Revelation, Violence and Empire

Is Revelation Good News or Bad News?

‘Have you ever thought what a God would be like who actually ordained and executed the cruelty that is in that book? A holocaust of mankind.’ ‘I read its cruel barbarous message and I despair.’ ‘What an evil book it is, for it says that humanity is nothing, is worth nothing.’ ‘Christianity would be better without that book. It preaches nothing but cruelty and destruction. It teaches that the destruction of human beings does not matter, is even to be rejoiced over. It is evil.’ These are statements by the main characters in C. J. Sansom’s novel Revelation, a book whose plot is largely built around the bowls of judgement in Revelation 15–16.

That these statements also express Sansom’s own views about the book of Revelation is confirmed by the ‘Historical Note’ that concludes the novel. Here he states that:

Where the Book of Revelation is concerned, I share the view of Guy [one of the characters], that the early Church Fathers released something very dangerous on the world when, after much deliberation, they decided to include it in the Christian canon (Sansom, 2009, p. 626).

Sansom is far from alone in arriving at such conclusions. The book has spawned controversy ever since its inclusion in the biblical canon, as the following views indicate (quoted from Gorman, 2011, pp. 1-2, except where stated otherwise):

- ‘neither apostolic nor prophetic ... I can in no way detect that the Holy Spirit produced it ... Christ is neither taught nor known in it’ (Martin Luther)
- ‘the most rabid outburst of vindictiveness in all recorded history’ (Friedrich Nietzsche)
- a ‘grandiose scheme for wiping out and annihilating everybody who wasn’t of the elect’; it ‘has in it none of the real Christ, none of the real Gospel’; ‘just as Jesus had to have a Judas ... so did there have to be a Revelation in the New Testament’ (the novelist D. H. Lawrence; Lawrence, 1931, passim)
- the ‘curious record of the visions of a drug addict’ (the playwright George Bernard Shaw)
- ‘a sick text. ... there’s something not quite right about Revelation’ (the author and journalist Will Self; Self, 1998, p. xii)
- a ‘retreat from ethical responsibility’; ‘its existence and its place in the canon are, in the fullest sense of the word, evil’ (New Testament scholar Jack Sanders)
- a ‘misogynist male fantasy at the end of time’ (feminist New Testament scholar Tina Pippin)
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These perspectives on Revelation may sound depressingly negative, but they are not easily brushed aside, given the examples of violence that the book contains. The following passages may serve as an illustration:

- ‘Then the kings of the earth and the magnates and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of the one seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?”’ (Rev. 6:15-17)
- ‘... the seven trumpets ... there came hail and fire, mixed with blood, and ... a third of the earth was burned up ... A third of the sea became blood, a third of the living creatures in the sea died ... A third of the waters became wormwood, and many died from the water, because it was made bitter.’ (Rev. 8:6-11)
- ‘... locusts ... were told ... to damage ... only those people who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads. They were allowed to torture them for five months, but not to kill them ... And in those days people will seek death but will not find it; they will long to die, but death will flee from them.’ (Rev. 9:3-6)
- ‘So the four angels were released, who had been held ready for the hour, the day, the month, and the year, to kill a third of humankind. ... By these three plagues a third of humankind was killed, by the fire and smoke and sulphur coming out of their mouths.’ (Rev. 9:15, 18)
- ‘Those who worship the beast and its image ..., they will also drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger, and they will be tormented with fire and sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and its image ...’ (Rev. 14:9-11)
- Another ‘angel swung his sickle over the earth and gathered the vintage of the earth, and he threw it into the great wine press of the wrath of God. And the wine press was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the wine press, as high as a horse’s bridle, for a distance of about two hundred miles.’ (Rev. 14:19-20)
- ‘... the seven bowls of the wrath of God ... every living thing in the sea died ... because they shed the blood of saints and prophets, you have given them blood to drink. It is what they deserve! ... they were scorched by the fierce heat, but they cursed the name of God, who had authority over these plagues, and they did not repent and give him glory. ... people gnawed their tongues in agony, and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and sores, and they did not repent of their
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deeds. ... and huge hailstones, each weighing about a hundred pounds, dropped from heaven on people, until they cursed God for the plague of the hail, so fearful was that plague.’ (Rev. 16:1-11, 21)

- '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. ... He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is called The Word of God. ... From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron; he will tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty.’ (Rev. 19:11-15)

The last text leads into an invitation to the birds to attend 'the great supper of God’ (v. 17). As Crossan notes (2007, p. 227), this is based on Isaiah 25:6-8, which talks about God preparing a banquet for all peoples. However, whereas Isaiah envisages a transformation of the earth into a world characterised by nonviolence, justice and peace, in Revelation 19 the birds gorge on the bodies of the slain (vv. 17-18, 21):

Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly in midheaven, 'Come, gather for the great supper of God, to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of the mighty, the flesh of horses and their riders – flesh of all, both free and slave, both small and great.’ ... And the rest were killed by the sword of the rider on the horse, the sword that came from his mouth; and all the birds were gorged with their flesh.

Crossan comments that human violence through the centuries has far exceeded that depicted in Revelation. Yet, he asks (2007, p. 227), 'how dare we say that God plans and wants it or that Jesus leads and effects it?’

Given these difficulties, it perhaps is no wonder that Cyril of Jerusalem (315–86) banned Revelation from all public and private reading, although it may come as more of a surprise that the book is not included in the Orthodox lectionary to this day (see Gorman, 2011, p. 62). But is Revelation an evil book?

This clearly is a conclusion that is not shared by everyone. Indeed, rather strikingly, in the light of the aforementioned views, Richard Bauckham describes Revelation as 'not only one of the finest literary works in the New Testament, but also one of the greatest theological achievements of early Christianity' (1993, p. 22), while Eugene Peterson regards it as 'a gift – a work of intense imagination' (1991, p. x) and as a 'brilliantly conceived and endlessly useful document' (p. 3). So which is it then? Is Revelation good news or bad news?

Or perhaps the real issue is how we read the book. After all, as G. K. Chesterton once said, 'though St. John the Evangelist saw many strange monsters in his vision, he saw no creature so wild as one of his own commentators’ (1908, p. 17). Luke Timothy Johnson similarly concludes: ‘few writings in all of literature have been so obsessively read with such generally disastrous results as the Book of Revelation .... Its history of interpretation is largely a story of tragic misinterpretation’ (2010, p. 507). Michael Gorman, in his aptly
Reading Revelation Responsibly, therefore rightly maintains (2011, pp. xiii-xiv):

How one reads, teaches, and preaches Revelation can have a powerful impact on one’s own – and other people’s – emotional, spiritual, and even physical and economic well-being. Some readings are not only inferior to others, they are in fact unchristian and unhealthy.

But how can we read Revelation responsibly, and what we are to make of its violent imagery?

**Apocalypticism and Violent Imagery**

The starting point for our discussion has to be the realisation that Revelation’s violent imagery needs to be understood in the context of the nature and function of apocalyptic language and imagery more generally.

Accounts of apocalyptic literature have often tended to stress that it is meant to sustain its addressees in times of crisis, especially oppression, which it does by ‘offering scathing critique of the oppressors’, ‘passionate exhortations to defiance’ and ‘unfailing confidence in God’s ultimate defeat of the present evil’ (Gorman, 2011, p. 15). N. T. Wright therefore calls apocalyptic ‘the subversive literature of oppressed groups’ (1992, p. 288).

Oppressed by a seemingly all-powerful hostile force, those responsible for the apocalyptic writings perceive the world in terms of a cosmic dualism between God and Satan, which they find embodied in real-life struggles between good and evil on earth. This cosmic dualism leads to an ethical dualism, according to which everyone has to take sides, either that of the good or that of the evil. This worldview also operates with a temporal dualism between the present, evil age, marked by injustice and oppression, and the age to come, which will be characterised by goodness, justice and peace.

It is frequently argued that the violence found in apocalyptic texts, which are the property of disadvantaged groups without access to power, is relatively unproblematic in the sense that the original readers of a book like Revelation would not have been in a position to inflict any violence on their enemies. But, of course, all that changed with Constantine, when Christianity acquired power, and Revelation has since proved far more dangerous in the hands of those wielding power.

However, while this is an important consideration, it has to be maintained that the depiction of a violent God or Christ is always problematic in and of itself, regardless of whether it is endorsed by a group that wields power or by one that does not. Secondly, while the apocalyptic worldview as such appears to have originated and thrived in contexts of oppression and persecution, notably under the Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes in the second century BCE, recent New Testament scholarship has pointed out that there is no evidence for any major persecution of Christians under Domitian, i.e. at
the time when the book of Revelation was written (see e.g. Pilgrim, 1999, p. 145; and Crossan, 2007, pp. 221-22).

Bauckham somewhat similarly regards the view that the book was written ‘for the consolation and encouragement of Christians suffering persecution’ as a generalisation that is to be resisted, commenting that ‘by no means all of [John’s] readers were poor and persecuted by an oppressive system: many were affluent and compromising with the oppressive system’ (1993, p. 15).¹ Crossan echoes this, concluding that Revelation is not consolation for ... persecution by Rome but admonition against ... acculturation to Rome.

The venom of the book’s anti-Roman rhetoric ... intends to preclude any Christian cooperation with the Roman Empire, although John believes that collusion is already happening (2007, p. 222).

The Beast: Revelation and Empire

Proper understanding of Revelation thus requires engagement with the issue of empire. This is an important topic in its own right, because if Revelation is a critique of empire then that is highly significant for hearing its message for today. And so it is not least for this reason that we are going to explore Revelation as political resistance literature, before applying its lessons to the issue of civil religion, illustrated primarily with reference to the United States of America. However, engagement with the notion of empire will also take us some way towards a more appropriate appreciation of the violence found in the book of Revelation. But let us begin with the notion of Revelation as political resistance literature.

Revelation as Political Resistance Literature

Apocalyptic is ‘the language and literature of resistance’ (Gorman, 2011, p. 15). Apocalyptic texts, such as Daniel or Revelation, are therefore written to oppose imperial rule (Horsley, 2010, p. 18). Bauckham even regards Revelation as ‘the most powerful piece of political resistance literature from the period of the early Empire’ (1993, p. 38), noting that it ‘offers a ... way of perceiving the world which leads people to resist and to challenge the effects of the dominant ideology’ (p. 159). Crossan similarly emphasises that the book is ‘a linked and interwoven attack on the empire of Rome, the city of Rome, and the emperor of Rome – ... on imperial theology’ (2007, p. 218), while Walter Pilgrim describes it as ‘Christian underground literature’ (1999, p. 151), ‘resistance literature’, ‘subversive literature’, ‘martyr-producing literature’, ‘revolutionary literature’ (p. 170) and ‘protest literature’ (p. 173).

¹ Having said that, however, Revelation does reflect some cases of violent hostility (1:9; 2:9-10, 13; 3:9); and it clearly expects future martyrdom (3:10; 6:9). As Pilgrim notes (1999, p. 146): ‘if the current hostility is more sporadic than organized, it is apparent that John perceives a grave threat on the horizon’ (similarly Collins, 1979, p. xi; and Krodel, 1989, pp. 68-69).
The book warns Christians against colluding with the Roman Empire, a theme that Crossan finds expressed, for instance, in the letters to the seven churches (Rev. 2–3), and in particular in the allusions to the Nicolaitans (2:6, 15), those ‘who hold to the teaching of Balaam’ (2:14), those ‘who tolerate that woman Jezebel’ (2:20) and ‘the deep things of Satan’ (2:24). Commenting on these references, Bauckham (1993, pp. 123–24) notes that ‘the idolizing of material prosperity characteristic of Rome here characterizes [the] church’ and:

what the Nicolaitans and Jezebel are urging is not some minor accommodation to the ways of the pagan society Christians have to live in, but complicity in that denial of the true God and his righteousness which characterizes the forces of evil incarnate in the Roman system.

Revelation therefore is an ‘anti-assimilationist’ or ‘anti-accommodationist’ text opposing the imperial culture of death (Gorman, 2011, pp. 24, 74–75). As Richard Horsley (p. 207) points out,

far from looking for the end of the world, [the apocalyptic writers] were looking for the end of empire. And far from living under the shadow of an anticipated cosmic dissolution, they looked for the renewal of the earth on which a humane societal life could be renewed.

Horsley makes two important points. Apart from drawing attention to the importance of empire as such, he highlights that Revelation’s end time scenario is not to be understood as referring to the actual end of the world but rather to the end of the then current political reality of the Roman Empire and everything that it stood for. To express this in kingdom of God language, the writer of Revelation is basically asserting that for God’s kingdom to flourish, the anti-godly reality of empire needs to be brought to an end. Christians thus need to oppose Rome not primarily because Rome persecutes Christians but because it is vital that Christians disassociate themselves from the evil perpetrated by the Roman system; and it is because of that disassociation that they may suffer persecution (see Bauckham, 1993, p. 38).

Gorman thus describes Revelation as a theopolitical text, not only a critique of empire but also a manifesto against civil religion (2011, p. 40), a notion that we will return to in a moment. Revelation parodies and critiques the competing story of ‘human power in the guise of deity’. The book’s critique is aimed at the oppressive nature of imperial power as well as the empire’s blasphemous claims. As Bauckham notes, ‘the Roman Empire, like most political powers in the ancient world, represented and propagated its power in religious terms. ... it absolutized its power, claiming for itself the ultimate, divine sovereignty over the world’ (1993, p. 34).

The Roman imperial cult, which was particularly widespread in the area where the churches of Revelation were located (for instance, ‘Satan’s throne’ in Rev. 2:13 appears to be a reference to the temple of the imperial cult at the top of Pergamum’s acropolis), saw the emperor as divinely ordained and attributed a sacred character to the Empire
itself. As Warren Carter notes, ‘Rome was chosen by the gods, notably Jupiter ..., to manifest the gods’ rule, presence, and favor throughout the world’ (2006, p. 7). The Roman imperial cult therefore required that prayers and sacrifices be offered not only to the gods but also to the emperor himself, who was worthy of praise, devotion and allegiance because of his protection of the empire. It has been pointed out that Domitian especially coveted such devotion and that statues of him would have been found in at least five of the seven cities mentioned in Revelation 2–3 (Pilgrim, 1999, p. 148).

Revelation contrasts this worship of the beast and thus the idolisation of human power – ‘all the inhabitants of the earth will worship it’ (13:8) ‘it exercises all the authority ...', and it makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast’ (13:12) – with the universal worship of God – ‘Lord, ... you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you’ (15:4) (see Bauckham, 1993, p. 34). The book is a theopolitical text because it makes claims about who is truly God, thus challenging the political theology of empire while also defining the sovereignty of the true God in terms of ‘nonviolent and non-coercive “Lamb power”’ (Gorman, 2011, p. 43). Interestingly and instructively, it is precisely in worship that ‘the community of faith realizes its new identity under the lordship of the Lamb and under the conscious, intentional rejection of the claims to lordship made by Babylon/Rome’ (Schnelle, 2009, p. 767). Pablo Richard therefore sees Revelation as ‘a liturgical text that amounts to a theological and political manifesto’ (1995, p. 40), while for Craig Koester it is a ‘visionary critique’ of ‘the deification of human power’ (2009).

Bauckham similarly regards the book as ‘a set of Christian prophetic counter-images’, which effect ‘a kind of purging of the Christian imagination, refurbishing it with alternative visions of how the world is and will be’ (1993, p. 17). To mention only one example, the goddess Roma, ‘a stunning personification of the civilization of Rome’, is turned, in the imagery of Revelation, into a Roman prostitute, whose wealth and splendour are nothing but the profits of her disreputable trade. It is by means of such imagery that John impresses upon his readers Rome’s true character and moral corruption.

Revelation criticises all imperial idolatry and injustice in the form of military, economic, political and religious oppression (Gorman, 2011, p. 33). Universalising ‘the harsh realities of particular historical situations’ (for instance, ‘the beast from the sea [in Rev. 13] represents Rome – yet more than Rome’ [Aune, 2000, p. 1188]), the book ‘is ... a critique of all idolatries and injustices similar to those of Rome, throughout history and into the present’ (Gorman, 2011, p. 34).

Case Study: The United States of America, Empire and Civil Religion

Writing from an American perspective, Gorman instructively applies Revelation’s critique to U.S. politics, quoting Richard, who notes that the countries of Central America
‘live in oppression and exclusion by an economic, cultural, and military system of global-
ization led by the United States government operating as an imperial, arrogant, and cruel
power’ (2005, pp. 146-47). Some have pointed to parallels between the Roman Empire
and contemporary manifestations of empire in global capital; and it has been suggested
that the United States feature the following imperial characteristics: ‘slave labor; demon-
ization, genocide, and displacement of indigenous people; colonization of distant lands ...;
cultural arrogance; and global military power’ (Howard-Brook and Gwyther 1999, p.
236). As early as 1860, the American poet and journalist Walt Whitman published a poem
called ‘The Errand-Bearers’, in which he proclaimed:

I chant the new empire, grander than any before – As in a vision it comes to me;
I chant America, the Mistress – I chant a greater supremacy ...
And you, Libertad of the world!

(quoted in Crossan, 2007, p. 2)

Almost 150 years on, the American political scientist Chalmers Johnson, commenting on
the effects of the 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center, notes (2004, p. 3) that
they:

produced a dangerous change in the thinking of some of our leaders, who began to see our
republic as a genuine empire, a new Rome, the greatest colossus in history, no longer bound
by international law, the concern of allies, or any constraints on its use of military force.

All this raises the question of how we define empire. Gorman (2011, p. 45) offers the fol-
lowing proposal, suggesting that an empire is:

An entity that has come to widespread (global or nearly global) dominance through deliberate
expansion by means of the extreme exercise of some form(s) of power – economic, political,
military, and/or religious – resulting in the creation of colony-like clients of the entity and of
enemies who perceive the entity as oppressive.

Gorman rightly notes that definitions of empire vary; that there are differences between
the U.S. and the Roman Empire, with the Roman imperial cult, in particular, finding no
modern equivalent; and that an empire may not necessarily be inherently evil. While
pointing out that the United States are perceived as an imperial force throughout many
parts of the world that have been affected by American military, political and economic
power, he also importantly emphasises that we need ‘to see Revelation as a critique of
secular power wherever and however it expresses itself oppressively, and especially as a
critique of such power that is deemed sacred and granted devotion and allegiance’ (2011,
p. 46). What is particularly troublesome, in the light of Revelation’s critique of empire and
civil religion, is the fact that there are ‘political, military, and economic powers to which
millions give unquestioned allegiance’ (Kraybill, 2010, p. 15).

The particular danger that Gorman (2011, p. 47) perceives is civil religion, which is
not confined to empires but can be found in any state, including poor, developing nations.
Civil religion includes (a) the ideology of the sacralisation of the state, its power, accom-
plishments, values and leaders; (b) the demand of solemn devotion and allegiance to the
state as a sacred responsibility (incl. the willingness to kill or die for the state); and (c) the mixing of religious faith and practice with political, nationalistic claims and practices. It also often includes (d) the sacralisation of one’s own people and the demonization of others, thus leading to a culture of hatred and violence.

Once again applying this to the context of North America, Gorman (2011, pp. 48-50) draws attention to the following marks or myths of American civil religion: exceptionalism (the US has a unique place in God’s plan), messianism (which is about spreading American-style freedom and democracy), innocence (when attacked or criticised, America is the innocent, righteous victim), extreme patriotism or nationalism (one’s country is worthy of [nearly] unqualified allegiance), militarism and sacred violence (a divine mandate to use violence when peaceful means are undesirable or unsuccessful).

More generally, civil religion involves the politicisation of the sacred and the sacralisation of the political, which Gorman finds expressed in the syncretism of American ideology and (quasi-) Christian religiosity (2011, pp. 53-54). It is this participation of the church in ‘the idolatry of the imperial cult, the civil or national religion’, that the book of Revelation critiques (p. 56), advocating instead what Gorman calls ‘uncivil worship and witness’ (pp. 55, 77). This he defines as a ‘challenging summons to follow the Lamb in a community of faithful resistance, liturgical living, and missional hope’ (p. 59). In practice, this means (p. 52) that:

Christian references to ‘our troops,’ in prayer or any other forms of discourse, are theologically inappropriate because ‘we’ (the church, Christians) do not have any troops. Such talk confuses our being Christian with being American (or British, or whatever) and manifests a profound forgetfulness about two important aspects of the church stressed in Revelation: its international character as a worldwide assembly of people from every tribe and nation (Revelation 7) and its peaceful, nonviolent character as a community of the Lamb.

And again (p. 56):

I would contend ... that the most alluring and dangerous deity in the United States is the omnipresent, syncretistic god of nationalism mixed with Christianity lite: religious beliefs, language, and practices that are superficially Christian but infused with national myths and habits. Sadly, most of this civil religion’s practitioners belong to Christian churches, which is precisely why Revelation is addressed to the seven churches ....

According to Gorman, Revelation’s counter-programme to imperial power and the dangers of civil religion unfolds in seven theological themes (pp. 75-76):

1. **The Reign of God and the Lamb**: Revelation has a ‘cruciform understanding of divine power’, according to which God reigns in the form of the slaughtered Lamb.
2. **The Reality of Evil and Empire**: Empire promises life while delivering death.
3. **The Temptation to Idolatry and Immorality**: This includes the idolatry of violence, oppression, greed, lust etc.
4. **The Call to Covenant Faithfulness and Resistance**
5. **An Alternative Vision of God and Worship**: This is a vision of ‘uncivil’ worship.
6. **Faithful Witness according to the Just and Nonviolent Pattern of Christ:** This involves living in nonviolent love towards friends and enemies in ‘mini-cultures of life as alternatives to empire’s culture of death’.

