

# Metaphor Matters: Violence and Ethics in Revelation

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THE VIOLENT IMAGERY of Revelation strikes many interpreters as morally repulsive. Readers struggle with images like that of Christ appearing with his armies at the end-time to destroy large portions of humanity. Although there are popular interpretations of Revelation that embrace this violent imagery (such as the multimillion-dollar enterprise around the *Left Behind* series<sup>1</sup>), most scholarly interpreters treat the violence of Revelation as a problem to be addressed.

There are two approaches to the issue of the violent imagery, although the second is far more prevalent among scholars. First, some interpret the imagery of Revelation as supporting and condoning violence, and reject the book as a result.<sup>2</sup> For these interpreters, the imagery represents real violence undertaken by God at the end-time. The second, more common approach to the violence of Revelation

<sup>1</sup> E.g., Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1995). The official Web site, <http://www.leftbehind.com>, offers a variety of books and other products.

<sup>2</sup> Some interpreters reject (or struggle with) only the violent elements of Revelation; e.g., Greg Carey, "Teaching and Preaching the Book of Revelation in the Church," *RevExp* 98 (2001) 97-98. Others reject the book entirely, e.g., Burton L. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament? The Making of the Christian Myth* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995) 195-97; John W. Marshall, "Collateral Damage: Jesus and Jezebel in the Jewish War," in *Violence in the New Testament* (ed. Shelly Matthews and E. Leigh Gibson; New York: Clark, 2005) 35-36; Tina Pippin, *Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John* (Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992). Outside of NT studies, similar assessments are made by a number of authors, e.g., Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals* (trans. Francis Golffing; Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1956) 185.

emphasizes the metaphorical nature of this language. The violent images are not themselves the point of Revelation; they direct the reader to a second layer of meaning. The interpreter who unpacks the metaphorical meaning of the violent imagery finds a message that is actually nonviolent.<sup>3</sup> This nonviolent meaning can then be embraced.

Each of these positions has advantages and disadvantages. The first position takes seriously the consequences of this violent imagery. It reminds the reader of the purposes for which such imagery is sometimes employed and the human tendency to claim divine sanction for violence against others. If Revelation is used to support injustice, perhaps it should not be read. Yet opponents rightly argue that this approach literalizes language that is highly figurative. The failure to recognize the figurative nature of Revelation leads these interpreters to misunderstand the book's core message. They mistakenly reject the positive aspects of the book along with its more troubling imagery.<sup>4</sup>

The second position responds in an important way to the literary character of Revelation. These interpreters grapple with the rich figurative language of the book. They point out, for example, that Christ ultimately conquers with "the sword . . . coming out of his mouth," suggesting the triumph of God's word rather than the literal slaughter of God's enemies (19:21).<sup>5</sup> This approach is persuasive because it recognizes that the language of Revelation is not literal, and it accounts for the violent imagery as a part of the book's rhetoric. Yet those who see actual violence represented offer an important challenge.<sup>6</sup> They underscore the rhetorical effect

<sup>3</sup> E.g., David L. Barr, "Doing Violence: Moral Issues in Reading John's Apocalypse," in *Reading the Book of Revelation: A Resource for Students* (ed. David L. Barr; SBLRBS 44; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003) 97-108; idem, "Towards an Ethical Reading of The Apocalypse: Reflections on John's Use of Power, Violence, and Misogyny," in *Society of Biblical Literature 1997 Seminar Papers* (SBLSP 36; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997) 358-73; Brian K. Blount, *Revelation: A Commentary* (NTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009) 1-5; William Klassen, "Vengeance in the Apocalypse of John," *CBQ* 28 (1966) 300-311.

<sup>4</sup> E.g., Barr, "Towards an Ethical Reading of The Apocalypse," 358-73; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* (2nd ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998) 217.

<sup>5</sup> For this perspective, see, e.g., Barr, "Towards an Ethical Reading of The Apocalypse," 361; Brian K. Blount, *Can I Get a Witness? Reading Revelation through African American Culture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005) 76, 82; Blount, *Revelation*, 354; M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1989) 196; Loren L. Johns, *The Lamb Christology of the Apocalypse of John: An Investigation into Its Origins and Rhetorical Force* (WUNT 2/167; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003) 184-85; Klassen, "Vengeance," 308; Patricia M. McDonald, "Lion as Slain Lamb: On Reading Revelation Recursively," *Horizons* 23 (1996) 29-47, here 42.

<sup>6</sup> Although Miroslav Volf (*Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1996]) does not interpret the violent imagery literally, he retains the violent content of the imagery and thus makes a similar point: "the attempt to exonerate the Revelation from the charge of affirming divine violence . . . is implausible. The

that the violent metaphors often have, and they raise important questions for those who read metaphorically. Can a nonviolent interpretation neutralize the violent content of a metaphor? How does a violent metaphor become nonviolent in its meaning?

