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ABSTRACT

Over the years, scholars have wrestled with the apparent emphasis on violence in the Apocalypse, even to question whether it should be considered Christian at all. Certainly, much of the material in Revelation appears to be violent and vengeful. In fact, Gerd Lüdemann calls this the 'dark side of the Bible'. As scholars of the Apocalypse, we are forced to ask, 'What is the significance of the violent images in Revelation? Does it matter? Does God, in fact, have a dark side, one which perhaps negates his "loving side"? If this violence is significant, how can these images be understood as relevant to our world which is so focused on technology, empiricism and rationality? What are we, as biblical scholars, to say about this as we proceed into the twenty-first century, a century already marred by terrorism justified by its emphasis on jihad? Is violence ever justified, even when it is used to bring about a just cause?' This article will review, without being comprehensive, what noteworthy scholars have suggested from their study of the Apocalypse. Possibly, an alternative to the extreme positions of violence and non-violence can be found within the text of Revelation. Hopefully, this review will advance a further consideration of this issue.

Keywords: apocalypse, vengeance, violence.

Introduction

Over the years, scholars have wrestled with the apparent emphasis on violence in the Apocalypse, even to question whether it should be considered Christian at all. With the definition of Jewish apocalypticism by J.J. Collins

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(1979), many scholars attempted to resolve the issue by placing the text within this definition. Murphy, in *Currents* (1994), however, states that this is an erroneous approach, as it is based on the questionable assumption that the 'advocacy of violence can be Jewish, but not Christian' (183).

The late twentieth century shed further insight on this whole matter, by using new approaches, such as linguistic analysis (Barr 1998 and Yarbro Collins 1984) and socio-political frameworks (Fiorenza 1991; Yarbro Collins 1981; DeSilva 1992; and Hylen 2003). Other scholars have placed the text in relation to various motifs, including *Combat Myth* by Adela Yarbro Collins (1976) and *Divine Warrior* by Longman (1981).

Several noteworthy suggestions have emerged which suggest that Revelation provides another alternative to the extreme positions of violence and nonviolence. Keller's (1995) theory of 'relationality' and Farmer's (1993) 'power as creative-relational response' might be directions to be pursued. Could Revelation be suggesting another alternative that challenges the reader to consider the nature of his own relationship with God, such as Keller's (1995) 'process of awakening' or Paulien's (2004) 'God-understanding'.

Although the Apocalypse has always fascinated laypeople and scholars alike, current interest has escalated. E.S. Fiorenza (1985), for one, captured this trend in *The Book of Revelation* (305) when she predicted this increased interest in the Apocalypse. Indeed, the terrorism of 11 September 2001, especially with its emphasis on jihad and the use of arms in religious causes, further magnified this interest. More intensely than ever, the question is being asked and considered: is violence ever acceptable, even when it is used to bring about a just cause?

It might be accurately stated that the Apocalypse of John has a wider and more diverse interpretation than any other text in either the Old or New Testament. This diversity ranges from the popular applications of the text to current events, such as Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Plant Earth* (1970), and the even more recent *Left Behind* series (2004–2005), to the myriad of approaches and perspectives used by scholars.

Certainly, the book of Revelation with its awesome imagery of beasts, dragons, warriors (both angelic and demonic) and finally the fantastic annihilation of the whole heaven and earth by God himself should be able to shed some light on the subject of the justification of violence. Anyone who has attempted to wrest the answers from this formidable text can tell you it sounds easier to do than it is.

The purpose of this article is to consider the debate on the justification of violence in the Apocalypse, and to survey the viewpoints of various note-

worthy scholars, without attempting to be entirely comprehensive. Hopefully, this work will advance a more qualitative consideration of this whole issue.