7. **Judgement and Salvation/The New Creation**

**Violence in the Context of Revelation’s Critique of Empire**

To return to our consideration of the issue of violence in Revelation, this clearly needs to be understood in connection with the book’s critique of empire. Commenting on its apocalyptic language, Koester has pointed out that ‘the visionary world portrays the clash of powers in extraordinary form in order to evoke the kind of faith and resistance needed to follow the Lamb’ (2009, p. 18). John depicts the end of the death-dealing Roman Empire in such drastic and violent ways in order to dissuade the church, as strongly as he possibly can, from colluding with a political entity that may appear to be all-powerful but that stands condemned in the eyes of God and is about to be defeated.

The violent descriptions in the plagues of the seven trumpets (8:6–9:21) and the seven bowls (16:1-21) may serve as an illustration of the book’s rhetoric. Noting that Revelation’s imagery relates to specific social, political, cultural and religious realities in the world of its original readers, Bauckham (1993, p. 20) points out that:

Their content suggests, among many other things, the plagues of Egypt which accompanied the exodus, the fall of Jericho to the army of Joshua, the army of locusts depicted in the prophecy of Joel, the Sinai theophany, the contemporary fear of invasion by Parthian cavalry, the earthquakes to which the cities of Asia Minor were rather frequently subject, and very possibly the eruption of Vesuvius which had recently terrified the Mediterranean world.

Bauckham goes on to comment that ‘John has taken some of his contemporaries’ worst experiences and worst fears of wars and natural disasters, blown them up to apocalyptic proportions, and cast them in biblically allusive terms’. This is as perceptive an analysis of the effect of Revelation’s imagery and rhetoric as one is likely to find; and it illustrates well how John goes to extraordinary lengths in the attempt to dissuade his readers from colluding with an empire that stands under the judgement of God. Bauckham (1993, p. 35) again sums it up well:

Revelation ... allows no neutral perception: either one shares Rome’s own ideology, the view of the Empire promoted by Roman propaganda, or one sees it from the perspective of heaven, which unmasks the pretensions of Rome. Revelation portrays the Roman Empire as a system of violent oppression, founded on conquest, maintained by violence and oppression. It is a system both of political tyranny and of economic exploitation.

That the readers of Revelation are urged to resist, rather than collude with, the Roman Empire is powerfully expressed in the book’s repeated admonitions to conquer. Every one of the seven letters to the churches in Revelation 2–3 ends with a promise for those who conquer (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 26-28; 3:5, 12, 21). Indeed, according to Bauckham, ‘the call to Revelation’s readers or hearers to “conquer” is fundamental to the structure and
theme of the book. It demands the readers' active participation in the divine war against evil' (1993, p. 88).

While the object of the act of conquering is left unspecified in the opening chapters of Revelation, the section dealing with the 'messianic war' (Rev. 12–14) defines the enemies of God and the church as the satanic trinity consisting of the dragon or serpent, which is the primeval source of all opposition to God; the beast or sea-monster, which stands for Rome's imperial power; and the second beast or earth-monster, which represents the propaganda machine of Rome's imperial cult (see Bauckham, 1993, p. 89). Bauckham (pp. 89-90) comments that:

The bestial figures are essentially primeval forces of evil, destined for ultimate defeat by the divine Warrior at the last day, but currently incarnated in the oppressive power of the Roman Empire, which surpasses in its military violence and its deification of its own power even the evil empires of the past ....

Bauckham offers further illustrations of how Revelation's imagery responds to the realities and propaganda of the Roman Empire (see 'The Critique of Roman Power' in Bauckham, 1993, pp. 35-39), but the point for us to note is that all these depictions, including the violent descriptions of Rome's defeat, are meant to dissuade the book's readers from being lured by the Empire's wealth and splendour and to recognise its evil, anti-godly nature.

As perhaps one of the most important steps on our quest to develop a responsible approach to the violent imagery of the book of Revelation, I therefore suggest that it needs to be seen primarily as a rhetorical deterrent. The book's readers are thereby urged to see the Roman Empire for what it truly is and not to associate with a profoundly unjust, brutal and evil regime that has been condemned by God. As John himself says:

Then I heard another voice from heaven saying, 'Come out of her, my people, so that you do not take part in her sins, and so that you do not share in her plagues; for her sins are heaped high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities.' (Rev. 18:4-5)

However, the recognition of the rhetorical purpose of Revelation's violent imagery is no more than another step along the way, partly because this perspective does not explain all the violent passages but also because the presence of that violent imagery, whatever its purpose, remains problematic.

The Problem of Revelation's Violent Imagery

Crossan captures the problem well by quoting from William Butler Yeats's poem 'The Stare's Nest by My Window' (1922):

We had fed the heart on fantasies,
The heart's grown brutal from the fare.
(Quoted in Crossan, 2007, p. 191)
Crossan is concerned about the effect that the violent imagery has on the readers of Revelation. Writing from an American perspective, he is particularly worried about Christian fundamentalism and what he calls its ‘ideological lust for imminent human slaughter and cosmic catastrophe’, its ‘apocalyptic vision of a violent God’ (2007, p. 196). The following quotes may help us appreciate Crossan’s concerns:

- ‘What then should be the believer’s attitude to the destruction of the world by fire? First of all, he should welcome it and pray for its nearness.’ (Robert Gromacki, 1970)
- ‘The world has one great war yet to endure .... The slaughter that will take place is too frightening to imagine. Just be thankful that you’re not going to be around.’ (Chuck Smith, 1977)
- ‘The Tribulation will result in such bloodshed and destruction that any war up to that time will seem insignificant.’ (Jerry Falwell, 1983)
- ‘Some day we may blow ourselves up with all the bombs .... But I still believe in God’s going to be in control .... If He chooses to use nuclear war, then who am I to argue with that?’ (Charles Jones, 1986; all four quotes from Crossan, 2007, p. 199)
- ‘Peace and peace plans in the Middle East are a bad thing, in the view of fundamentalist Christians, because they delay the countdown to Christ’s return.’ (Robertson, Falwell, LaHaye, quoted in Crossan, 2007, p. 201)

Crossan rightly calls these concepts a ‘fanatical delusion’ (2007, p. 197), but he is particularly worried that the delusion may go back to the Bible itself; and he comments that ‘as Christianity follows John in emphasizing … apocalypse over incarnation, it finds itself waiting for God to act violently while God is waiting for us to act nonviolently’ (p. 230).

It is not difficult to show that the statements quoted by Crossan demonstrate a failure to understand the rich, allusive nature of Revelation’s imagery, which is steeped, as we saw earlier, in allusions to Old Testament passages as well as to contemporary myths and events. In treating Revelation as a literal prediction of how the divine judgement will occur, these authors and speakers fail to appreciate the book’s rhetoric. They also ignore its nonviolent message of faithful witness and martyrdom, and its universalist hopes, both of which we shall explore in a moment. The problem raised by these views is compounded by the fact that they are voiced, not by a persecuted minority, but by Christians who have, at times, had quite a profound influence upon decision makers in the most powerful country on earth.

Another difficulty of Revelation’s violent imagery may be best illustrated by quoting the following passages:

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given; they cried out with a loud voice, ‘Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?’ (Rev. 6:9-10)
... because they shed the blood of saints and prophets, you have given them blood to drink. It is what they deserve! (Rev. 16:6)

Render to her as she herself has rendered, and repay her double for her deeds; mix a double draught for her in the cup she mixed. As she glorified herself and lived luxuriously, so give her a like measure of torment and grief. (Rev. 18:6-7)

Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power to our God, for his judgments are true and just; he has judged the great whore who corrupted the earth with her fornication, and he has avenged on her the blood of his servants. (Rev. 19:1-2)

While the primary purpose of Revelation’s violent imagery appears to be a rhetorical one, which I defined as an attempt to help its readers see the Roman Empire for what it truly is and to dissuade them from associating with an unjust, brutal and evil regime that has been condemned by God, there are also passages that seem to strike a vindictive note. This is the particular temptation of any rhetoric that seeks to console a persecuted minority. Although this is not Revelation’s main purpose or strategy, the texts quoted above appear to fall into this trap.

