

## Article

# Victim to Victor: The Appeal of Apocalyptic Hope

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**Abstract:** Jewish apocalyptic literature emerged as a form of resistance literature during the intertestamental period. A product of marginalized communities, such literature is highly political, articulating the worldview of the politically oppressed and those who considered their religious freedoms to be under threat. As resistance literature, apocalypses cathartically utilize vivid descriptions of violence and poetic symbols of hope to encourage those who identify as victims to maintain their resistance to political pressure or injustice. This paper explores the ways the Christian Book of Revelation builds on this tradition to envisage hope in the face of systemic evil, political oppression, and injustice. Neither the noun nor verb for hope appear in Revelation, yet its eschatological vision of vindication, victory, and shared rule in New Jerusalem for those who are oppressed has inspired many Christians to hope for a new world order with significant implications for the present. After considering the historical context of Revelation, this paper will examine the ways the apocalyptic imagination of Revelation continues to be invoked and (mis)used in contemporary Christianized political discourse. I argue that the Book of Revelation continues to appeal precisely because it offers a framework for believing that the victim will become the victor in the eschaton.

**Keywords:** hope; apocalyptic; Revelation; persecution; evil; injustice

## 1. Introduction

Apocalyptic literature and hope might appear to be odd bedfellows for those whose ideas of what constitutes an apocalypse are shaped by popular culture. Contemporary portrayals of apocalyptic events emphasize violence that causes utter devastation and usually results in the end of the world. Calling something “apocalyptic” has become shorthand for disaster or catastrophe: Terrible summer bushfires are “apocalyptic,” the aftermath of a bad hurricane is described as an apocalypse. More recently, the Coronavirus pandemic that is fundamentally reshaping global communities and exposing the fragility of our lives has been described as an apocalypse of sorts, a disease of plague-like proportions that has exposed the fragility of human order and control.

Destruction and disaster are not, however, what characterizes ancient Jewish and Christian apocalypses such as Daniel, Revelation, 4 Ezra, and 1 Enoch. These texts might include elements of destruction and violence, often framed as divine judgment, but they more typically reveal the nature of evil and unveil the way God is at work to address evil. In this sense, apocalypses cast an alternate vision of the world; one that promises renewal and cultivates hope in the midst of difficulty. Apocalypses offer theologies of resistance, visions of a different future, and promises of justice to encourage believers facing state terror.<sup>1</sup> That is, they offer a program of hope.

This essay examines the way one ancient apocalypse, the Book of Revelation, envisages hope in the face of systemic evil, political oppression, and injustice. The term “hope” does not appear in the

<sup>1</sup> (Portier-Young 2011, p. 140).

text, yet the eschatological vision Revelation portrays is one of vindication, victory, and shared rule in a future kingdom known as New Jerusalem for followers of Jesus. Revelation imagines a future where suffering, death, and evil are utterly destroyed by God and the world is radically reconfigured so that every tribe and nation will live in peace.

Revelation's eschatological vision is not, however, merely a fantasy or a fairytale ending based on hopeful wishes. Nor is it comfort through the kind of escapism that denies the reality of human suffering.<sup>2</sup> It is a sharply political critique of evil whose undoing is based upon the nature and action of God. I argue that hope in Revelation is particular, characterized as divine vindication for Christians who have been unjustly treated by the Roman State. The hope Revelation offers is hope for the oppressed, not the oppressor. Victims are turned into victors in this text whereas the powerful who use violence die by violence.<sup>3</sup> Central to Revelation's theology of hope and cosmic reversal of fortune is its particular and unusual portrayal of Christ as a slaughtered yet standing lamb—the ultimate victim turned victor.

This reversal of status, described as vindication in Revelation and embodied by the lamb, raises theological and ethical questions. Hope for a different future, as we shall see, is reliant upon claims about God's power to overthrow evil and to transform death into life. The accompanying ideas of retributive justice, however, are violent and potentially problematic. In the final section of this paper we will briefly look at how this dynamic of the text is precisely what lends it to misuse and misapplication. Yet, despite these theological tensions, Revelation has inspired and continues to inspire Christians to hope for a better world. As South African scholar Allan Boesak observes, the cry of the martyrs in Revelation 6:10 "how long O Lord?" is a "cry of hope that God will prove to be the Mighty One [ . . . ] it is a cry black South Africans who find their help in Yahweh have been uttering for a long time."<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Revelation's Context

### 2.1. Author and Date

The Book of Revelation is a late first century CE text addressed to Christians living in Asia Minor, an area under the rule of the Roman Empire.<sup>5</sup> The author calls himself John and, although we do not know precisely who he was, he presents himself as a prophet in the biblical tradition, a faithful Jew, someone who witnesses to Christ, and one who has suffered for that witness (Rev 1:9–10).<sup>6</sup> The noteworthy part of John's self-portrayal is that he claims to share in his audiences' "tribulation" (*thlipsis*)—a term that denotes oppression or trial (1:9). This sets the tone for the rhetoric that follows. John presents himself and his fellow Christians as under attack and facing great evil. What is revealed through his vision is that the source of tribulation is the Roman Empire itself, an Empire John presents as the current expression of an ancient evil that has threatened God's people since the beginning of time.

Specific Christian communities are named in Revelation 1:10 as recipients of the letters, but the fact that seven are named, a number representing completeness, indicates a universal audience may be in mind.<sup>7</sup> John's message therefore is both particular and universal. Each congregation is issued a specific greeting and made a specific promise, but the unifying theme is the promise that those who remain faithful to Jesus will share in his victory and eschatological reign. Recipients of these promises

<sup>2</sup> (Boesak 1987, p. 17).

<sup>3</sup> See for example, Rev 17:15–17. Additionally, those who oppress others face the harshest divine judgement (Rev 20:10).

<sup>4</sup> (Boesak 1987, p. 69).

<sup>5</sup> While the majority of scholars support a late first century date, the dating of Revelation has traditionally been split between an earlier date during Nero's reign (66–68 CE) and a later date under Domitian (90–96 CE). For fuller discussions of dating see (Aune 1997, pp. lvii–lxx), and (Koester 2014, pp. 71–79).

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the various "Johns" who have been associated with Revelation see Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, xlviii–lvi.

<sup>7</sup> Numbers have symbolic significance in apocalyptic texts with seven indicating perfection or completeness. Each of the seven communities is given a message from the risen Christ that serves to encourage, rebuke, or remind them of their calling and task, as well as God's promise to them (Rev 1:4 11; 2:1, 8, 18; 3:1, 7, 14).

are called “conqueror” or “victor” (*ho nikōn*), a theme to which we will return below (2:7, 11, 17, 28; 3:5, 12, 21). John’s messages therefore serve as a call to Christians everywhere to see the world through his eyes and resist the evil he names in the hope of future reward in God’s kingdom, that is, in the hope of becoming victors.

## 2.2. The Political Setting of Revelation

Rome and the Roman Empire have long been recognized as important for understanding the context of the New Testament. The insights of postcolonial criticism and empire studies have led scholars to be increasingly attentive to the political nature and setting of Revelation over the past few decades. This shift means that instead of seeing the Roman Empire as “background” to the biblical text, politics and power are foregrounded in Revelation and imperial ideology is John’s primary interlocutor.

Research emerging out of classics and archaeology adds credence to the idea that Roman ideology might have loomed large in the minds of Christ followers even in Asia Minor. Rome’s imperial propaganda was widespread and insidious. Coinage, statuary, ceremony, and architecture together communicated Rome’s might and values throughout Asia Minor. Friesen’s work on the imperial architecture of Asia Minor, particularly temples and cultic sites, highlights how the dominant ideology of empire is being criticized and rejected by the author of Revelation.<sup>8</sup>

The importance of Rome for understanding the rhetoric of Revelation cannot be overstated. Rome, in John’s view, is the oppressor and enemy of God’s people. Such a stance is not universal in the New Testament: There are a range of views relating to a Christian’s obligation or relationship to the Roman Empire with advice ranging from accommodation of the Empire to complete rejection of it.<sup>9</sup> Revelation lies at the latter end of this spectrum, representing one of the most anti-imperial canonical texts.

Of course, the other great center of power for New Testament writers was Jerusalem and the Jewish leadership. Even after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish temple in 70 CE, Jerusalem’s leaders and traditions held influence over emerging Christian communities. Rome and Jerusalem were the political powers under which Jesus and his followers negotiated the world.

Politics and religion cannot be separated in the ancient world. Modern readers might easily align Jerusalem with a particular faith and set of religious practices and beliefs, yet forget that Rome too comes with an accompanying religious framework. Whether one was Jewish, Greek, Roman, Egyptian, or migrant in the Roman Empire, one’s religion and one’s politics were inseparable. Both of these contexts inform the worldview of Revelation.

## 2.3. The Theological Setting of Revelation

John addresses a religious community, be they from a Jewish or Gentile background. While John draws on both Jewish and pagan traditions to describe what he sees, it is arguably his Jewish sources that provide the basis of hope. John calls his text a “prophecy” (1:3) and in doing so places it in a textual tradition of biblical prophecy that has critiqued and resisted previous empires who have threatened God’s people. Jewish prophecy, possibly under the influence of wisdom and Zoroastrian literature, became more apocalyptic in the Hellenistic period, a period marked by warfare, occupation of Judea, and suppression of Jewish religious practices.<sup>10</sup> The texts that were written during this time, such as Daniel and 1 Enoch, portray faithful Jews actively resisting the hegemony of occupying rulers. They became a form of “resistance literature,” modelling a program of resistance and faithful living in the face of opposition.<sup>11</sup> Such texts invoke both terror and hope, casting a vision of an alternate future,

<sup>8</sup> (Friesen 2001).

<sup>9</sup> See for example, Mark 12:14–17/pars; John 19:12–15; Acts 17:7, 25:8; Phil 4:22; 1 Peter 2:13–17.

<sup>10</sup> The origins of Jewish apocalyptic literature are complex and debated, but the earliest extant Jewish apocalyptic texts address the rise of Hellenism and the religious persecution of the Jewish people that ensued. These include texts such as Daniel, 1 Enoch, and later 4 Ezra, 2 Baruch, and Revelation.

<sup>11</sup> (Portier-Young 2011, pp. 11–45).

a just kingdom where the righteous would prevail. Revelation will add the Jesus event to this existing religious framework and it is to this particular portrayal of Jesus to which we now turn.

### 3. The Lamb as Victor

#### 3.1. Slaughtered, Not Sacrificed

The lamb in Revelation is one of the dominant images for Jesus Christ. John portrays the Christ figure as one who has been murdered (slaughtered) by an unjust regime yet has overcome death and is therefore a victor worthy of worship and of purchasing the spoils of war. These spoils include the liberation of his own people. As victor, the lamb is a symbol of the power of God to condemn injustice and vindicate those who have suffered for their faith in God. Much has been written about the lamb in Revelation and my point here is not to rehearse the arguments which have been dealt with in depth elsewhere.<sup>12</sup> The questions here are more specific: How does John's particular Christology shape his message of hope in this text? And, where is victory and hope located—in a martyr's death, Jesus' resurrection, or his warrior-like return?

We first encounter the lamb of Revelation in chapter five as part of a vision of the heavenly throne room. An angel tells the Seer, John, to look and “see, the Lion of the tribe of Judah” who has conquered (5:5). John turns to see this lion, but when he does, he sees a slaughtered lamb instead.

Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered (*hōs esfagmenon*), having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth (Rev 5:6).

It is one of the most enduring images to emerge from this text, in part because of its vivid description and in part because there are several cognitive dissonances embedded in the scene. The Christ figure is introduced as a lion and so a lion is what we might expect to see. Instead a lamb is revealed, one who is simultaneously slaughtered and yet standing alive—a seemingly impossible combination but nevertheless a rather creative way to symbolize the death and resurrection of Jesus in one image. The scene is made more memorable for its blend of an everyday image with a number of implausible qualities that belong more accurately to the realm of fantasy. Ancient readers would have been familiar with slaughtered lambs, seeing them in the marketplace or in various temple precincts where sacrifices were offered. Yet this lamb has seven horns and seven eyes, making him an outlandish and powerful figure whilst at the same time recognizable.<sup>13</sup>

The verb *sfazō* can indicate ritual slaughter, but its most common meaning in reference to people is to kill a person with violence, that is, to slay them. In the New Testament it is only used in Revelation and once in 1 John 3:12 where it refers to the murder of Abel by his brother Cain. In that context it has no cultic resonance but rather denotes an unjust, violent death. In Revelation, likewise, “slaughter” is used to signify the unjust killing of a variety of people either by the Roman State or by one another.<sup>14</sup> *Sfazō* is John's chosen verb to denote the actions of humans when murdering one another (6:4), the slaughter/murder of the saints under the altar who cry out for justice (6:9), the slaughter of humans by the Roman state (18:24), and the fatal wound on the beast (13:3, 8). These uses suggest that the author's prevailing sense of *sfazō* is slaughter, in the sense of murder, rather than cultic action. Jesus' death is described with this verb three times in Revelation 5 (5:6, 9, 12)<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> See for example, (Johns 2015) and (Middleton 2018).

<sup>13</sup> The seven horns denote perfect power and his seven eyes an omniscient gaze rivalling that of any human emperor. See (Whitaker 2015, pp. 115–17).

<sup>14</sup> By contrast, the gospel writers, Paul, and other New Testament authors use more cultic language, such as *thuō*, to describe Jesus' death.

<sup>15</sup> The lamb as a metaphor for Jesus in Revelation is very complex. While I am arguing here (agreeing with Johns) that the Christological emphasis is on the lamb as victim turned victor rather than a sacrifice for atonement, both aspects are present in Revelation's lamb imagery and cultic resonances cannot be completely ignored. See (Johns 2015, pp. 108–51).

Further evidence that Christ is portrayed in Revelation as a victim of state-sanctioned murder is the reference to him as “the faithful witness/martyr” (*martus*, 1:5; 3:14), a descriptor that associates him with other murdered groups of people in the text. The community at Pergamum have lost a man named Antipas, another “faithful *martus*” who has been killed (2:13). Two further witnesses, or two martyrs, are described in 11:7–8 as having been killed by the “beast” (Rome) who left their bodies lying in the street. All three of these are described as *martus*, a term that means “witness” but would come to mean “martyr” or one who had died for their faith in early Christianity. While *martus* does not yet in the first century CE have the common meaning of martyr, we are arguably seeing the beginnings of this tradition here.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, every “witness” in Revelation is someone who has died for their faith, that is, they are martyrs in the later sense.<sup>17</sup> Jesus as lamb is therefore a proto-martyr,<sup>18</sup> one whose death and ultimate vindication is a model for his followers.

Despite the language of slaughter and a setting of heightened political animosity, we cannot overlook the fact that this author uses the image of a lamb for Jesus, *albeit* an unusual, multihorned, omniscient lamb. The symbolic work of the lamb metaphor takes us beyond the historical reality of Jesus as a victim of the Empire’s violent injustice and into the semantic domain of Passover. In the biblical tradition, the Passover Lamb is slaughtered, rather than offered as a sin sacrifice, and serves as a means of liberation from an oppressive regime.<sup>19</sup> Appeal to Passover or Pesach evokes the memory of the Hebrew people’s liberation from slavery, a reminder of a time when the blood of the lamb protected God’s people.<sup>20</sup> The lamb’s blood in Revelation similarly functions to liberate the people (1:5).

While other parts of the New Testament imagine Jesus’ death primarily in sacrificial terms, that theological aspect is downplayed in Revelation. Instead John frames Jesus’ death in terms of political contest, evoking an agonistic-ethical paradigm in his comparison of the Empire of God and the Roman Empire. That is, Revelation 5 presents a *Christus Victor* theology, to borrow a term associated with Gustav Aulén’s atonement theology.<sup>21</sup> The lamb reveals that God’s liberative work has already begun in the cross. Moreover, the liberation that the lamb works is a liberation from the forces of sin and evil that include actual earthly empires and powers. The Empire has been defeated, it just does not know it yet.

In portraying Christ as a conquering lamb, Revelation’s author reconfigures death. Death, particularly unjust death at the hand of an oppressor, is no longer a result of weakness but is portrayed instead as victory. Or more precisely, Jesus’ faithfulness to the point of death is what makes him a victor and model martyr. As Craig Koester writes, “it would appear that Jesus’ captors were victorious when they took his life, but in Revelation the opposite is true: Remaining loyal to God to the point of death is triumph.”<sup>22</sup> The resurrection of the Lamb reimagines the cross as victory, in a shocking reversal of power.<sup>23</sup>

### 3.2. *Christus Victor as an Image of Hope*

The slaughtered lamb is the only being in the entire cosmos worthy (*axios*) to take the scroll from God’s right hand and unleash the judgements therein (5:7). In the narrative logic of Revelation it is the lamb’s death, a death framed as victory rather than weakness, that makes him uniquely qualified to open the scroll’s seals.<sup>24</sup> We cannot, of course, separate the lamb’s death from his resurrection.

