploiters of the nations, "the kings of the earth" (6:15; 18:9) bringing their wealth as offering to the holy city Jerusalem (21:24, 26). Even they are caught up in God's project of healing of the nations (22:2). John takes worship to the streets and demands an audience, tempted to be too accommodating and uncritical of the socio-political order around it, that it give public testimony to the Lamb who calls the unjust to account and renounces the violent with his more costly way of love. It is as a slain lamb that Jesus is worshiped and as slain lamb that he is victorious over idolatry and injustice.

The War of the Lamb is a call to arms, to wage war with what at first glance seems to be no weapons at all—the words of faithful testimony—but to those with eyes of faith are mightier than bullets and bombs, because their power resides in the promise and faithfulness of God. As in every generation, Revelation asks if there are those with ears to hear what the Spirit is saying to the church (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22), who will find

the courage to believe what they hear, and will dare to open their mouths to declare God's word.

NOTES

1 For a collection of these texts with contemporary translation and critical commentary, see James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha (Volume 1): Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments* (New York: Doubleday, 1983); and Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha (Volume 2): Writings Related to the Apostles, Apocalypses, and Related Subjects*, revised edition, translated by R. McL. Wilson (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003). 4 Ezra is readily available in *The Jerusalem Bible* or *The Revised New English Bible*.

2 For a fascinating survey of uses of apocalyptic in western history, with attention to warfare imagery in inspiring warfare and revolutionary causes, see Eugen Weber, *Apocalypses: Prophecies, Cults and Millennial Beliefs Through the Ages* (Toronto, ON: Random House, 1999).

3 Charles S. Peirce, "Evolutionary Love," in Nathan House and Christian Koesel, eds., *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), 1.365-66.

4 Jack T. Sanders, *Ethics of the New Testament: Change and Development* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1975), 115.

5 For a thorough exegetical discussion that follows the pacifist position taken up here, with an even-handed review of alternative interpretations, see Loren L. Johns, *The Lamb Christology of John: An Investigation into Origins and Rhetorical Force* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr/Siebeck, 2003).

6 Thus, Exodus 14:4, 14, 18; 15:1-18; 17:14-16; Numbers 21:14-15; Deuteronomy 7:16-26; 9:4-7; 20:10-18; 33:27-28; Joshua 1:1-18; 3:7-13; chapters 6-7; 10:14, 42; 11:6; Judges 5; 1 Samuel 14:23; 2 Samuel 5:17-25; Psalm 68; 78:53-55; Isaiah 26:16-27:6; 52:7-12; 59:15-20; 63:1-6; Amos 2:9; Habakkuk 3; Zechariah 14. See Patrick D. Miller, Jr., *The Divine Warrior in Early Israel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973).

7 See for example the highly readable and instructive interpretation of Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1984).

8 Paul B. Duff offers a full analysis in *Who Rides the Beast? Prophetic Rivalry and the Rhetoric of Crisis in the Churches of the Apocalypse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

9 For an overview of Roman political ideology, see Klaus Wengst, *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ*, translated by John Bowden (London: SCM, 1986).

10 For a readable account of Rome's bad press among ancient critics, see J. P. V. D. Balsdon, *Romans and Aliens* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 161-92. Other contemporary apocalyptic renunciations of Rome are 4 Ezra 11-13 and Sibylline Oracles 8:1-216 (Charlesworth, *Pseudepigrapha*, 418-23).



HARRY O. MAIER

is Associate Professor of New Testament Studies at Vancouver School of Theology in Vancouver, British Columbia, and a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada.