

War of the Lamb

◆◆ Brian Zahnd ◆◆

Those who want to hold onto a primitive vision of a violent and retributive God often cite the white horse rider passage from Revelation. They will say something like this: “Jesus came the first time as a lamb, but he’s coming back the second time as a lion.” (Despite the fact that no lion is ever seen in Revelation — the lion is the Lamb!) By this they mean the nonviolent Jesus of the Gospels is going to mutate into what they fantasize is the hyper-violent Jesus of Revelation.

Sadly, the proponents of this flawed interpretation seem to prefer their imagined violent Jesus of the future over the nonviolent Jesus of the Gospels. At a basic level they essentially see the Bible like this: After a long trajectory away from the divine violence of the Old Testament culminating in Jesus renouncing violence and calling his followers to love their enemies, the Bible in its final pages abandons a vision of peace and nonviolence as ultimately unworkable and closes with the most vicious portrayal of divine violence in all of Scripture.

JESUS “GIVES UP” ON LOVE?

In this reading of Revelation, the way of peace and love which Jesus preached during his life and endorsed in his death is rejected for the worn-out way of war and violence. When we literalize the militant images of Revelation we arrive at this conclusion: In the end, even Jesus gives up on love and resorts to violence. Tragically, those who refuse to embrace the way of peace taught by Jesus use the symbolic war of Revelation 19 to silence the Sermon on the Mount.

This kind of hermeneutic has disastrous implications; it mutes Jesus’ message of peace and forgiveness. When we literalize the ironic and

symbolic images employed by John of Patmos, we illegitimately use Revelation to give license for our own hellish violence. We reason, if Jesus is going to kill two hundred million people upon his return, what does it matter if we kill one hundred thousand people at Hiroshima?

But is John the Revelator really trying to tell us that in the end, the Lamb is going to transform into the ultimate killing machine? Of course that’s not what John is saying!

First, remember that ALL of Revelation is communicated in theatrical symbol — all of it!



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- Locusts that look like horses with human faces, women’s hair, and lion’s teeth.
- An army of two million soldiers riding lion-headed horses that breath fire and belch sulfur.
- A red dragon with seven heads in the heavens that sweeps away a third of the stars with its tail.
- A seven-headed beast from the sea with the body of a leopard, feet of a bear, and mouth of a lion.

- An angel in the sky with a giant sickle who reaps all the grapes of the earth and puts them in a winepress that generates a river of blood for two hundred miles.

These are all symbols! None of them are literal! Just as Jesus riding a flying white horse wearing a blood-drenched robe with a sword protruding from his mouth is a *symbol*. The question is, what is John communicating to us with his creative symbols?

JOHN'S GOSPEL MESSAGE

To begin with, the rider on the white horse is called Faithful and True, and his name is The Word of God. John is not depicting a literal event in the future, but giving us a symbolic reality about the present – John is depicting the glorious triumph of the Word of God (Jesus Christ).

The one called The Word of God is not riding the red horse of war, but the white horse of triumph. Jesus doesn't overcome evil by war, but by his word. This

is how Jesus wages his righteous war. Jesus doesn't wage war like the murderous beast of Rome; Jesus wages war as the slaughtered Lamb of God.

As Eugene Peterson says in his excellent book on Revelation, "The perennial ruse is to glorify war so that we accept it as a proper means of achieving goals. But it is evil. It is opposed by Christ. Christ does not sit on the

red horse, ever."

After riding the peace donkey on Palm Sunday to contrast his peaceable kingdom with the violent empires of a pagan world, Jesus does not later contradict himself by riding a warhorse in an exaggerated imitation of Genghis Khan.

Perhaps John of Patmos is asking too much of modern readers, but he assumes we will keep in

mind that Jesus is ever and always the slaughtered Lamb. As Richard Bauckham reminds us in his *Theology of Revelation*, "When the slaughtered Lamb is seen 'in the midst of' the divine throne in heaven, the meaning is that Christ's sacrificial death *belongs to the way God rules the world.*"

Christ always rules from the cross, never from an Apache attack helicopter!