Of course, it may be, and usually is, argued that the aim of these texts is not to express vindictiveness but rather the desire for the just and deserved judgement of God. Pilgrim, for instance, commenting on Revelation 18:20 and 19:1-8, suggests that these texts are ‘not to be understood as a call for vengeance nor a kind of psychological catharsis of the oppressed against their oppressor’ but rather as ‘a cry for justice, a plea for God to put an end to all the suffering of the victimized’ (1999, p. 160). I would concur that many of the judgement texts fall into that category, and yet it seems to me difficult to deny that phrases such as ‘repay her double’ display a vengeful attitude. Quite apart from this, the very notion of retributive justice achieved by means of ‘redemptive violence’ raises problems in itself.

**The Myth of Redemptive Violence and the Problem of Divine Violence**

Bauckham has argued that ‘the holiness and righteousness of God require the condemnation of unrighteousness on earth and the destruction of the powers of evil that contest God’s rule on earth, so that their rule may give place to the coming of God’s kingdom on earth’ (1993, p. 40). Not only would this appear to be the right and just thing for God to do; it would also seem to be required in order for God’s plans for his creation to come to fruition. As again Bauckham points out: ‘With their violence, oppression and idolatrous religion [the powers of evil] are ruining God’s creation. His faithfulness to his creation requires that he destroys them in order to preserve and to deliver it from evil’ (p. 52). Gorman (2011, p. 79) agrees, suggesting that the death and destruction in Revelation are symbolic of the judgment and cleansing of God that is necessary for the realization of the hope offered in Christ for a new heaven and new earth in which God and the Lamb alone reign forever among a redeemed, reconciled humanity from all tribes, peoples, and nations.
Revelation therefore repeatedly speaks of the wrath and judgement of God. The following may serve as an illustration:

The nations raged, but your wrath has come, and the time for ... destroying those who destroy the earth. (Rev. 11:18)

But do we have to assume that God’s final victory requires the destruction of those who currently oppose his reign? And what does that say about God? New Testament images of violent judgement and destruction find their precedent in the Old Testament and in particular in the Old Testament prophets, who voiced the expectation that God would one day defeat Israel’s enemies or, to put it in less nationalistic terms, those who oppose his rule on earth. The assumption is that, in order for God and his goodness to triumph and reign unchallenged, all evil has to be destroyed.

This notion is frequently taken for granted, but it is increasingly seen to be a disturbing assumption, because it presents us with a violent God who proceeds in exactly the same way that all empires have always gone about securing their victory over their opponents. This is the pattern that we can readily observe throughout the course of history. Victory and sovereignty are secured by violent means, by destroying one’s enemies or, at the very least, defeating them and enforcing one’s coercive rule upon them. Triumph, according to this pattern, always involves violence.

Crossan (2007, passim) calls it ‘the normalcy of civilization’s violent injustice’. John Swinton speaks of ‘the deep irony that we constantly seek peace by going to war’ (2008, p. 11), while Stanley Hauerwas notes that ‘we use war to make ourselves think that the world can be made safe’ (2008, p. 50). Walter Wink, finally, talks about the ‘myth of redemptive violence’, which, he notes, ‘undergirds American popular culture, civil religion, nationalism, and foreign policy’ (1992, p. 13).

What these writers have in common is the conviction that violence is not the answer. Hauerwas, for instance, points out that ‘as faithful followers of Christ in a world at war, we cannot imagine being anything other than nonviolent. ... nonviolence is a sign of hope that there is an alternative to war’ (2008, p. 55). Or, in the words of Martin Luther King: ‘hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multiplies toughness in a descending spiral of destruction’ (1977, p. 47). But of course it was Jesus himself who told us to ‘put [our] sword back into its place’, because ‘all who take the sword will perish by the sword’ (Matt. 26:52).

I have been struck recently by several examples of people who, having experienced extreme forms of violence, have been enabled to respond nonviolently and with love and compassion. One of these is Marian Partington, whose sister Lucy was raped, tortured and murdered by Frederick and Rosemary West. Partington describes (2012, p. 154)
how, after a long and intensely painful struggle, she eventually found the strength to for
give and be compassionate, and how it was precisely the intensity of her pain that brought
her to that point:

There is a place that understands, deep within, that violence can only breed more violence
and that this is where it must stop. It is not a place where justice means more pain, punish-
ment and revenge. It is rooted in a strong instinct for this depth of pain not to happen to any-
one else. ... It is a place of insight which opens up to learning, hope and compassion. It is a
place that yearns for healing, which is willing to sacrifice the immediate response of revenge.
... It wants to say, just wait, stay with the pain, let it burn you into a place of renewal.

This is an excellent exposure of the myth of redemptive violence. As Partington notes,
‘violence can only breed more violence’, and justice must not mean revenge. Having been
harmed in ways that few of us can even begin to imagine, she talks about a yearning for
healing that is willing to sacrifice any desire for revenge.

Another example is the work of Marcia Owen in Durham, North Carolina, whose min-
istry seeks to address that city’s huge problem with gun violence. In a book co-authored
with Samuel Wells, she describes violence as ‘a desperate attempt to assert short-term
physical control in a situation that is psychologically out of control’ (Wells and Owen,
2011, p. 51). The book is partly about Owen’s own journey of transformation while head-
ing up the Religious Coalition for a Nonviolent Durham (see www.nonviolent-
durham.org).

She especially reflects on how she had become hardened to the perpetrators of
Durham’s gun violence, whose punishment she desired. However, as Owen notes, ‘that is
not the way of Christ’ (Wells and Owen, 2011, p. 62), and ‘the only response to immeas-
urable loss is God’s immeasurable love’ (p. 66), which is available to all. And so she talks
about becoming aware of the fundamental unity of all, victims and perpetrators, who are
of equal worth and value and need healing. Owen explains how such an inclusive
approach is vital when working with the Black and Hispanic communities affected by gun
violence, as victims and perpetrators tend to come from the same families. Like Parting-
ton, she describes how it was through the acceptance of suffering, the suffering she her-
self had caused and the suffering she had endured, that she was given what she describes
as ‘the most empowering gift in ministry’, which is ‘hearing God whispering, “I have no
enemies”’ (p. 68).

Wink, well-known for his work on nonviolence, even believes that ‘there is ... no other
way to God for our time but through the enemy, for loving the enemy has become the key
both to human survival in the age of terror and to personal transformation’ (2003, p. 60).
And like Partington and Owen, Wink, too, reflects on how it is in the midst of our suffering
and grief that divine love and forgiveness accomplish profound transformation (p. 61):

It is precisely here, in the midst of persecution, that many will find themselves overtaken by
the miraculous power of divine forgiveness. God’s forgiving love can burst like a flare even in
the night of our grief and hatred, and free us to love. It is in just such times as these, when
forgiveness seems impossible, that the power of God most mightily manifests itself.
I am offering these examples of compassion, forgiveness and the love of enemies because they raise serious questions about the portrayal of divine violence in biblical books such as Revelation. They also raise questions about our understanding of the nature of God. As Wink notes, ‘if we resist violence with violence, we simply mirror its evil. We become what we resist’ (2003, p. 77). But if that is the case, then what does that say about a violent God?

