

Violence in the Book of Revelation

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Introduction

The Book of Revelation is the final book of the New Testament as well as the final book of the Christian Bible. It occupies a central place in Christian eschatology as the only completely apocalyptic document in the New Testament canon. The book spans three literary genres: the epistolary, the apocalyptic, and the prophetic. It begins with John, on the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea, addressing a letter to the "Seven Churches of Asia", who describes a series of prophetic visions culminating in the Second Coming of Jesus. The violent imagery of this text has led to a wide variety of interpretations, one of which claims that the imagery represents real violence performed by God at the apocalypse. The latter interpretation is that imagery in Revelation is meant to be metaphorical and contains a nonviolent message. In this essay, I will discuss this text's violent imagery and how it can be interpreted through each lens, and I conclude that the metaphorical interpretation allows for a more ethical and informative reading of the Book of Revelation.

Metaphorical Interpretation

In this section, I will discuss the metaphorical interpretation of Revelation and explore various violent images in order to reveal the underlying meaning that John intended to present to readers.

Interpreting the Book of Revelation through a metaphorical lens accounts for the violent imagery as a part of the book's rhetoric rather than as literal violence. For example, in the battle scene in which Christ comes from the heavens with an enormous army, John describes a

“sharp sword” that came out of his mouth being used to slay the Beast (Revelation 19:21). This invites the reader to understand the battle as a war of words rather than weapons because it creates the visual of God using His word to “conquer” nonbelievers and sinners. However, this conquering language still impacts readers’ understanding of the texts through creating the perception of “spiritual advancement as a battle” (Hysten 784). Thus, while it is possible to derive a nonviolent message from the text, readers’ comprehension of it is still guided by connotations present in the metaphorical imagery. In the context of the above example, these connotations can provide readers with the understanding that violence is condoned in the mission to spread God’s word. However, by further examining the conquering language as it occurs throughout Revelation, it becomes evident that John intends for readers to understand conquering as akin to “being a faithful witness or aligning one’s own will with God’s” (Hysten 788). In this light, violence through conquering language in the text is no longer truly violent. Instead, it emphasizes that faith is the utmost priority.

The metaphorical interpretation of Revelation allows for readers to think about the apocalypse in multiple ways, and it provides a resource for exploring tensions in the text through an ethical lens. Unlike the literal interpretation, understanding the text as a series of multiple metaphors provides the perception that John does not advocate or describe violence but is “giving the reader ways of understanding a complex concept” (Hysten 793). Through presenting multiple images within the text, John reveals a nonviolent meaning. Some of the images seem to conflict with one another, but they acknowledge the complexity of the divine and the eschaton itself. Returning to Christ’s battle, we see that God will judge the wicked for

their acts against His people, yet the image of God's kingdom with open gates implies that salvation will still be possible for them, which portrays him as merciful and forgiving (Hysten 794). John does not seek to reconcile this conflict; instead, he follows the traditional Christian belief that God will judge and is willing to forgive the unjust. He does something similar with his presentation of Christ as both a lamb and a lion, which conflict because the "lamb is not an image of a fearsome warrior" and "the lion cannot conquer if it has been slaughtered" (Hysten 786). John wants to present a new meaning of conquest through Christ: he wants readers to understand Christ as a symbol of achieving victory through self-sacrifice.

Revelation is often understood as a chronology of the end-time. However, upon examining the text as a series of complex metaphors, it can be understood as a narration of the sequence of John's vision rather than a prediction of the sequence of future events. Looking at the events in Revelation as part of an "eschatological gallery" allows readers to understand each one as contribution towards John's overall vision (Boring 195). This overall vision, instead of describing the exact events of the apocalypse, functions to reveal something about God's nature "that pervades past and present as well as the future" (Hysten 794). Thus, he aims to preserve the conflicting images of God as a firm but forgiving judge and of Christ as a warrior who achieves victory without actual military conflict instead of reconciling them (Baukham 215). These conflicting images "belong together" for John, with "neither subverting the other" (Blount 109). This is because for John, the apocalypse represents the destruction of

death and evil and the restoration of justice through God, and so he seeks to reveal how it is possible for this to be accomplished by the divine.