Scholars who read metaphorically posit a process of “transformation” of the violent metaphor into something peaceful. Yet their description of this process is incomplete. Such accounts tend to move quickly to nonviolent meanings of the metaphors, as if this can negate the violent imagery itself. For example, a common way of interpreting the battle scene of 19:11-21 is that the language draws on the image of a cosmic battle, taken from the prophets and ancient Near Eastern combat myths. But, because it is a metaphor, the violent content of the battle imagery is somehow extracted and replaced with something less offensive. M. Eugene Boring writes:

[John] uses the ancient form of portraying the ultimate victory of God as winning a great battle in which those who have resisted God are slaughtered. But he fills this with new *content*. This is simply what has happened in the Christian confession as such, that the Christ, the triumphant military king, is Jesus, the crucified man of Nazareth, who was crucified not as preliminary to his victory but as his victory.<sup>7</sup>

What the battle image conveys is that Christ defeats the powers of evil—not with actual violence but through his death and resurrection. As another example, Brian K. Blount writes of Christ the Lamb, “He is a dosage of violence that is not only quantitatively reconfigured into a lesser amount, but is also qualitatively transfigured into a different substance. In his characterization as slaughtered, nonviolence is extracted from violence and then set out as an antidote against it.”<sup>8</sup> Richard B. Hays writes, “[T]he symbolic logic of the work as a whole dismantles the symbolism of violence.”<sup>9</sup> Yet to my knowledge no one has described this extraction or

violence of the divine word is no less lethal than the violence of the literal sword” (p. 296). Although he does not discuss the metaphorical nature of the language, Volf understands the violence of Revelation symbolically (p. 299) and also underscores the violent content of the language.

<sup>7</sup> Boring, *Revelation*, 196-97 (italics original); cf. Harry O. Maier, “Coming Out of Babylon: A First-World Reading of Revelation among Immigrants,” in *From Every People and Nation: The Book of Revelation in Intercultural Perspective* (ed. David Rhoads; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005) 62-81, here 73.

<sup>8</sup> Blount, *Can I Get a Witness?* 81; cf. 82. Blount describes the process of this transformation, drawing on Theophus H. Smith’s discussion (*Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black Culture* [Religion in America; New York: Oxford University Press, 1994] 196-203) of a “homeopathic cure,” although neither author is specific about how such a cure is embodied in Jesus or specifically in the Jesus of Revelation.

<sup>9</sup> Richard B. Hays, “Revelation,” in idem, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation. A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996) 169-85, here 175. For other descriptions of the transformation of violent imagery, see David L. Barr, “The Apocalypse as a Symbolic Transformation of the World: A Literary

dismantling process.<sup>10</sup> What is missing is a discussion of the moment at which the violent metaphor loses its content and becomes something else.

As a contribution to this discussion, in this article I explore in more depth what metaphors are, how they function, and what they require of the reader. In doing so, I hope to provide an alternative understanding of how reading metaphorically can provide an ethical option for interpreting Revelation. To preview, I argue that the violent imagery in Revelation does matter. It shapes the imaginations of those who enter into John's worldview. For those who seek a nonviolent message, the image of the conquering Christ remains problematic; however, the conquering imagery is not all there is to Revelation. John's use of other metaphors disrupts the logic of the battle metaphor—and in doing so may help the reader to see how this metaphor is limited. In the end I propose an alternative strategy for reading Revelation ethically: that of understanding John's language as multiple metaphors that each contribute something to the reader's understanding of a complex theological concept.

## I. Metaphor and Imagination

In this section I argue that the violent content of Revelation's metaphors is not magically transmuted into something nonviolent. Instead, interpreters often ignore the violent content because of the conventional nature of the metaphors John uses. Nevertheless, even when it is neglected, the violent content shapes the imagination of the interpreter.

This understanding of Revelation grows out of the recognition of the conceptual nature of metaphorical language, an argument that philosophers, linguists, and cognitive scientists have been making for close to three decades. A metaphor

Analysis," *Int* 38 (1984) 39-50, here 41; idem, "Towards an Ethical Reading of The Apocalypse," 361; Richard Bauckham, "The Apocalypse as a Christian War Scroll," in idem, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1993) 210-237, here 233; Boring, *Revelation*, 196; Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 300-301.

<sup>10</sup> I am aware of two articles that address hermeneutics and violent imagery in Revelation. Ronald L. Farmer ("Undercurrents and Paradoxes: The Apocalypse to John in Process Hermeneutics," in *Reading the Book of Revelation* [ed. Barr], 109-18) draws on process philosophy. This discussion has potential, yet Farmer does not discuss how he knows to identify some images as "basal lures" and others as "surface lures," or how the interaction between them is defined. Ian Paul ("The Book of Revelation: Image, Symbol and Metaphor," in *Studies in the Book of Revelation* [ed. Steve Moyise; Edinburgh: Clark, 2001] 131-47) draws on Paul Ricoeur's theory of metaphor, which is a precursor of conceptual metaphor theory. I find the development of later theorists useful in thinking through the violent imagery. The best overall treatment of metaphorical imagery in Revelation is that of Lynn R. Huber, *Like a Bride Adorned: Reading Metaphor in John's Apocalypse* (Emory Studies in Early Christianity 12; New York: Clark, 2007). To my knowledge, however, Huber does not address the ethical implications of her discussion.

understands one thing in terms of another.<sup>11</sup> The metaphor of Christ conquering with the sword of his mouth (19:21; cf. 1:16; 2:12, 16; 19:15) may serve as an example. This metaphor invites the listener to understand Christ's words as a sword with which he will conquer his enemies.<sup>12</sup> The metaphor asks the hearer or reader to see one thing in terms of another: words as swords. In the language of conceptual metaphor theory, the reader draws on the "source domain" (a sword) to understand the "target domain" (words).

This view of metaphor contrasts with a common view that a metaphor is a deviant form of language.<sup>13</sup> From this perspective, a metaphor is a decorative way of saying what could otherwise be expressed more literally. Interpreting a metaphor involves restating its meaning in propositional language. "For instance, a metaphor of the 'A is E' form (e.g., Man is a wolf) is nothing but an indirect way of presenting some intended literal meaning 'A is C' (e.g., Man is fierce)."<sup>14</sup> Although few interpreters of Revelation explicitly discuss their understanding of metaphor, many seem to be operating with this referential view of language. When the meaning of the metaphor is discovered, the violent aspect of the language can be discarded because it does not contribute anything substantive to the meaning of the text.<sup>15</sup>

This view of metaphor held sway throughout the modern period, yet it no longer seems adequate for a number of reasons. First, it does not account for the way people apprehend metaphors without translating them into literal terms.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) 5. My understanding of metaphor draws on conceptual metaphor theory. In addition to Lakoff and Johnson, some of the works I find especially useful include Max Black, "Metaphor," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 55 (1954–55) 273–94; Raymond W. Gibbs, *The Poetics of Mind: Figurative Thought, Language, and Understanding* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); George Lakoff and Mark Turner, *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Mark Turner, *The Literary Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., David E. Aune, *Revelation* (3 vols.; WBC 52A, 52B, 52C; Dallas: Word, 1997, 1998) 3:1067; Boring, *Revelation*, 195; Blount, *Revelation*, 354–55. For conceptual background, see Aune, 3:1060–61.

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., Wallace Martin, "Metaphor," in *The New Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (ed. Alex Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993) 760; *Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd ed.; ed. J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner; Oxford: Clarendon, 1989) 5:898, s.v. "figure"; 9:676, s.v. "metaphor."

<sup>14</sup> Gibbs, *Poetics of Mind*, 212. Gibbs is describing the "substitution view" of metaphor. For a description of other viewpoints, see *ibid.*, chap. 5.

<sup>15</sup> Huber (*Like a Bride Adorned*, 67, 70) situates this modern tendency in interpreting Revelation among broader trends in interpreting figurative language.

<sup>16</sup> Gibbs, *Poetics of Mind*, chap. 3. Gilles Fauconnier, Mark Turner, and Mark Lakoff further discuss contemporary brain research and the apprehension of metaphorical language; see Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Com-*

Consider the following statements: “I am spending too much time on my work,” and “If I cut the second assignment, I will save time on grading.” Few readers will stumble over the use of “spend” and “save” in relation to the concept of time. The reader easily apprehends the statements because they draw on a conventional metaphor, TIME IS MONEY.<sup>17</sup> The abundant use of conventional metaphors is one indicator of a deeper human tendency to think metaphorically. As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have argued: “Metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature.”<sup>18</sup> Likewise, readers of Revelation know to interpret the sword in relation to words because the image draws on a conventional metaphor, ARGUMENT IS WAR. Readers connect the sword with words because it is common to speak about words as weapons, and arguments as battles.<sup>19</sup>

Second, when metaphors are translated into propositional terms, some of their meaning is lost. For example, when the metaphor “Sally is a block of ice” is converted to “Sally is cold” the meaning of the statement remains metaphorical.<sup>20</sup> Sally is not literally cold but is metaphorically cold in her affect. The statement could be further translated into literal terms: for example, “Sally is unfriendly.” Yet some of the cognitive content of the metaphorical expression is lost in this literal reformulation. “Unfriendly” does not capture the specific style of Sally’s behavior; she might be brusque or rude or distracted. Likewise, the “sword coming out of his mouth” (Rev 19:21) cannot be translated adequately into literal language. When interpreters express the meaning of this metaphor, they often say something like “God conquers by means of a war of words—through persuasion, not coercion.”<sup>21</sup> This is a good expression of the metaphorical meaning of this verse, yet

*plexities* (New York: Basic, 2002); George Lakoff, *The Political Mind: Why You Can't Understand 21st-Century Politics with an 18th-Century Brain* (London: Penguin, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> The use of small capitals is a convention of conceptual metaphor theory that distinguishes root metaphors from their verbal expressions.

<sup>18</sup> Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors*, 1. See also chaps. 4 and 6; cf. Lakoff and Turner, *More than Cool Reason*, chap. 1.

<sup>19</sup> For a discussion of this conventional metaphor, see Gibbs, *Poetics of Mind*, 249; Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors*, 4, 61–66. The sword metaphor is similar to other expressions in Scripture; see Isa 11:4–5; Wis 5:20; Eph 6:17. The conceptual approach to metaphor is not necessarily anachronistic in a first-century context. Although Aristotle’s view of metaphor has often been understood as evidence that the ancients understood metaphor as decorative, this position has recently been reevaluated. See Huber, *Like a Bride Adorned*, 46–56; James Edwin Mahon, “Getting Your Sources Right: What Aristotle Didn’t Say,” in *Researching and Applying Metaphor* (ed. Lynne Cameron and Graham Low; Cambridge Applied Linguistics; Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 69–80. Huber includes a helpful discussion of Cicero and Quintilian.

<sup>20</sup> For this example, see Gibbs, *Poetics of Mind*, 217–18.

<sup>21</sup> Farmer, “Undercurrents and Paradoxes,” 115.

it is still metaphorical. What it means for God's word to "conquer" is supplied by the connection the metaphor creates between the sword and the word of God. The inability to find a literal equivalent suggests that metaphorical language is more than simply decorative. Metaphors have conceptual content that their literal "equivalent" lacks.<sup>22</sup>

Third, understanding metaphors conceptually helps to address their effect on the imagination. Metaphors invite the reader into a way of seeing the world.<sup>23</sup> Even a common, conventional metaphor asks the reader or hearer to take an imaginative leap, to envision the world in a particular way. Through the conventional metaphor TIME IS MONEY, we imagine time as a precious and scarce commodity, as something that, by "saving," we can hoard for our later use.<sup>24</sup> Through the metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY, we imagine each of our lives as a continuous path with a starting place, a destination, and various "turning points" along the way.<sup>25</sup> Such metaphors shape the way people understand abstract concepts like time and life.

This conceptual aspect of metaphor is relevant to the ethics of reading Revelation, because a reader who enters into a metaphorical worldview begins to reason according to its terms. Imagine this scenario from an academic conference. A presenter emerges from a paper session and says to a colleague, "That second questioner really shot holes in my argument." The colleague responds, "Yes, I thought her criticisms were right on target. I think you could strengthen your position by making your method more explicit." The two are reasoning along the lines of the metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR. They are strategizing for the next phase in the battle. The point is that people not only speak as if words are elements of warfare but also reason in these terms: one can win or lose an argument, or fight to a standstill. One might experience academic discourse as a conversation or as a cooperative effort. When conceived as war, the participants' experience is shaped and constrained by the metaphor.<sup>26</sup>

In light of my discussion here, what seems dangerous about the metaphor of Christ's sword is how it may shape and constrain the imagination.<sup>27</sup> This shaping

<sup>22</sup> Mark Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007) 190. For a discussion of the way objectivist views of language deny the cognitive function of metaphor, see Johnson, *Body in the Mind*, 66-67. David L. Barr (*Tales of the End: A Narrative Commentary on the Book of Revelation* [Storytellers Bible 1; Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge, 1998] 9) expresses a similar understanding.

<sup>23</sup> Gibbs, *Poetics of Mind*, 207; Mark Johnson, *Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1993) 1-2; Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors*, 3-5; Lakoff and Turner, *More than Cool Reason*, 57-59.

<sup>24</sup> For a discussion, see Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors*, 7-9.

<sup>25</sup> See Lakoff and Turner, *More than Cool Reason*, 1-5.

<sup>26</sup> Gibbs, *Poetics of Mind*, 7-8; Lakoff, *Political Mind*; Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors*, 7-9; Lakoff and Turner, *More than Cool Reason*, 62.

<sup>27</sup> Some interpreters imply that violent imagery may incite readers to undertake literal vio-

occurs even when the interpreter understands the sword as the nonviolent word of God. Even so, the metaphor invites the reader to think of Christ's word in terms of a conquering warrior and to reason in these terms. The moral danger may be especially strong because Revelation explicitly asks its readers to "conquer" (from νικάω; 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5; 12:21; 21:7) just as Christ has conquered (3:21; cf. 5:5; 17:14). The "conquering" of the reader is also metaphorical. Yet, in employing these metaphors, John invites the reader to imagine the world in a particular way. He asks the reader to envision spiritual advancement as a battlefield—and to reason in these terms. According to the logic of the battlefield, "conquering" is something one does over one's enemies. There must be winners and losers. Winning involves the subjugation or annihilation of the enemy. If "conquering" is problematic morally, it is not because it implies any literal violence or incites the reader to carry out such violence, but because it may motivate and constrain the imagination to see even God's accounting of justice as a zero-sum game.<sup>28</sup>

## II. Multiple Metaphors

John's use of multiple metaphors is another reason interpreters have argued that the violent content of the imagery is transformed. The appearance of the Christ figure in Revelation 5 has been important to the discussion of the moral implications of the book. The chapter opens with the problem of a scroll that no one has been found worthy to open (vv. 1-4). One of the elders says to John, "See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals" (v. 5). John looks and sees "in the midst of the throne and the four living creatures and in the midst of the elders a Lamb standing like one slaughtered" (v. 6). Interpreters who struggle with the violent imagery often

lence. For example, Barr writes, "It is a short step from the literal justification of violence, to the political justification of violence, to the use of violence against the enemy" ("Doing Violence," 99). This view makes sense when applied in retrospect to some acts of violence by people who claim a biblical rationale. Yet to suggest a causal relation between the violence of the text and the violent act is much more difficult. Most readers who support the same interpretation of the same text never undertake violent action.

<sup>28</sup> For a discussion of the "apocalyptic imaginary," see Catherine Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World* (Boston: Beacon, 1996) chap. 1. An example of the way that the conquering imagery of Revelation takes hold of the imagination is found in books by Tim LaHaye, the coauthor of the *Left Behind* series. The series of novels reads Revelation in graphically violent terms, and the approach is reflected in the way LaHaye speaks of the Christian life. For example, *Rapture under Attack: Will Christians Escape the Tribulation?* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1998) depicts the argument over the interpretation of Revelation as an "attack" (the chapter headings reinforce this overall theme). Other examples are found in the titles of some of his earlier books: *The Battle for the Family* (Grand Rapids: F. H. Revell, 1982); *The Battle for the Mind* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980); *The Battle for the Public Schools* (Grand Rapids: F. H. Revell, 1983). LaHaye envisions the discussions about these public issues as battles, with clear winners and losers.



read the interplay of these images as a transformation of the lion into the nonviolent lamb. In this section I argue that this “transformation” is better understood as the interplay of multiple metaphors, which the reader interprets alongside an array of literary and cultural cues.

Some scholars describe the transformation of the imagery as the replacement of the lion by the lamb. For example, G. B. Caird writes that the title Lamb “is meant to control and interpret all the rest of the symbolism. It is almost as if John were saying to us at one point after another, ‘Wherever the Old Testament says “lion,” read “Lamb.”’”<sup>29</sup> Such a view makes sense from a referential view of metaphor. The lion image suggests a fierce killer; the slaughtered lamb, its opposite. Presented with this apparent contradiction, some interpreters choose one image over the other. For other interpreters, the lamb does not replace the lion but does “reinterpret” it.<sup>30</sup> In either case, the nonviolent lamb remains the dominant image.

Other interpreters describe a more complex interaction between the two images, yet without altering the overall understanding of the passage. Richard Bauckham argues, “By placing the image of the sacrificial victim alongside those of the military conqueror, John forges a new symbol of conquest by sacrificial death.”<sup>31</sup> Or, as Blount writes, “There is every narrative indication that John thinks the two titles belong together. In the end, neither subverts the other. The lion reveals a Lamb; the Lamb remains a lion.”<sup>32</sup> These interpreters recognize the complexity of John’s metaphors and suggest that both images are important to the meaning of the passage. Yet they end up with a nonviolent interpretation that is similar to that of their counterparts who simply give preference to the lamb. For Bauckham, Jesus

<sup>29</sup> G. B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (BNTC; London: A. & C. Black, 1966) 75; cf. Barr, “Towards an Ethical Reading of The Apocalypse,” 361; Boring, *Revelation*, 110.

<sup>30</sup> E.g., Barr, *Tales*, 6; James L. Resseguie, *Revelation Unsealed: A Narrative Critical Approach to John’s Apocalypse* (BIS 32; Leiden: Brill, 1998) 34; cf. Johns, *Lamb Christology*, 168.

<sup>31</sup> Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 215.

<sup>32</sup> Blount, *Revelation*, 116. Other interpreters who maintain aspects of both images include Aune, *Revelation*, 1:352; Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) 78; Robert H. Mounce, “Worthy Is the Lamb,” in *Scripture, Tradition, and Interpretation: Essays Presented to Everett F. Harrison by His Students and Colleagues in Honor of His Seventy-fifth Birthday* (ed. W. Ward Gasque and William Sanford LaSor; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 60-69, here 68; Steve Moyise, “Does the Lion Lie Down with the Lamb?” in *Studies in the Book of Revelation* (ed. Moyise), 181-94, here 189; idem, *The Old Testament in the Book of Revelation* (JSNTSup 115; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995) 132; Mitchell G. Reddish, *Revelation* (Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary; Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2001) 109-10; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Proclamation Commentaries; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 60; J. P. M. Sweet, *Revelation* (Westminster Pelican Commentaries; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979) 125; Ben Witherington III, *Revelation* (New Cambridge Bible Commentary; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 120.

“has won a victory, but by sacrifice, not military conflict.”<sup>33</sup> For Blount, the result is also nonviolent, although the victory comes through the faithful witness of the lamb.<sup>34</sup>

Conceptual metaphor theory can help explain how each metaphor can contribute to the meaning of the passage at the same time that the nonviolent lamb seems predominant. From this perspective, each metaphor contributes something to the understanding of a complex concept.<sup>35</sup> Take, for example, the complex concept of time. I have already discussed the conventional metaphor TIME IS MONEY. Another conventional metaphor is TIME MOVES (e.g., “Time flies”; “The days are surely coming, says the LORD”). This metaphor imagines time as a moving object. The metaphor of time moving expresses something about the human experience of time that the money metaphor does not capture. Time is an abstract and complex idea, and both TIME IS MONEY and TIME MOVES express something about the concept of time.<sup>36</sup> As Lakoff and Mark Turner argue, “When we try to conceptualize the wealth of our experiences of these domains, no single, consistent structuring of that experience is possible; instead we need to import structure from a wide variety of source domains if we are to characterize anything approaching the full richness of the target domains.”<sup>37</sup> Because of the complexity of a topic such as time, no single metaphorical expression will suffice.

Like time, Christ is a complex concept. Early Christians struggled to express who Jesus Christ was. One place John does this is in Revelation 5. Here Christ is one “worthy to open the scroll” (see vv. 2-5), suggesting that he has an important purpose or function, and one that is unique, for no others are found worthy. At the same time, John identifies this one as the lion of Judah, the root of David, and the lamb standing as slaughtered (vv. 5-6). Each metaphor is distinctive, and with regard to the question of violence, the images are somewhat contradictory: the lamb is not an image of a fearsome warrior; the lion cannot conquer if it has been slaughtered. It is only in applying both images to Christ that the reader comes to understand that Christ is both slaughtered lamb and conquering lion. The combination of these metaphors communicates something distinctive about Christ.

Although the images of the lion and the lamb convey aspects of Christ that are in tension with each other, the combination of metaphors can make sense because metaphorical mapping is partial, not total. Each metaphor “highlights and

<sup>33</sup> Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 215.

<sup>34</sup> Blount, *Revelation*, 109, 116-18; cf. Barr, “Doing Violence,” 107.

<sup>35</sup> Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors*, 52-55; Lakoff and Turner, *More than Cool Reason*, 2, 52. Elsewhere I discuss interpreting multiple metaphors with regard to John 6; see Susan Hysten, *Allusion and Meaning in John 6* (BZNW 137; Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2005).

<sup>36</sup> For a discussion of these and other conventional metaphors about time, see Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors*, 7-9, 41-45; Lakoff and Turner, *More than Cool Reason*, 34-49.

<sup>37</sup> Lakoff and Turner, *More than Cool Reason*, 52.

hides” different aspects of a complex concept like Christ.<sup>38</sup> The image of the slaughtered lamb highlights the death of Christ, and perhaps his weakness or vulnerability. If readers view only this image, they would not grasp this Christ as triumphant warrior king. These aspects are hidden. In fact, the metaphor hides many other things that might be said of Christ, for example, his relationship to the Holy Spirit, or his role as a teacher or healer. The lion and lamb metaphors highlight and hide other attributes of Christ.

Readers find a coherent message among these metaphors by interpreting them within the constraints of a literary and cultural context. Although the text itself does not dictate its interpretation, the common assumption that Revelation should be understood as a product of the first century shapes the possibilities for interpretation.<sup>39</sup> Many of the metaphors John uses were already conventional in his culture. The lion is frequently an image of OT rulers, suggesting strength and military victory.<sup>40</sup> The lamb is a metaphor for Jesus (John 1:29, 36; Acts 8:32; 1 Pet 1:9; cf. 1 Cor 5:7), although it has a number of possible source domains.<sup>41</sup> Perhaps most important, “conquering” (νικάω) is also a conventional metaphor. For example, 4 Maccabees speaks of reason “conquering” emotions (e.g., 4 Macc 6:33; 13:7), often in quite militaristic terms (e.g., 7:3), although the heroes of the story never wield literal weapons.<sup>42</sup> The notion of metaphorical “conquering” is reflected also in other early Christian understandings of the death of Jesus. For example, in 1 Cor 1:23-24, Paul speaks of Christ both as crucified and as “the power of God” (θεοῦ δύναμις).<sup>43</sup> This familiar pattern of reversal forms a cultural backdrop against which interpreters make sense of the lion and lamb metaphors.

<sup>38</sup> Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors*, 10-13; Lakoff and Turner, *More than Cool Reason*, 39.

<sup>39</sup> The notion that metaphors do not have a literal referent suggests that meaning is constructed in a cultural and rhetorical context. In another context, the language of Revelation 5 could take on a different meaning. Imagine a champion boxer nicknamed “The Lion,” who suffers a humiliating and unexpected defeat. If a sports commentator later quips “the conquering lion is a slaughtered lamb,” the juxtaposition of imagery would have a different meaning. On the cultural construction of metaphorical meaning, see Johnson, *Body in the Mind*.

<sup>40</sup> E.g., Gen 49:9; Num 24:9; Deut 33:20, 23; 2 Sam 1:23; 1 Kgs 10:19-20. Once a lion characterizes Israel as a whole (Num 23:24). For the lion as a metaphor for the Messiah, see 2 Esdr 11:36-46; 12:31-34. For a discussion, see Aune, *Revelation*, 1:350; J. Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (AB 38; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975) 85.

<sup>41</sup> See Aune, *Revelation*, 1:372-73; Johns, *Lamb Christology*, chaps. 3-5; Russell S. Morton, *One upon the Throne and the Lamb: A Tradition Historical/Theological Analysis of Revelation 4-5* (Studies in Biblical Literature 110; New York: Peter Lang, 2007) 150-60.

<sup>42</sup> There are many examples in ancient literature of conquering (νικάω) being used metaphorically. In the NT, see Matt 12:20; John 16:33; Rom 8:37; 12:21b; 1 Cor 15:54; 1 John 2:13; 4:4; 5:4. Outside of the NT, see, e.g., 1 Clem. 18.4; 2 Clem. 16.2; Diogn. 5.10; 7.7; Epictetus *Diatr.* 1.18.21-22; Herm. *Mand.* 12.2.5; 12.5.2; Ign. *Pol.* 3.1; Josephus *A.J.* 1.19.7 §302; Philo *Jos.* 200; Plato *Symp.* 213E.

<sup>43</sup> Although the notion of “conquering” is not always present, the pattern of reversal in the

The literary context also prepares the reader to understand these metaphors in particular ways. In the edicts to the seven churches, conquering language appears frequently, and often in parallel with other phrases that may shed light on its metaphorical content. Conquering is akin to patient endurance (2:3, 19; cf. 3:10), repentance (2:5, 16; 3:3, 19), being faithful unto death (2:10), holding fast to what you have (2:25; 3:11), and remembering what you have heard (3:3). Thus “conquering” appears to be a metaphor for a being a faithful witness, or aligning one’s own will with God’s. Christ is also understood as one who has “conquered” (3:21). In this way, John prepares the reader to understand “conquering” as something other than a literal reference to military victory.

Informed by this literary and cultural context, interpretations display a general agreement regarding what each metaphor contributes to the overall meaning of the passage. Within this agreement, there is room for some variety. For some interpreters, the lion redefines the lamb’s death as “conquering.”<sup>44</sup> For others, the lamb defines the way in which the lion’s conquering takes place. As Blount puts it, “The slaughtered Lamb is how the lion manifests itself in the world.”<sup>45</sup> Yet, even considering the difficulty in identifying a single source domain for each metaphor, the variety in these interpretations is limited. No one argues that the lion defines how the lamb manifests itself in the world. To do so would be to suggest, for example, that the imagery of Revelation 5 presents Christ as a “wolf in sheep’s clothing.” Christ appears to John as a passive lamb, yet his inner nature has already been revealed as that of a ravenous lion. The lamb image is a disguise by which the lion lures his unsuspecting prey into his lair. Given the later violent acts of the Christ figure in Revelation 19, such an understanding is not entirely implausible.<sup>46</sup> To read Revelation 5 in this way, however, would be to take the “conquering” literally. Based on the literary and cultural cues, most commentators read “conquering” as a metaphor.<sup>47</sup>

death of Christ is familiar elsewhere in the NT, e.g., Mark 10:43-45; Acts 3:13; Gal 3:13-14; 1 Pet 2:7. Cf. the description in John of Jesus’ death as “exaltation” (3:14; 8:28; 12:32, 34). The notion of Jesus’ death as a reversal forms a natural backdrop against which many readers understand the language of Revelation 5.

<sup>44</sup> E.g., Resseguie, *Revelation Unsealed*, 34.

<sup>45</sup> Blount, *Revelation*, 117.

<sup>46</sup> Moyise (“Does the Lion Lie Down?” 190-91) argues for a similar interpretation of Revelation. Although it is certainly possible, the alternatives he identifies are better, not because they are “Christian” (p. 191) but because they read the literary and cultural cues that suggest that “conquering” is metaphorical.

<sup>47</sup> The notion of conceptual blending is another way to understand how the overall message draws from each image, rather than one canceling the other out. The conceptual blending of the imagery creates a “central inference”—in this case, that “Jesus conquered through suffering and weakness rather than by might” (Barr, “Apocalypse as a Symbolic Transformation,” 41). But this central inference is not available from the lamb image alone. From the lamb image we understand only that the slaughtered lamb is nonetheless standing, but not that this represents “conquering.”

Yet to say that the lamb's conquering is metaphorical is not to say that it is nonviolent. Understood as multiple metaphors, the images of lion, root, and lamb do not cancel each other out. Each contributes to the overall meaning. Because all these metaphors are necessary to portray Christ in this complex way, the reader cannot simply negate the violent part and still say that the lamb has "conquered." The "conquering" of the lamb—even of a nonviolent lamb—rests to some extent on the logic of lionlike conquering. The lamb does not magically transform the lion into something nonviolent.

From the standpoint of an interpreter concerned about the ethics of this violence, the tension created by the images may be important. Taken on its own terms, the logic of one metaphor interferes with the logic of the other. The lamb's death is described as "conquering." And the lion's "conquering" is that of the lamb, standing as slaughtered. The lamb does not mute the violent imagery. The juxtaposition of multiple images, however, may bring the logic of violence into question or even reverse normal expectations of what conquering looks like.

### III. Metaphors in Conflict

Read as conceptual metaphors, the violent imagery of Revelation will not go away. It shapes the reader's imagination of the end-time. Yet by offering many metaphors, John gives the reader multiple ways of contemplating the end-time. Exploring the tensions among the metaphors is a resource for thinking ethically about the language of Revelation. Here I provide an example of these tensions in the climactic final scenes of chaps. 19–22.

Many interpreters understand these chapters as a seamless whole. One popular way of reading them is to interpret the images as a chronological prediction of the future. In this reading, the violent imagery is left unchecked, leaving many interpreters with the ethical problem with which I began this essay. This reading also creates problems in the logical sequence of events. For example, the enemies of God are destroyed in the first battle, and the birds of the air devour their flesh (19:21). Then they are destroyed again in 20:9, consumed by a fire from heaven. Finally, they are brought up from the dead to be destroyed again in the lake of fire (20:15). Readers may supply an explanation to overcome these tensions. For example, some argue that not all the enemies are destroyed in the first battle; others suggest that the birds devour Christ's earthly enemies while the cosmic enemies are consumed with fire. These details are not explained in the text but are ways readers fill in the gaps.

The understanding that the lamb has "conquered" comes from the blended image of the lion and the lamb. For a discussion of conceptual blends, see Turner, *Literary Mind*, chap. 5. More recently, Fauconnier and Turner (*Way We Think*, chap. 2) discuss metaphor as a subcategory of a larger thought process of conceptual blending.

If the images are read as multiple metaphors, the reader leaves the gaps in place. Boring offers an alternative way of understanding these chapters, as “a tour through an eschatological art gallery.”<sup>48</sup> Each metaphor is a different picture in the gallery, and each contributes something to the overall vision John presents of “what must happen soon” (1:1; 22:6; cf. 1:19). I find Boring’s own metaphor useful because it helps the interpreter conceptualize what it means to read these chapters as multiple metaphors. The images need not be taken in chronological sequence as a literal prediction of the future; they exist alongside one another in a thematic portrayal of the end-time. The interpreter’s task is not to unify the images but to explore what each one communicates about the subject matter.

Read in this way, the introductory words of each scene, “and I saw” (19:11, 17, 19; 20:1, 4, 11; 21:1), narrate the sequence of John’s vision rather than predicting the sequence of future events. In John’s “gallery,” there are two different battle images that depict the defeat of the enemy or the destruction of evil (19:11-21; 20:7-15). But other images are there as well: the binding of Satan for one thousand years (20:1-3), a limitation, not a destruction of evil; the resurrection of the faithful, who reign with Christ (20:4-6); the marriage of the bride and the Lamb, which is at the same time the descent of the New Jerusalem from heaven (21:1-27); the river of the water of life with the tree of life on either side (22:1-3). When the images are read as multiple metaphors, each is a distinctive way of thinking about “what must happen soon.”<sup>49</sup> There are, of course, multiple ways to interpret these images and to read them in relation to one another. Yet seeing them as multiple metaphors contributing to one complex concept offers an alternative way of reading this climactic section of Revelation.

If John’s language is viewed as multiple metaphors, the tensions of the imagery do not go away; however, they may become ethically productive. By way of illustration, I offer an interpretation of two images and the tensions they produce: the first battle image (19:11-21) and the image of the holy city (21:1-27). My intent is not to render a complete interpretation of these passages but to demonstrate some of the potential in interpreting them metaphorically.

The kings of the earth are destroyed in the first battle scene. They are introduced along with the beast (19:19) and are thereby aligned with the forces of evil against Christ. The beast is thrown into the lake of fire, and “the rest were killed

<sup>48</sup> Boring, *Revelation*, 195; cf. 198. I agree with Boring’s characterization of these scenes in this way, although he goes on to say that the theme of the gallery is “God’s victory at the end of history,” which seems to prioritize the “conquering” images over the others. (It may also be an unconscious use of “victory” as a conventional metaphor.)