Surveying the biblical literature, Crossan refers to examples of violent and examples of nonviolent portrayals of God, which lead him to suggest that we ultimately have to choose between a violent and a nonviolent God. Rejecting the former, Crossan shows how the ‘best’ biblical texts promote the radicality of divine nonviolent justice (2007, passim). As we saw at the beginning of our exploration of violence in Revelation, this move leads Crossan to reject Revelation as a text that transforms the ‘nonviolent resistance of the slaughtered Jesus into the violent warfare of the slaughtering Jesus’ (2007, p. 224). As he puts it: ‘To turn Jesus into a divine warrior allows once again – but now terminally in the last book of the Bible – the normalcy of human civilization’s violent injustice to subsume the radicality of God’s nonviolent justice’ (p. 234).

I am inclined to follow Crossan in making a distinction between ‘the normalcy of human civilization’s violent injustice’ and ‘the radicality of God’s nonviolent justice’; and it is evident that the most radical biblical texts promote the latter. That, however, raises the question of what we make of those texts that do not; and it is here that I am reluctant to follow Crossan’s lead too quickly. But how should we approach the texts that portray a violent God; and is there any hope for Revelation yet?

My starting point for what follows is the twofold conviction that the notion of re- demptive violence is indeed a myth and that the Christian God is a nonviolent God. Jesus’ ministry and message, and especially his suffering and death on the cross, clearly point in that direction. As once again Wink notes, Jesus ‘preferred to suffer injustice and violence rather than be their cause’ (2003, p. 87; my italics). Or to quote Miguel d’Escoto, former Nicaraguan foreign minister and a Roman Catholic priest, ‘the very essence of Christianity is the cross’ (as quoted by Wink, 2003, p. 85).

Biblical Depictions of God and Their Reinterpretation in the Life of Jesus

Let me now quickly sketch how I would approach biblical texts that talk about God in violent terms, before offering some further observations on violence and nonviolence in Revelation. My first observation concerns the fact that all biblical texts are culturally conditioned and thus operate with concepts and beliefs stemming from the cultural background of the biblical authors, concepts and beliefs that, in some cases, we would be reluctant to adopt today.
This need hardly be demonstrated, but if an example was required, I would point to New Testament stipulations regarding clothing (e.g. 1 Cor. 11:5-6). Granted that this is a somewhat trivial example, I have chosen it deliberately due to its largely uncontroversial nature. More consequential examples would include biblical statements on issues such as homosexuality or the role of women. Indeed, relevant texts on the role of women offer perhaps the most helpful analogy for our purpose in that they, too, can be divided into those that reflect the ‘normalcy of civilisation’s expectations’ and those that model the ‘radicality of the divine transcendence of those values’, to use language that reflects Crossan’s aforementioned distinction. As with the issue of divine violence, the most radical texts transcend cultural norms and expectations.

This, it should be noted, is true of both testaments. While, for instance, the Old Testament routinely talks about God achieving justice by punishing those who oppose his rule, there are also expectations of peace and nonviolence, such as Isaiah’s vision of the nations streaming to Mt Zion in order to be taught by Israel’s God, a vision that includes the well-known expectation that swords be beaten into ploughshares (Isa. 2:1-4). It is perhaps instructive, in this context, to reflect on Jesus’ coming as the Messiah, a Messiah who did not conform to Jewish expectations of a powerful royal figure, who would defeat the Romans and liberate Israel from its enemies by military and hence violent means but who, when suffering a slow, agonising death on a Roman cross, identified with the psalmist’s cries of lament (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34; cf. Ps. 22:1) and embodied the agony of Isaiah’s suffering servant. In all this, Jesus acted in conformity with the expectations of some Old Testament texts while not realising the hope for a glorious divine victory won by violent means expressed in others. Even his closest followers found it difficult to come to terms with Jesus’ radical reinterpretation of his messianic role (see Mark 8:31-33).

The dissonance between the traditional expectation of a glorious divine victory and Jesus’ willingness to suffer injustice and violence rather than be their cause has usually been resolved by projecting God’s glorious victory, a victory won by violent means, into the future. This, it seems, is what the book of Revelation is inviting its readers to anticipate. However, over against such expectations I want to propose that Jesus’ death on the cross, according to d’Escoto ‘the very essence of Christianity’, ought to be seen as the model for God’s engagement with this world. What if the final victory, too, was won not by violent, coercive and retributive means but by nonviolent, noncoercive and restorative ones? What if God truly was the radically ‘Other’ who did not need to resort to the normal ways and means of empire? But what, we now need to ask, does Revelation have to say about this? What does it offer: compassion or apocalypse? to put it in the words of James Warren’s book title (see Warren, 2013).
Violence and Nonviolence in Revelation

It may be instructive to begin with the observation that Revelation echoes Jesus’ words about the sword:

Let anyone who has an ear listen. If you are to be taken captive, into captivity you go; if you kill with the sword, with the sword you must be killed. Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints. (Rev. 13:9-10)

As Gorman points out, ‘Revelation calls believers to nonretaliation and nonviolence’ (2011, p. 79). In line with this, the faithful are said to conquer not by violent means. Instead,

they have conquered [the accuser] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they did not cling to life even in the face of death. (Rev. 12:11)

Like Christ, his followers conquer by their own suffering rather than by inflicting suffering on others. As Pilgrim points out: ‘This is Christian literature, and Christian resistance is of a special kind. Revelation does not preach hatred, violence, or even revenge. Nor does it rely on the power of the sword. There is no appeal to political or armed revolution’ (1999, p. 174). Suffering at the hands of those in power, the Christian ‘response to hatred and violence’, as again Pilgrim notes (ibid.),

is not more of the same, but the willingness to suffer for the cause of Jesus Christ, without hatred or bitterness. Here we encounter once again the radically new ethic toward one’s enemies exemplified in the life and teaching of Jesus. ... Christian resistance ... responds with suffering love, as did its Lord. ... Only in this way can the cycle of violence be broken and the power of tyranny overcome.²

However, while it can thus be seen that Revelation calls the followers of the Lamb to nonviolent resistance, the question of God’s engagement of the powers of evil still requires further exploration. If Christ’s followers are not supposed to respond to violence with more of the same, and if nonviolent resistance is the only way in which the cycle of violence can be broken and the power of tyranny overcome, then it would seem problematic for God to resort to violent means himself.

Turning to this issue, I am once again taking my cue from Bauckham’s comments on Revelation (1993, p. 64), in which he makes the point that:

if God is not present in the world as ‘the One who sits on the throne’, he is present as the Lamb who conquers by suffering. Christ’s suffering witness and sacrificial death are ... the key event in God’s conquest of evil and establishment of his kingdom on earth. Even more than the judgments which issue from the throne in heaven they constitute God’s rule on earth.

² However, as Glasson has pointed out, this kind of message can be harmful to sufferers of abuse, who require ‘a process of strengthening from within, a slow, painful journey into self-belief, a realization that life has worth’ as well as the concomitant ‘vocabulary of resilience, solidarity and resistance’ (2009, p. 91). It is also worth noting in this context that willingness to suffer is not a sign of weakness but of strength. As again Glasson notes, ‘Jesus chooses to be a victim, not because he is relinquishing power but because he is naming the power of love to live differently’ (p. 44).
It is particularly important to note that Bauckham, while referring to some divine judgements, regards ‘Christ’s suffering witness and sacrificial death [as] ... the key event in God’s conquest of evil and establishment of his kingdom on earth’. Gorman concurs, pointing out that ‘Christ conquers ... not by inflicting but by absorbing violence’ (2011, p. 78). This is a helpful starting point, and it is worth emphasising that the image of the Lamb that was slain is a pervasive one in Revelation.