A SELF-SACRIFICIAL KING

John stresses that Jesus reigns through self-sacrifice by depicting the white horse rider as wearing a robe drenched in blood *before the battle begins*. Jesus' robe is soaked in his own blood. Jesus doesn't shed the blood of enemies; Jesus sheds his own blood. This is the gospel! The rider on the white horse is the slaughtered Lamb, not the slaughtering Beast.

To further make his point, John tells us that the sword the rider uses to smite the nations is not in his hand, but in his mouth. This is not Caesar's sword, but the word of God. The Revelator so desires that we not miss this point, that he comes right out and tells us, "and his name is called The Word of God." It's

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like when a political cartoon labels the symbol to make sure we properly identify it. The sword is not a sword; the sword is the word of God.

If we combine all of John's creative symbols the message is clear: ***Jesus wages war by self-sacrifice and by what he says***. Jesus combats evil by co-suffering love and the word of God. This is the righteous war of the Lamb.

Christians are called to believe that co-suffering love and the divine word are all Christ needs to overcome evil. A fallen world addicted to war does not believe this, but the followers of Jesus do...or should! If Jesus conquers evil by killing his enemies,

he's just another passing Caesar.

But the whole point of John's Revelation is that Jesus is *nothing* like Caesar! The war of the Lamb looks nothing like the war of the Beast. Jesus is not like Caesar; Jesus does not wage war like Caesar. To miss this point is to misunderstand everything the Apocalypse is trying to reveal! The war of the Lamb is the same war the Apostle Paul describes to the Corinthian church:

We are human, but we don't wage war as humans do. We use God's mighty weapons, not worldly weapons, to knock down strongholds of human reasoning and to destroy false arguments. We destroy every proud obstacle that keeps people from knowing God. We capture their rebellious thoughts and teach them to obey Christ. —2 Corinthians 10:3-5

This is the kind of war that is symbolically depicted in Revelation with a rider on a white horse called The Word of God who wears a robe drenched in his own blood and wages a righteous war with a sword coming from his mouth.

This is not a literal war, this is a symbolic war. This is not a future war; Christ is waging this war right now. ***I know Christ is waging this war right now because I am among those who have been slain by the sword of his mouth and raised again to newness of life!***

Jesus slays me. He slays me with his divine word. And in slaying me, he sets me free. This is salvation. John the Revelator is showing us how Jesus saves the world, not how Jesus kills the world.

The book of Revelation is not where the good news of the gospel goes to die. The book of Revelation is where the good news of the gospel finds its most creative expression. Through inspired dreamlike images John the Revelator dares to imagine a world where the nightmare of endless war finally succumbs to the peaceable reign of Christ. And I, for one, believe in the vision John saw.

The kingdom of the world has now become the Kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ and he will reign forever and ever.

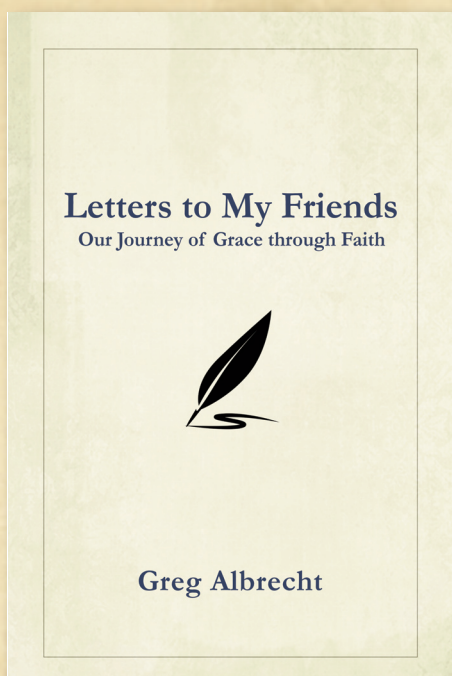
—Revelation 11:15

Worthy is the Lamb! □

Brian Zahnd is author of Farewell to Mars and Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God.

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