<sup>16</sup> Extending the argument of (Trites 1973, pp. 77–80).

<sup>17</sup> See Revelation 17:6 where the “Whore of Babylon,” an image for Rome, is accused of being drunk with the “blood of the witnesses/martyrs.” While these are not named, the reference to blood indicates that they too have died for their witnessing.

<sup>18</sup> (Middleton 2018, p. 64).

<sup>19</sup> (Aune 1997, p. 353; Koester 2014, p. 376).

<sup>20</sup> See Exodus 12.

<sup>21</sup> (Rutledge 2015, p. 360). See (Aulén 1931).

<sup>22</sup> (Koester 2014, p. 386).

<sup>23</sup> (Johns 2015, p. 159).

<sup>24</sup> (Middleton 2018, p. 93).



Revelation's lamb is one slaughtered yet standing. Victory therefore is complex, located both in the willingness of a faithful martyr to die and in God's power to overturn that death. John, however, emphasizes that the worthiness of the lamb to open the scroll is his death not his resurrection (5:9, 12).

When the lamb opens the first seal divine judgement is unleashed and a rider of a white horse emerges to conquer (6:2). In this supposedly simple action of opening a scroll, the lamb who was previously declared victor by the heavenly realm now reveals how he will conquer. Battle imagery punctuates the narrative of Revelation throughout. For every instance of Rome, symbolized as beast and dragon, conquering God's people (11:7; 13:7), God retaliates with greater violence. The retributive violence of the deity in Revelation has not escaped the notice of scholars who have critiqued Revelation for being too imperialistic in its resistance to empire.<sup>25</sup> That is, John harshly critiques the Roman Empire but does not go as far as questioning many of the structures associated with her power and violence. He does not question imperialism per se, nor its hegemony and violence, but ultimately "reinscribes imperial practices and processes."<sup>26</sup> In a battle for power and domination, John portrays God as more powerful and more terrifying than the emperor: Revelation's God has absolute, cosmic, eternal power as opposed to the earthly, temporal power of the emperor.

The militant nature of God's coming empire can be seen most clearly in the transformation of the Jesus image from lamb to warrior. In the interest of brevity, I will use just one example. In 19:11, Jesus appears again, this time as the rider of a white horse. As rider, he is described as the one who "makes war." He is crowned—a symbol of his authority—and is accompanied by the "armies/troops of heaven." He is armed with a sharp sword, both to strike down nations and to rule them. What follows is a battle scene with the beast and his kings and armies (19:19), a battle that the Christ-rider and his heavenly army win resulting in the total destruction of the opposing army.<sup>27</sup> Their defeat is graphically depicted as a grotesque "banquet" where the birds eat the flesh of the deceased army who are doubly defeated by being left unburied as carrion (19:17–18).<sup>28</sup> The one who was slain, is now the one who slays all the opponents of God. Victim has become ultimate victor.

Slaughtered political victim turned conquering warrior is a very different image to that which is often associated with Jesus as lamb. Biblical lambs are most often interpreted as sacrificial lambs who atone for sin, although sacrificial lambs served a much wider variety of purposes in antiquity. Here John does use language of redemption, but it leans towards the militaristic and economic rather than sacrificial. The liberation offered by the victorious lamb is that he can purchase the freedom of prisoners of war. John uses economic language "to buy" or "redeem" (*agorazō*) in 5:9 to denote the freedom that can be purchased for captives taken in battle.<sup>29</sup>

The hope that the victorious lamb inspires works at multiple levels: Hope in vengeance, hope in God's power to beat earthly power, hope in God's justice, and hope that one's present weakness is not the final word. On the one hand the violence is cathartic, an emotive way for the oppressed and powerless to imaginatively live out fantasies of vengeance.<sup>30</sup> At another level, the military might of the lamb assures hearers not only that justice will be done but, additionally, God has the power to enforce it and the will to do so. John uses the Jesus tradition of death and resurrection to remind Jesus followers their hope is founded on the one who has conquered death and who can therefore, effectively, conquer anything. In a remarkable twist on the narrative of empire, the death of Jesus is transformed

<sup>25</sup> (Darden 2015, pp. 121–34), is critical of Revelation's violence. See also (Carey 2015, pp. 295–306).

<sup>26</sup> (Darden 2015, p. 122).

<sup>27</sup> It is important to note that Christ's army is not a human army. John does not call his hearers to violent action nor imagine a human revolt. The retributive violence is God's along with the host of heaven. See (Carey 2015, pp. 304–5) and (Koester 2014, p. 763).

<sup>28</sup> The author is drawing upon Ezekiel 39 in using this image of birds feasting upon the bodies of dead soldiers. Stavrakopoulou describes it as corpse abuse, arguing it functions as an appeal to fears about proper care for the dead. See (Stavrakopoulou 2010, p. 69).

<sup>29</sup> (Schüssler Fiorenza 1998, p. 73; Johns 2015, p. 122; Middleton 2018), acknowledges this semantic probability but says it does not rule out cultic resonances (72).

<sup>30</sup> (Collins 1984) and (Pippin 1992) both address the cathartic aspects of the text.

from a point of weakness associated with victimhood into the moment of victory itself. It is this aspect of the text that continues to inform and inspire Christians in quite contradictory ways 2000 years later.

#### 4. Issues for Contemporary Readers

One of the reasons the Book of Revelation continues to appeal is precisely because it offers a framework for believing that the victim will ultimately become the victor. It draws in Christians facing oppression, persecution, or war whether they be medieval Christians filled with millennial expectation in the midst of Christian-Muslim conflict or contemporary doomsday cults. Christopher Rowland offers several examples of Revelation's legacy in his article about the reception of Revelation.<sup>31</sup> One example he cites is that of Anne Wentworth, a 17th century English Baptist who found hope in Revelation's destruction of Babylon. In *A Vindication of Anne Wentworth* she likens the suffering she and other woman experienced at the hands of abusive husbands to that of Christians under Rome.<sup>32</sup> It is one example of the way the images of Revelation speak to Christians who feel under threat in particular ways, particularly those who perceive themselves to be powerless victims of a powerful abuser.

This appeal to the vindication found in Revelation has taken a perhaps surprising form in 20th century America in terms of who assumes the role of victim. Candida Moss's work on martyrdom and persecution traces the use of martyrdom language and ideology throughout Christian history arguing that that traditional history of martyrdom is a myth.<sup>33</sup> The effect of this tradition is what is of interest here. Moss argues that if Christianity is a religion of persecution and martyrdom, then Christians who feel under attack are not only affirmed in their victim status but also frame their response in terms of war and their opponents as enemies.<sup>34</sup>

The most ironic expression of this "myth of persecution" is arguably found in its use by American evangelical Christians who use it to cast themselves as victims in an ideological war despite having immense wealth, power, and political influence. In framing themselves as victims, evangelicals and other conservative Christians undermine any attempt at political dialogue and polarize the world,<sup>35</sup> adopting the dualistic worldview of apocalyptic texts. One can be victim or oppressor, friend or foe, winner or loser, on God's side or on Satan's, but either way one is at war. Evoking such rhetoric, Newt Gingrich famously claimed that the "war on Christianity" was the reason he entered the 2012 for Republican nomination.<sup>36</sup> Compromise is not an option in such a worldview and almost any level of vitriol can be justified in response to being "persecuted" by those who are against God.<sup>37</sup>

This is the dangerous aftermath of Revelation: That a text written to and for an oppressed minority can be co-opted by powerful, contemporary, western Christians who see in this text a language and worldview that reinforces their sense of victimhood. The danger comes when those very Christians find justification for the same kind of hyperbolic polemics as the text itself, pitting empire against empire, incognizant that in the contemporary world the line between "Rome" (the evil empire) and God's empire may be very thin indeed. An even worse danger occurs when the violent scenes of Revelation are taken literally or imitated by humans.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>31</sup> (Rowland 2003, pp. 4–20).

<sup>32</sup> Cited in (Rowland 2003, pp. 10–12).

<sup>33</sup> (Moss 2013).

<sup>34</sup> (Moss 2013, p. 21).

<sup>35</sup> (Moss 2013, pp. 253–54).

<sup>36</sup> Cited in (Moss 2013, p. 259). The idea that there is a "war on Christianity" has found traction in several western countries.