Bauckham insightfully demonstrates not only to what extent Revelation is steeped in Old Testament language and symbolism, but also how this is reinterpreted in the light of Christ’s death. For instance, commenting on Revelation 5, Bauckham (1993, p. 74) notes how what John hears, namely that ‘the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered’ (v. 5), is reinterpreted by what he sees, which is a slaughtered Lamb that, by means of its sacrificial death, has redeemed people from all nations (vv. 6, 9-10). While the messianic titles ‘Lion of the tribe of Judah’ and ‘Root of David’ evoke traditional nationalist and militaristic notions of a conquering Messiah, the author of Revelation stresses that the victory over evil has been won by the Lamb’s sacrificial death. ‘John [thus] carefully reinterprets the tradition. His Messiah Jesus does not win his victory by military conquest’ (Bauckham, 1993, p. 68).

Based on these observations, it would seem proper to conclude that Revelation’s portrayal of God’s final victory is more nuanced than, for instance, Crossan allows. John has taken traditional Old Testament concepts and expectations but has reinterpreted them in the light of Christ’s victory won on the cross rather than in a violent clash with Rome. Revelation accordingly can be said to feature reassuring examples of the ‘radicality of divine nonviolent justice’ triumphing over the ‘normalcy of civilisation’s violent injustice’, to quote Crossan yet again.

That said, however, the book does contain some deeply problematic texts, in which, to put it in Pilgrim’s words, ‘cries for vengeance [are] intermingled with depictions of divine action in violent and oft-repulsive imagery’ (1999, p. 175). Shouts of Hallelujah prompted by the fact that the blood of God’s servants has been avenged (Rev. 19:1-4) and depictions of people gnawing their tongues in agony (Rev. 16:10) and of blood flowing ‘as high as a horse’s bridle, for a distance of about two hundred miles’ (Rev. 14:20) cannot be easily passed over without comment.

As we said earlier, some of this language is best explained as a rhetorical deterrent, urging the readers not to collude with the Roman Empire. A similar point is made by saying that Revelation’s imagery and language need to be seen as symbolic or metaphorical, rather than as literal. As Gorman says, the ‘death and destruction in Revelation are symbolic of the judgment ... of God’ (2011, p. 79; my italics; see also Pilgrim, 1999, p. 176). Apocalyptic literature, it has been pointed out, appeals to our imagination. According to
Peterson, who sees the author of Revelation as a theologian, poet and pastor, the book needs to be read as poetry (1991, p. 5). Peterson notes that:

A poet uses words not to explain something, and not to describe something, but to make something. Poet (poëtēs) means ‘maker.’ Poetry is not the language of objective explanation but the language of imagination. It makes an image of reality in such a way as to invite our participation in it.

Bauckham similarly suggests that ‘part of the strategy of Revelation, in creating a symbolic world for its readers to enter, was to redirect their imaginative response to the world’ (1993, p. 129). However, while a non-literal reading of Revelation’s violent imagery is an important step in the right direction, for our imagination to be fed with images of a violent God still seems to be troubling.

Nor does this approach offer much help with the book’s occasional cries for vengeance. A possible way forward in relation to these texts might be to compare them to the Old Testament’s imprecatory psalms (e.g. Ps. 137) and to note, as, for instance, Pilgrim does, that ‘crisis times evoke passionate outbursts of feeling and cries of desperation’ (1999, p. 176). This, too, is an important observation, and we should be very careful not to disallow such passionate cries. After all, one of the main contributions of the psalms of imprecation and lament is precisely to give people permission to be honest before God and express their true feelings and desires.

However, there does seem to be a fundamental difference between honest prayer and an apocalyptic text that envisages God’s violent retribution at the end of times. Moreover, given Jesus’ call to love our enemies, cries of vengeance now appear in a slightly different light. Pilgrim is therefore quick to point out that the relevant texts in Revelation are, in fact, not vindictive but should be seen as cries for justice. Again, we need to be careful not to dismiss this too glibly. As Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza points out, ‘the outcry of Revelation for justice and judgment can be fully understood only by those who hunger and thirst for justice’ (1991, p. 139). However, while that is undoubtedly the case, it is also true that this ultimately reinforces the problematic myth of redemptive violence.

Personally, I would conclude that, while Revelation’s portrayal of God’s final victory is indeed far more nuanced than has often been recognised, there are nonetheless passages that convey problematic images of God, images that depict God in inappropriate terms, as it were, images in which ‘the normalcy of civilisation’s violent injustice’ has not yet been transcended. In these cases, it would seem that John’s cultural background has imposed limits on his ability to conceive of God in radically different terms.3 Having said

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3 This is precisely the insight of apophaticism, also known as the ‘via negativa’, which recognises that human depictions of God, including the ones found in the biblical literature, can never accurately describe the one who is indescribable. Apophaticism, which ultimately leads to silence before a God understood as the radically ‘Other’, therefore insists on critiquing the kataphatic impulse to commit itself to language, an impulse that is deemed to be problematic by apophatic standards. On apophaticism and kataphaticism, see Lane, 1998, passim.
that, it is important to acknowledge that the book of Revelation has made some very significant strides in that direction. But to repeat a point made earlier, if Jesus’ redefinition of his messianic role in strictly nonviolent terms is indeed the model for God’s engagement with the world, then perhaps all our ‘normal’, violent expectations of God’s final victory may yet again prove to be misguided.

Revelation and Universalism

An entirely nonviolent understanding of God’s engagement with the world moreover calls for a universalist understanding of salvation. Surprising though this may seem in relation to a book that has much to say about divine punishments and maintains that the smoke of the torment of ‘those who worship the beast and its image … goes up forever and ever’, but some have made a case for a universalist reading of Revelation. Pilgrim, for instance, points out that ‘there is a surprising note of universal salvation that sounds throughout Revelation’ (1999, p. 177).

A fully universalist reading has been proposed by Gregory MacDonald (2008), whose starting point is the anticipation, expressed in Revelation 15:4, that ‘all nations will come and worship before [God], for [his] righteous acts have been revealed’ (NIV). It has been suggested that the nations here stand for the community of the redeemed (e.g. Beale, 1999, pp. 1097-98), but MacDonald points out that elsewhere in Revelation Christ’s followers are never identified with the nations, which are rather ‘the apostate ethno-political groupings that make up God’s rebellious world’ (2008, p. 111). Nor does John talk about people from all nations coming to worship but about all nations doing so (p. 112).

For the nations now to come and worship is fully in line with the description of the 144,000, the redeemed multitude drawn from every nation, as ‘first fruits’ (Rev. 14:4), which implies that at some later stage the rest of the harvest will be coming in as well. MacDonald comments: ‘The conversion of the Gentiles is a taste of the fullness to come in the New Age, when we will see the conversion of all the nations’ (2008, p. 118). Bauckham, who unlike MacDonald does not espouse a full universalist position, nonetheless comes to similar conclusions (1993, p. 101): ‘In the first stage of his work, the Lamb’s bloody sacrifice redeemed a people for God. In the second stage, this people’s participation in his sacrifice, through martyrdom, wins all the peoples for God. This is how God’s universal kingdom comes.’ And thus the proleptic vision of universal worship in Revelation 5:13 will eventually come true:

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, ‘To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might forever and ever!’