Understandings of Violence in the Apocalypse

The Turn of the Previous Century

Many scholars in the late 1800s and early 1900s have noted the remarkable differences between the tone of the Apocalypse and that of the rest of the New Testament, especially the Gospels, where Jesus advocates love for one's enemy, turning the other cheek, and forgiving seventy times seventy. Jesus himself stands silently before the mockery and torture of the political leaders, whereas the Apocalypse appears to seethe with hatred and cries for vengeance upon the persecutors of the righteous. Bauer (1917) states, 'The Apocalypist breathes a glowing hatred against all enemies and persecutors of Christianity and assuages himself with thoughts about the terrible sufferings which await them' (40). (See similar interpretations in Preisker [1949: 205], who notes the absence of the love theme, which is so prevalent in the other Johannine literature.

A Changing View

Klassen (1966) thinks, however, that too much emphasis has been placed on these differences, that the Apocalypse is not any different on the subject of wrath than other texts of the New Testament. According to Klassen,

> emphasis, moreover, on the time beyond history is not upon viewing with delight the sufferings of the unrighteous but on the unhindered fellowship between those who follow the Lamb and Him who made their obedience possible. The literary motif that provides unity for the Apocalypse is a sevenfold 'blessing' (1.3; 14.13; 16.15; 19.9; 20.6; 22.7; 22.14), not a series of curses (1966: 311).

Similarly, Hanson (1957) rejects the idea that God's wrath reflects only the Old Testament. He states that in the Apocalypse there is 'a more carefully thought out conception of the Divine wrath even than Paul, one which is more closely related to the central message of Christianity, and which forms a completion and crown of all that is said about the wrath in the rest of the Bible' (1957: 159). According to Hanson, the difference between the Apocalypse and the Old Testament is that in the Old Testament, 'God judges by inflicting suffering whereas in the Apocalypse, He judges by accepting suffering' (1957: 168).

Genre and Context

Some scholars have dealt with the issue of violence in the Apocalypse by attributing the vicious tone of the book to its genre (see Vischer 1895 for one of the earliest examples). Although they consider the book as indeed Christian in literary structure and theology, they also agree that Jewish apocalyptic is indeed the primary genre of Revelation. (For the extensive work of the *Apocalyptic Group*, see Semeia 14 [Collins (ed.) 1979].) This group built on the groundbreaking text linguistic analysis of Hellholm (ed.) (1983) and Hanson (1979), which identified characteristics of apocalyptic literature. (For more on the nature of apocalyptic, see Collins [ed.] 1979: 19.) Klassen (1996), however, notes that there is a significant difference from the usual style of Jewish apocalyptic: whereas the righteous are usually depicted as enjoying the suffering of their enemies, in Revelation, the saints are never depicted as enjoying the torture of their enemies (309).

Not everyone, however, agrees that the emphasis on violence is on account of the genre. Some suggest that perhaps the Christians of John's day simply lived with 'stronger attitudes of hatred and hope than we can condone' (Bousset 1896: 271). Barclay (1960) proposes that the text reflects the human struggle with one's own suffering. For example, in relation to Rev. 18.6-8, Barclay (1960) states that the passage 'is not a case of grim, savage, harsh, vengeful law and justice; it is simply the expression of the great truth that every man is working out his own judgment' (198-99). G.E. Wright and R.H. Fuller in *The Book of the Acts of God* (1957: 337) take a position similar to this. D.H. Lawrence (1976) goes further with a sort of psychological twist and argues that the Apocalypse, especially chs. 12-22, is the expression of the hatred and envy by the weak and oppressed against the strong (114-15). H. Lilje (1957) also defends the text by showing that the author is actually expressing the idea of human revenge since it is God who executes judgment (234). Rissi counters that the cries of vengeance by the souls under the altar (Rev. 6.9-11) are not seeking personal vengeance but the revelation of the praise of God in the final judgment (1952: 142). Aune (1998) interprets the cries for vengeance by the martyrs in a similar way, but within the context of the imprecatory prayers of the Old Testament. The martyrs (like the psalmist) are not cursing the others so much as praying that God will act justly (1998: 408-10). Earlier, E. Lohse (1960) also suggested that the cries of the martyrs for vengeance should be understood as a prayer or plea for the establishment of God's righteousness on earth rather than for God's violence (43).

Lenses

The twentieth century produced a plethora of lenses which, when applied to Apocalyptic studies, have proven to be extremely insightful. These lenses have helped in exploring the complexities of the text, and have provided useful insights, sometimes highlighting distinctions between the characters in the text, and sometimes allowing cultural nuances to emerge (for example, sociological, anthropological and psychological). In addition, other scholars have contributed much by setting the text alongside or within the framework of other literary forms of the same era.

The Inversion Theory of David Barr

It is significant to note that many of these approaches have highlighted similar points about the text. One of the most significant is what David Barr (1998) calls 'radical inversion' (69-70)—that violence is experienced by the righteous as well as carried out on the wicked. Whereas in both Jewish and Christian apocalyptic, only righteous violence can establish justice on earth, John inverts this in the Apocalypse: Jesus is the slain lamb, not the lion tearing its prey (Rev. 5). Similarly, the followers of Jesus are to endure violence, not inflict it (for examples of this inversion, see Barr (1998: 110).

The Four Converging Inquiries of Catherine Keller

Catherine Keller (1995), in her study of Revelation by means of four converging inquiries—liberation, feminism, postmodern thought and process thought—calls this concept of inversion the 'symbolism of sacrifice'; the one who is worthy to open the scroll is not the powerful lion but the sacrificed lamb. According to Keller, this suggests 'the willingness of the divine to go down with us into our worst suffering (not therefore to will it)' (1995: 194). This duality, the emphasis on power and the exercising of it, is what is unique about Revelation. She calls this a 'counter apocalypse, a vision neither apocalyptic nor anti-apocalyptic, neither of power nor non-power' (1995: 194). The cross itself, suggests Keller, symbolizes 'the disclosure of divine immersion in human suffering and thus, of the possibility that the powers of injustice could be ultimately overcome… It hints at the slow and halting process of awakening to the alternative power evoked by the parables and the Sermon on the Mount…the power of a long-centered justice' (1995: 195). Keller goes on to suggest that the Spirit is the most likely means by which this would come about; these perspectives do not so much

as add up to a correct doctrine of power, but together, they may empower a set of practices that constitute an ongoing, if spasmodic, struggle within theological education and religious reformation (1995: 188). She shows that, alone, each of these perspectives is inadequate, and calls for 'relationality' rather than power struggle. She suggests that eschatological victory should be in terms of 'awakened relations' rather than victory in battle by the white horse warrior (1995: 195).

Combat Myth as a Literary Form

Adela Yarbro Collins (1976) arrives at the concept of 'inversion' from the interpretation of Revelation within the framework of the literary form of *Combat Myth*. In Revelation, she suggests, divine victory is interpreted as divine judgment and vengeance for the deaths of the martyrs. If a certain number of martyrs is required before the eschaton occurs (as is implied by the response to the cry of the souls under the altar [Rev. 6]), then each martyr's death brings the eschaton nearer. This sharply contrasts with zealotism which advocates fighting to bring about the kingdom. Adela Yarbro Collins (1976) shows that in Revelation, in fact, it is death that brings about the eschaton along with the destruction of the enemy (234).

Divine Warrior as a Literary Form

Tremper Longman (1981) sets Revelation within the framework of the Old Testament *Divine Warrior*, but notes the difference between Jesus' holy war and the Holy War of Israel. While the latter, at the Lord's command, directed their warfare against earthly enemies, Jesus struggled with the forces, the powers and principalities, which stood behind sinful mankind (1981: 303). Although Longmann (1981) does not call this 'inversion' (see also Barr 1998), he does note that, unlike the Old Testament Warrior, Jesus' command is not to slay but to convert (Mt. 28.16). Jesus triumphs not in battle, but on the cross. He 'disarms the powers and forces by death, not by killing but by being killed' (1981: 303-304).

Historical-Literary Analysis

Stan Lindsay (2004) comes to a similar conclusion in his historical literary study in which he sets the text within and against the backdrop of the Roman world at the time of the writing of the text. He proposes in this historical literary study based on the *Sitz im leben* of the Apocalypse in the Roman Empire that there are three possible responses by the first-century Jewish audience. Each position represented by a character in Revelation reflects a component of the historical audience: (1) We can '…beat 'em' represents

the Jewish revolutionaries, the Sicarri, the Zealots, those who believed that with or without the help of the Messiah, the Kingdom would be brought about by physical warfare. Readers would understand that this position is not advocated by the author since the righteous in the Apocalypse do not win by means of physical force nor superior warfare but by spiritual means (e.g. the Word). (2) '…join 'em' represents the religious parties who tolerated and even compromised with the Romans to achieve their own ends. This view is seen as the cowardly approach in the Apocalypse and hence would be seen as one to avoid. (3) '…transcend 'em' represents, according to Lindsay (2004), the view of the author of the Apocalypse. The apparently passive response turns into action, 'His readers will "conquer" in the way that their master "conquered". They will be "slain" as the Lamb was "slain". They will have a transcending conquest', and consequently be triumphant (8; see also Hemer [2003: 12], who shows that Christ does not confront evil with violence but with forgiveness).

Grammatical-Literary Study

In his grammatical literary study, Klassen (1966) comes to a similar conclusion. By studying the terms *nikao* (to achieve victory) and *polemeo* (to make war), he shows some significant distinctions about who does violence in the Apocalypse. God is never described as going out to war (*polemeo*), although Christ goes to war (*polemeo*) twice (2.16; 19.11). In both cases, however, he does not fight with weapons of warfare, but with the two-edged sword—the Word—in his mouth. Klassen (1966) states, 'To be sure, the element of struggle between God and evil remains, and victory is achieved, but it is not a victory fought with literal weapons. The sword which the Lamb uses, which protrudes from his mouth, is the Word of God' (308). *Polemeo* (to prepare or make war) is more often used to describe Satanic activity (11.7; 12.17; 13.7) or in a neutral sense (2.7; 16.14; 19.19; 20.8) (305-306).

In contrast, the author uses the term *nikao* (to achieve victory). While the verb is used only twice in regards to Christ (5.5; 17.14) and twice as regards the beast (11.7; 13.7), most of the time it is used to describe the faithful followers of the Lamb (2.7, 11, 17, 26; 3.5, 12, 21; 21.7). In these cases victory comes not by armed battle, but by 'refusing to love one's own life so much that one resists martyrdom and through consistent patterning of one's life upon the Lamb's sacrifice' (306). Indeed, the followers of the Lamb never engage in battle under the Lamb's leadership; for example, in Rev. 17.14 when the ten kings confront the Lamb, the Lamb triumphs not by his superior weapons or force, but because of who he is, the King of

Kings and Lord of Lords. His followers, the called, chosen and faithful are with him and thus also share his triumph. R.H. Charles (1920) points out that it is significant to note how far from the cry for revenge the righteous have come (Rev. 6) (see also Windisch 1909: 212). In a similar way, in Rev. 17, the righteous again participate in Christ's triumph (*nikao*) without making war (*polemeo*). In each case the joy of the faithful in God's triumph is focused not on selfish vindication but on the attributes of God himself: 'the stress is not on the delight in her [Babylon's] suffering but joy in the outcome of God's cause' (1909: 304).

Purpose

Social and Cultural Pressure

Other scholars attribute the violent tone of Revelation to its purpose. Until recently, most scholars interpreted the atmosphere of crisis as reflective of Roman persecution, under either Nero (64–65 CE) or Domitian (90–100 CE). More recent scholarship, however, is beginning to question this background and to consider that perhaps the crisis implied in the text is social and cultural pressure from society.

Advocacy for the Poor and Oppressed

Fiorenza (1991) is one of the first to interpret the Apocalypse as standing in advocacy for the poor and oppressed, as 'a hope and encouragement for those who struggle for economic survival and freedom from persecution and murder' (101). She shows in an extremely convincing way that indeed, 'the central problem and topic [of Revelation] is the issue of power and justice' (117). By means of rhetorical analysis, she seeks to 'reconstruct the communicative interaction between a text and its sociocultural contexts' as well as 'the discursive interaction between a text's author and audience' (118). Fiorenza (1991) acknowledges the current debate about the nature of the 'crisis' in Revelation, but shows that the Apocalypse 'provides the vision of an alternative world in order to motivate the audience and to strengthen their resistance in the face of Babylon/Rome's overwhelming threat to destroy their life and livelihood' (129).

Fiorenza (1991) emphasizes that the purpose of Revelation is realized only when the reader engages 'both critically and responsibly its rhetorical world of vision in our own struggles for justice and liberation' (139).

Adela Yarbro Collins (1981) counters Fiorenza (1991) on the basis that there is not enough historical evidence to support the notion of political oppression and persecution as the setting for the Apocalypse. Instead, she

suggests that the crisis in the Apocalypse is a perceived social crisis: 'the purpose of the Apocalypse seems to be the resolution of tension aroused by a perceived social crisis' (1981: 170). The violent imagery in the text was 'intended to release aggressive feelings in a harmless way' (171). Barr (1998) agrees that the crisis is not persecution, but that it reflects a 'struggle between prophets' (243-56).

Along similar lines, DeSilva (1992) suggests that the conflict is between the Christian community and society-at-large, which is exerting pressure. John, the author of the Apocalypse, speaks as a prophet seeking to prepare the church, by means of apocalyptic imagery, to meet the intensifying conflict 'in such a way as to preserve *communitas* rather than to accommodate the *societas.* His Apocalypse is a call for radical, social action, for choosing life in the margins of society rather than assimilation' (302).

Susan Hylen (2003) in her small but intriguing study of Revelation 18 treats the issue of oppression and gender in an even different way, suggesting that a multivalent interpretation yields the most valuable insights. She illustrates this by her work on ch. 18, a notoriously negative passage with respect to gender issues. Hylen (2003) shows that clearly the passage can be interpreted as oppressive, but unless one also considers it as liberating, one does not completely grasp the complexities of the text (2003: 218-19). This embracing of both interpretations also enables the reader to relate the complexities and multivalence of the text to the complex realities of life.

Relevancy and Significance

Much of the material in Revelation appears to be violent, vengeful and hateful. In fact, Gerd Lüdemann (1997: 36-54) calls this the 'dark side of the Bible'. As students of the Bible, we are forced to ask, 'What is the significance of the violent images in Revelation? Does it matter? Does God in fact, have a dark side, one which perhaps negates his "loving side"? If this violence is significant, how can these images be understood as relevant to our world, which is so focused on technology, empiricism and rationality? What are we, as biblical scholars, to say about this as we proceed into the twenty-first century?' Some scholars suggest some answers.

Adela Yarbro Collins (1984) says that the violent images, symbols and narratives can be used by readers 'as an occasion to discover one's own hostile, aggressive feelings' (173). These symbols of power, however, indicate that sin and evil are not simply individual choices but involve 'collective processes with evil or destructive effects' (173). Collins follows Metz's (1969) proposal that the church is an 'institution of a socially critical

freedom' (134-35; paraphrased by A.Y. Collins 1984: 175). She challenges the church to 'take the responsibility of questioning and destroying the self-absolutizing tendencies of the church as an institution' (175; see also, Metz 1969: 134-35). This means that the church should undertake two things: First, 'protest the absolutizing of any one political program or system…' And, second, 'ally itself with those tendencies in society which hold promise of a movement forward toward the fulfillment of the eschatological promises of the Bible—freedom, peace, justice, and reconciliation' (175; summarizing Metz 1969: 92-96 and 153).

John Collins (2002) has a different suggestion. He considers the Bible's claim to certitude to be the factor that leads some who do not understand the use of the text to justify violence. He therefore suggests that 'the most constructive thing a biblical critic can do toward lessening the contribution of the Bible to violence in the world is to show that that certitude is an illusion' (10).