<sup>37</sup> By "persecuted" here I mean to indicate the perception of being under attack precisely because of one's sense of martyrdom, not because one is actually under attack. It is a way for those with enormous power to negate that power and appeal to victimhood as a very effective rhetoric strategy. This is not to negate the reality that there are Christian communities in places like Egypt, Pakistan, and China who face tangible and terrifying persecution. The difference is those Christians are minorities in their communities and do not have political power and influence.

<sup>38</sup> For example, the Branch Davidian doomsday cult interpreted Revelation to indicate they were in the last days and engaged in holy war when they clashed with authorities in Waco, Texas. Almost 80 people died including a number of children.

While the attempt to create a Christian empire of victors might seem in keeping with the text, a careful reading of Revelation does not permit it. Victory is something only God bestows in Revelation and not something one can claim for oneself (5:10). Followers of Jesus are called to worship, wait, and endure faithfully and ethically, that is, to place their hope in God's action rather than build a counter-empire based on human strength, even if faithful waiting means suffering persecution or even death. Victor status is something only God can grant, not something to be claimed for oneself through military power or political maneuvering.

We have highlighted some of the pitfalls of Revelation's worldview when adopted too simplistically or by those who rule the empires of this world. Conversely, for those who are oppressed and powerless this text offers enormous hope. Allan Boesak acknowledges the violence inherent to Revelation's rhetoric yet argues it is justified.<sup>39</sup> He writes from a South African perspective, "In times of severe persecution, suffering, and death, the hearts of the faithful long passionately for signs of the power of God and for God's intervention in their history for the sake of justice and liberation."<sup>40</sup> To know God has the power to overthrow even the most violent and evil regime—such as the practices of terror, torture, and death that manifest under apartheid policies in South Africa—is necessary for hope. A powerless God cannot save, but one that can overturn death and destroy evil offers hope.

As a form of deliberative rhetoric,<sup>41</sup> Revelation seeks to shape the hearer's worldview, to foster a practice of hopefulness that will allow them to endure. Such a hope-filled worldview does not diminish nor downplay the seriousness of the suffering they face. That is, it is not naïvely optimistic nor grounded in the likelihood of human progression. Rather, Revelation seeks to cast a vision that takes hearers beyond the immediate and encourages them to place their hope in God's past and future liberating action. By reminding hearers of God's activity and casting a vision of eschatological salvation, John aims to instill in them a motivating hope.<sup>42</sup> We might think of this kind of hope as a discipline; a worldview and stance that will allow them to endure their present darkness and enable them to act.<sup>43</sup>

Hope in Revelation has both ethical and communal dimensions which offer helpful ways of thinking about hope in the contemporary world. Hope in God's reign manifests in the text as a call to ethical living, specifically, abstinence from certain worldly practices that are seen as anti-God. In the context of Revelation ethical obligation includes refraining from idolatry (the worship of pagan deities and obeisance to the Emperor), rejecting any food sacrificed to idols, and non-participation or withdrawal from the economic injustices of Rome. This latter one has particular import for the contemporary world where analogous capitalist trade practices result in the wealthy becoming wealthier at the cost of the poor and the environment. This kind of economic injustice is harshly condemned by John in the vision of Rome's destruction, paired with an exhortation for Christians to withdraw from her practices (Rev 18:3–4).<sup>44</sup> Ethical hope, therefore, is hope in a different future which informs and shapes the present. It is "the preconditional for action in the face of overwhelming odds" and "empowers us to address problems that appear intractable."<sup>45</sup>

<sup>39</sup> (Boesak 1987, p. 124).

<sup>40</sup> (Boesak 1987, p. 17).

<sup>41</sup> (DeSilva 2009, pp. 82–85). Scholars have variously identified Revelation's rhetoric as deliberative, epideictic, and forensic. While arguably traits of all three are present, I agree with deSilva that the emphasis is on deliberative.

<sup>42</sup> (Stewart 2019, p. 93).

<sup>43</sup> (Newheiser 2019, p. 16), refers to hope as a "discipline of resilience." Newheiser is not addressing the text of Revelation (that application is my own). Yet, conceptualizing hope as a discipline that enables people to endure suffering without sinking into despair and inaction is one that works well with the rhetoric of Revelation. For a fuller description of this function of hope see (Newheiser 2019, pp. 63–84).