The reverse is not the case, however, since a universalist understanding of ultimate salvation could still reckon with divine retributive justice executed by violent means. What the universalist does affirm, however, is that the punishment will not be everlasting and that there will be no eternal damnation.
Additional key texts for universalists occur at the end of Revelation, where it is clear that a distinction between the saved and the wicked continues into the new creation (Rev. 21:8). However, the gates of the Holy City, the abode of the redeemed, are never closed (Rev. 21:25), and in 22:14 the risen Christ utters a blessing, which is also an invitation: ‘Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates’. As the redeemed already live in the city, the invitation is extended to those outside it, those who are in the lake of fire (Rev. 21:8) but who, it appears, can still wash their robes in the blood of the Lamb and be added to the book of life. Earlier on, in 21:24-26, there was a vision of the nations entering the city, which leads MacDonald to comment that ‘not only do the gates offer the opportunity for the lost to enter salvation from the lake of fire, but in John’s vision the lost actually avail themselves of this opportunity’ (2008, p. 115).

One of the city’s most striking features is its perfectly cubic shape (Rev. 21:16). It resembles the holy of holies in this (see 1 Kgs 6:20), and as the city has already been described as ‘the home of God’, who ‘will dwell with [its inhabitants] as their God’ (Rev. 21:3), the implication is that everyone now lives in the presence of God, and thus in the holy of holies, continually. That everyone is in view is suggested by John’s language, which talks about the home of God being with ‘humans’ (μετα των ανθρωπων),5 which is John’s term for humanity in general, as Bauckham (1993, 137) points out, calling this a ‘most universalistic reference’ and commenting that ‘now that the covenant people have fulfilled their role of being a light to the nations, all nations will share in the privileges and the promises of the covenant people’.

It is also important to note that the blessing in 22:14 is followed by an invitation by the Spirit and the bride, who, we need to remind ourselves, is none other than the church:

The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come.’ And let everyone who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift. (Rev. 22:17)

Whereas in 21:6 Christ had promised the water of life to the church, in 22:17 that promise is offered by the church, the bride of Christ, to those in the lake of fire. In an allusion to Genesis 2–3 we also find the tree of life whose leaves are ‘for the healing of the nations’ (Rev. 22:2), which, in the logic of the text, is on offer to those in the lake of fire. MacDonald comments that ‘John’s vision is of the ultimate defeat of Christ’s enemies by reconciling them. This is the kind of victory most fitting for the Lamb who triumphs through sacrificial love’ (2008, p. 117). It was the same vision that drove King, who quoted Abraham Lincoln’s incisive question, ‘do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?’ only to comment that such ‘is the power of redemptive love’ (1977, p. 49).6

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5 NRSV translates ‘among mortals’.
6 MacDonald offers an extensive discussion of the two texts that are frequently understood to imply eternal damnation. Commenting on Rev. 14:9-11, which includes the notion that the smoke of the torment of ‘those who worship the beast and its image … goes up forever and ever’, he shows how the same phrase is later
Reading Revelation Responsibly

To conclude our discussion of violence in the book of Revelation, it may be helpful to summarise the main steps of the argument:

1. Unfavourable perceptions of the book of Revelation are, at least partly, the result of ‘tragic misinterpretation’ (Johnson, 2010, p. 507), thus emphasising the need to read Revelation responsibly (Gorman, 2011).

2. At a general level, this requires an understanding of the nature and purpose of apocalyptic language and imagery.

3. A common approach to apocalyptic literature is to regard it as the ‘underground literature’ of disadvantaged, oppressed and persecuted groups, which are meant to be consoled with the vision of an all-powerful God, who will eventually right all the wrongs they are currently experiencing. These groups, it has been pointed out, were not themselves in a position to retaliate with violence. However, in response to this view, it has been maintained that there is no evidence for any major persecution of Christians at the time when Revelation was written and that this approach still leaves us with problematic depictions of a violent God.

4. A related but slightly different approach sees Revelation first and foremost as political resistance literature. Here the purpose of the book’s violent imagery is not understood in terms of consolation but rather as providing a rhetorical deterrent that seeks to dissuade its readers from colluding with the Roman Empire. The message in this case is that readers are not to cooperate with God’s enemies, and the shockingly violent depictions of their ultimate demise are intended to reinforce that point.

5. Both approaches operate with the notion of retributive justice, according to which ‘the holiness and righteousness of God [as well as the injustice suffered by God’s followers] require the condemnation of unrighteousness … and the destruction of the powers of evil’ (Bauckham, 1993, p. 40).

6. The two approaches also both subscribe to what has been called the ‘myth of redemptive violence’ (Wink, 1992, p. 13), according to which those that oppose God’s rule need to be defeated and perhaps even destroyed in order for God’s creation to be delivered from evil.

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On used of Babylon, where it clearly needs to be understood symbolically, as the smoke from her did not go up forever and ever (2008, p. 125). The other text, Rev. 20:10-15, also features the phrase ‘forever and ever’. If this is to be taken literally, then MacDonald suggests that it is only the demonic trinity, i.e. the systems, that suffer total destruction (see pp. 128-32), whereas those participating in those demonic systems are, as we said earlier, invited to wash their robes and enter the city of God.
7. Images of a violent God thus depict him as acting in precisely the same way that all empires have always acted throughout the course of human history. Such images therefore perpetuate an understanding of God that reflects ‘the normalcy of civilisation’s violent injustice’ (Crossan, 2007).

8. Over against such an understanding, it has been pointed out that the most radical biblical texts offer an alternative vision of the ‘radicality of divine nonviolent justice’. This is in line with Jesus’ call to love of enemies, and we have seen some powerful examples of human transformation that have resulted in forgiveness, compassion and love of enemies. This is also the vision of Revelation, which calls the followers of the Lamb to nonviolent resistance.

9. However, if God’s followers are called to nonviolence, then surely God himself cannot act any differently, and it has been suggested that Jesus’ death on the cross provides the model for God’s nonviolent, noncoercive and restorative engagement with the world. Just as Jesus reinterpreted his messianic role in nonviolent terms, thus fulfilling pertinent Old Testament texts while not living up to the expectations of those desiring a powerful king who would achieve a glorious victory over his and their enemies by violent means, so God’s final, eschatological triumph, it has been suggested, will also be achieved by nonviolent, noncoercive and restorative means rather than by violent, coercive and retributive ones.

10. The book of Revelation, it has been argued, reflects this and offers a far more nuanced portrayal of God’s ultimate triumph than is usually recognised.

11. As for its violent depictions of God, not only do they need to be read symbolically and metaphorically rather than literally, they are also best understood as a rhetorical deterrent.

12. Other texts present us with desperate, honest cries to God out of difficult situations, and most are perhaps best understood as cries for justice rather than revenge. Ultimately, however, while we may sympathise with those suffering injustice, oppression and persecution, these cries envisage a perpetuation of the cycle of violence that is mistakenly assumed to be redemptive.

13. In these texts as well as in the violent descriptions of God John’s cultural background has imposed limits upon his ability to perceive of God in radically different terms, even though he has already made significant strides in that direction.

14. Finally, I have suggested that a fully nonviolent understanding of God’s engagement with the world requires a universalist understanding of salvation, which is at least hinted at in Revelation.
Sources