Literal Interpretation

Unlike the metaphorical interpretation of the Book of Revelation, the literal interpretation reveals a violent message and misconstrues the divine as cunning, vengeful, and unforgiving. In this section, I will examine the flaws of the literal interpretation through comparing readers' understanding of the examples of violent imagery used in the section covering metaphorical interpretation, and I will discuss why it gives readers a limited understanding of John's perception of the end-time.

The position of violence in Revelation being reflective of real events can be flawed in that it takes violent imagery in the text as literal, causing readers to miss key metaphors put forth by John. Returning to the example of the sharp sword coming from Christ's mouth, we see that by ignoring the metaphorical layer of this image, we are left with something simply grotesque (Boring 54). It presents the divine as cruel, vengeful, and violent, which conflicts with much of the New Testament's portrayal of God and Christ as forgiving and merciful. This negative representation is only furthered by taking the contradictory images of Christ as both a lamb and a lion in Revelation 5 as literal rather than figurative. In this chapter, "Christ appears to John as a passive lamb, yet his inner nature has already been revealed as that of a ravenous lion" (Hulen 788). By taking the conquering language throughout the text as literal, this image of Christ can be wrongly interpreted as him being a wolf in sheep's clothing, which paints him

as cunning and secretive. Reading Revelation in this way causes a misinterpretation of Christ as cruel and dubious, and it blurs John's intent and understanding of the eschaton.

When violence in the text is taken literally, it appears that John sanctions violence through God as just punishment. It can then be argued that he "legitimizes the tools of torment and execution" God uses to punish the wicked (Streett 1). This understanding construes John as a believer of the Old Testament God, who was unforgiving, angry, and cruel, which seems out of context with the placement of the Book of Revelation as the last book in the New Testament. In examining the conquering language of the text through this lens, John seems to welcome God's violent acts through his association of violence and judgement against nonbelievers and sinners (Streett 5). As previously established in the metaphorical interpretation, this is likely not the case.

Flaws in literal interpretations of the text also become evident through examining the events of Revelation as a chronology rather than a series of metaphors. In the previous section, I noted the metaphorical implications of this viewpoint; here, I will discuss how the chronological understanding of the text carries various time conflicts. One such example of conflicting events that arise when interpreting the Book of Revelation as a chronology is the two stories of the destruction of God's enemies. In the first battle, they are destroyed by the sword that came from Christ's mouth, and birds devour their flesh (Revelation 19:21). However, these enemies are destroyed again when they are consumed by a fire from the heavens in Revelation 20:9. This logical conflict forces readers to fill in the gaps left by the

literal interpretation of the text (Hylan 789). These gaps also allow for readers to interpret the text as a direct reflection on violence being incurred on Christians by Romans of the time. For example, the four horses of the apocalypse in Revelation 6 can be understood as symbols of the Roman empire. In this understanding of the text, the white horse is reflective of the empire's victorious nature, the red horse is a symbol of its political violence, the black horse symbolizes economic power, and the pale green horse paints the Roman empire as an empire of death (Richard 69). These achievements by the Roman empire were made through the oppression and killing of Christians. While this interpretation is plausible because of the references that John makes to Christian persecution throughout his writing, it does not reconcile the logical conflicts that occur by taking the violence in the Book of Revelation literally.

Conclusion

Through examining the metaphorical imagery of the Book of Revelation, we can reveal the flaws in taking violence throughout the text literally. While it seems that John's language takes the form of a vision report, it does not actually function that way (Boring 53). Understanding the text as just a vision report leaves violence in the text to go unchecked and causes interpretations of it to become flawed and shallow in meaning, whereas deciphering the imagery as metaphorical allows readers to understand John's distinctions about the nature of the divine. Through Revelation, John intends to present his understanding of the apocalypse as the final battle of God's word, and he uses violent imagery to discuss God's nature rather than the acts He will perform on the wicked.

Interpreting this biblical text as a series of complex metaphors allows for readers to understand the eschaton in multiple ways and through a more nuanced perspective than interpreting it as literal violence enacted on sinners and nonbelievers, and it maintains the complicated dualities of God and Christ. In conclusion, the metaphorical interpretation allows for a more ethical, informative understanding of the Book of Revelation in that it enables readers to think about the end-time as a nonviolent series of events in which God's character is revealed as both just and stern.

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