<sup>44</sup> See (Royalty 1998).

<sup>45</sup> (Newheiser 2019, p. 16).



The communal aspect of hope is implied rather than explicitly stated in Revelation. The entire text is addressed to “seven churches” (1:4) and each of these churches is addressed as a community of believers whose success depends upon one another (2:1–3:22). For example, the message to Thyatira asks the community to reject “Jezebel” and her teaching lest they suffer the punishments planned for her (2:18–28). While the promise to conquerors is to “whoever conquers,” denoting individual responsibility, the messages call on the community to act in a unified way. Fear and hope are paired in these messages for maximum rhetorical effect.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, the prayers of “the saints” are offered on behalf of those still suffering on earth, a symbol of the necessity of mutual support across time and space (5:8; 8:3–4).

Communal hope has another aspect too. It is not hope in individual victory in the sense of one’s own salvation being assured. Indeed, our modern focus on the individual would seem astonishing to the ancient community to whom Revelation was addressed. The celebratory scenes of those who have conquered are communal and multi-ethnic (7:9–10; 22:3). Hope takes on an essentially communal nature when hope is in the recreation of the entire cosmos; human and earth together. Revelation’s vision of the New Jerusalem, a multicultural garden-city, locates the future of God and God’s empire on earth with and amidst a vast throng of people. God’s victory is shared by the community who become priests and co-rulers in this kingdom (20:6). Earth and her creatures are remade in gleaming splendor. Hope, in this context, is founded on the promise that God will renew the earth, not on humanity’s escape from the earth.<sup>47</sup>

## 5. Conclusions

The hope that John of Patmos inspires in readers and hearers of his apocalyptic vision is a hope addressed to the oppressed, the small minority of Christ followers living in a world that they experience as hostile and dangerous. This context is vital. Revelation speaks to those who necessarily have a pessimistic outlook about the world’s power structures. It is written for those who are oppressed and have no recourse but hope in God’s justice. Yet, theological tensions and ethical questions raised by Revelation’s rhetoric remain. Although scholars have argued that the lamb is a model of “non-violent active witness,”<sup>48</sup> we cannot divorce the slaughtered lamb from the warrior, sword-wielding lamb. Revelation’s violent images and appeal to power remain problematic and become even more so when co-opted by the powerful.

John has created a vision of an alternate reality, a way of viewing the world that suggests all is not what it seems. Hope in Revelation functions to empower suffering Christians to endure and spurs them into ethical action. It does not deny or minimize the reality of their present suffering nor make them invulnerable. It does, however, suggest that endurance is possible. Theologically, the hope espoused in Revelation is in God’s consistency and God’s reign. What is revealed is not just that God reigns supreme in the heavenly realm but also that God has transformed the victim into the victor. This victor, the conquering lamb, is one who returns with military force and absolute power capable of defeating all and any evil in the world. So while the ultimate action that will bring change is God’s, Christians have obligation to remain faithful and endure with hope. In doing this they do not just survive, they become victors through their witness.

Hope’s opposite is despair. If despair is the fear that tomorrow will be just like today, then hope believes that change is possible even in the face of a reality that speaks otherwise. Hope, in Revelation,

<sup>46</sup> (Stewart 2019, p. 87).

<sup>47</sup> Ostwalt points out that contemporary films like *Waterworld* have secularized these Christian apocalyptic expectations. In *Waterworld*, for example, humans living on a flooded, post-apocalyptic, ecologically-devastated earth, seek out “paradise.” Paradise, construed as rare dry land, is found by human heroes who destroy evil opponents and repopulate dry land themselves. In Revelation, conversely, the destruction of evil and establishment of “paradise” is credited to divine action alone. See (Ostwalt 2003, pp. 177–79).

<sup>48</sup> (Blount 2009, pp. 70–84), who argues for the lamb as powerful but non-violent. See a discussion of various approaches to Christology and violence in the new introduction to (Johns 2015, pp. i–ix).

is the belief that God is creating a future that looks fundamentally different from today. There is a darkness embedded in such hope precisely because it acknowledges a certain impotence in the face of suffering and struggle, a certain kind of victimhood. Apocalyptic hope, as configured in Revelation, is hope that God will intervene to address injustice precisely because the disempowered and the dispossessed cannot.

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