Jon Paulien (2004), Andrews University, in his innovative and creative presentation to the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in San Antonio, 2004, suggests a different stance in his analysis of Revelation in relation to the movie *The Matrix*. For the author of Revelation, according to Paulien (2004), 'true freedom involves standing against oppressive systems' (19). Paulien's (2004) idea is that, like in *The Matrix*, violence has an evil twin, deception; as tools of power and control, they lead to the self-destruction of the entire system (20). The Apocalypse, according to Paulien (2004), shows that the only way to combat these twins is by knowledge; not the self-knowledge of Socrates, but by a God-understanding. This means standing alone if necessary 'in the face of something bigger and more powerful than ourselves… Living a meaningful life in the face of violence and deception means seizing our freedom to construct an authentic view of reality and accept responsibility for the consequences of that view' (21-22).

Concluding Thoughts

Relationality

Catherine Keller (1995) offers a more optimistic suggestion, one in which pneumatology whispers an intuition into the subtler powers of the universe (195). This, according to Keller (1995), is called 'relationality, which awakens potentiality and is only possible for humans insofar as it fulfills the criterion of mutuality' (195). In other words, relationality is only possible through attention to relationship, by the awareness that one is part of the

whole, that 'These relational powers are continually released, transformed by our intersubjective agency, into the solidarity of shared potentialities' (175). Although Keller (1995) acknowledges that the power of mutuality will probably not win, cynicism should not be an option. Rather,

> The love of justice and the justice of love have not been and will not be defeated. They do have a chance to realize themselves socially—not absolutely, not permanently, not triumphantly, but with the dauntless vulnerability of the Spirit of Life… The lines of relational power more like fibers in a web than railroad tracks to the horizon, intersect and energize communities of support and struggle already (195).

This strategy is not contingent on a messianic warrior but on the 'delicate and nonetheless messianic power of awakened relations' (195).

Ron Farmer (1993), like Keller (1995), sees relationality as a major point in the Apocalypse. According to him, process hermeneutics is able to transform the reader's understanding of divine power in Revelation so that whereas it (divine power) appears to be controlling and coercive, it can be interpreted as relational and creative-responsive (1993: 97-98).

Witnessing

Richard Bauckham (1993) takes a more straightforward approach. He argues that Revelation is more readily available to the reader than other scholars suggest. According to him, the imagery and symbols should not be considered as vague or 'impressionistic' means of expressions: 'They are capable both of considerable precision of meaning and of compressing a wealth of meaning into a brief space by evoking a range of associations' (22). In regard to the emphasis on violence, Bauckham says, 'The judgments which are so vividly described in the rest of the book should appear not as judgments on their enemies so much as judgments they themselves were in danger of incurring, since worshipping the beast was not something only their pagan neighbors did' (15). Hence, the visions could bring consolation and encouragement or warning and painful challenge depending on 'which group of the Christians depicted in the seven messages a reader belongs to' (16). The call to 'conquer' addressed to all the seven churches 'transcends both consolation and warning. It calls Christians to a task of witnessing to God and his righteousness for which the consolations and warnings of the seven messages are designed to prepare them' (16).

Speaking to Power

Frank England (1992) reads the significance of power in Revelation in even a different way. He says that the author of the Apocalypse is calling for

the dispersal and sacrifice of life. This is carried out in the Eucharist, the central act of worship in the church.

> The concentration of power and authority in any one Being/being leads to tyranny and oppression. The desire to maintain a position of power by one results in the denial of life and human dignity to others. The broken bread and spilt blood of the Eucharist demonstrates that sacrifice is a kenotic process which resists the desire for power, status, identity, and privilege… this act [of Eucharist] will draw others into the sacrificial dynamic, demonstrating that the dwelling of God is with people (1992: 52).

The Human Condition

Adela Yarbro Collins (1984) sees the value of Revelation in 'the pointed and universal way in which it raises the questions of justice, wealth, and power—Revelation serves the value of humanization insofar as it insists that the marginal, the relatively poor and powerless, must assert themselves to achieve their full humanity and dignity' (172). The reader must acknowledge that the vision of Revelation is 'partial and imperfect' but can also realize that because of this, it can still speak to our broken human condition (172).

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