<sup>49</sup> In this sense my reading is aligned with Boring’s; he sees these images as “more synchronic than diachronic” (M. Eugene Boring, “Revelation 19–21: End without Closure,” *PSB Supplementary Issue 3* [1994] 57-84, here 66). Cf. David L. Ban, “Waiting for the End That Never Comes: The Narrative Logic of John’s Story,” in *Studies in the Book of Revelation* (ed. Moyise), 101-12.

by the sword of the rider of the white horse, the one coming out of his mouth, and all the birds of the air devoured their flesh" (19:21). In the logic of the battle scene, the "kings of the earth" evoke the breadth of resistance against Christ, and such resistance is utterly destroyed. The feasting of the birds evokes the apocalyptic feast of the birds and wild animals of Ezek 39:4, 17-20, suggesting the finality of God's restoration of justice.<sup>50</sup>

Although the language of Revelation 19 implies the utter annihilation of the kings of the earth, the imagery of the holy city contradicts this notion. The "kings of the earth" reappear in the New Jerusalem, "bringing their glory into her" (21:24). Along with the city metaphor, this makes perfect sense. The metaphor draws on the image from Isaiah in which God's faithfulness to Israel is depicted as the establishment of the holy city, including the tribute brought by foreign nations (Isa 60:10-11). The logic of the city metaphor requires that the kings of the earth are not simply alive at this point but possess their own glory. In addition, they do not appear to be enemies of God but willingly add their glory to the holy city.

In each metaphor—the battle and the city—the kings of the earth do nothing strange or surprising. Yet the juxtaposition of these images disrupts the logic of each metaphor. Because the kings of the earth have largely been portrayed negatively in Revelation (for example, as those who fornicate with the whore [17:2; 18:9]), their "glory" may appear questionable. At the same time, their appearance in the New Jerusalem disrupts the logic of the battle metaphor, which recorded the ultimate destruction of these kings. Thus, although violent imagery does contribute to the overall picture of the day of the Lord, the tensions in the images suggest that God's ultimate destruction of evil can be only a partial way of understanding this complex idea.

There is an element of coherence in the battle and city metaphors, because the city God establishes is fortresslike. Its walls are unbelievably large in every dimension (21:12, 16-17). This is the city of a conqueror. Yet there is still disruption of the battle logic here, for the gates of the city are always open (21:25).<sup>51</sup> It seems possible that God can afford to leave the gates open, having just annihilated every enemy. John subsequently indicates, however, that outside of the gates "are the dogs and sorcerers and fornicators and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood" (22:15). Many readers fill this gap by locating the lake of fire outside the city.<sup>52</sup> In doing so, they connect 22:15 with the list of evildoers in 21:8, whose "place is in the lake burning with fire and sulfur." This suggests a more cohesive picture in which everything that is evil has been destroyed.

<sup>50</sup> Other language of Ezekiel 39 also lends a sense of finality, esp. vv. 22, 29.

<sup>51</sup> Boring, "Revelation 19–21," 77.

<sup>52</sup> E.g., G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 1142; Stephen D. Moore, "The Beatific Vision as a Posing Exhibition: Revelation's Hypermasculine Deity," *JSNT* 60 (1995) 27-55, here 43; Sweet, *Revelation*, 317.

Yet it is also possible to leave the gap. The image that 22:14-15 creates is one of entry into the city: those who “wash their robes” may enter, while others are simply described as “outside” (ἔξω). The lake of fire is not in view. Evildoers are not inside the city, but they apparently still exist.

Read as a series of metaphors, John’s vision of the end-time retains its violent imagery. Yet the tensions between the images may serve as a reminder that the language is metaphorical, and thus partial. The “day of the Lord” is a complex concept that can be understood only metaphorically. It is, on the one hand, the rectification of evil, as God overturns powers that have been violently opposed to God. But, if the language is metaphorical, it is also not that.<sup>53</sup> Other images may help the reader to remember that the “day of the Lord” involves recreation (21:1). It is the restoration of Jerusalem in all its splendor (21:11-21). It provides for “the healing of the nations” (22:2). Rather than privileging one metaphor over others, the reader may understand each metaphor as a contribution to an abstract and complex concept.

#### IV. The Ethics of Multiple Metaphors

Understanding John’s language as multiple metaphors may contribute to an ethical reading of the text by heightening awareness that multiple interpretations are possible. When interpreters suggest an overarching meaning for John’s metaphors, they make choices about how the images relate to one another and which should take priority. The interpretation of any text involves such choices. Yet the interplay of metaphors in Revelation may create an opportunity for readers to become aware of themselves making choices that are often hidden from view. As Daniel Patte notes, the ability to conceive of “a plurality of legitimate (critical) readings”<sup>54</sup> may be a key to an ethical reading of the text from a contemporary academic perspective. The recognition that there is not a single, universal interpretation makes room for meaningful engagement with interpreters from different contexts and perspectives. Such awareness may contribute to an ethical reading of the text by encouraging what Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has called an “ethics of accountability.”<sup>55</sup> Interpreters who are aware that more than one interpretation is possible may be more likely to give an account of why their interpretation is ethical. Doing so requires the interpreter to reflect on her own political and social

<sup>53</sup> On the “is” and “is not” of metaphor, see Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language* (trans. Robert Czerny with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977) 249, 255.

<sup>54</sup> Daniel Patte, *Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Reevaluation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995) 7, 27-29.

<sup>55</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation,” *JBL* 107 (1988) 3-17, here 15.



context and to relate the interpretation to the context in a meaningful way. Giving such an account also brings greater awareness that in other contexts different interpretations may be ethical.

The difficulty of resolving multiple metaphors into one meaning reinforces the notion that the text has many meanings, and that different interpretations may speak ethically to different situations. Emphasizing the nonviolent nature of John's vision may provide a helpful corrective in a situation where some are using religion to sanction violence. Yet to suggest that John's vision is only nonviolent may go too far and may be unproductive ethically. The violent metaphors of Revelation have been part of what has allowed the text to continue to speak in meaningful ways in situations of oppression.<sup>56</sup> The potential for John's metaphors to speak ethically in different ways may remind interpreters to contextualize and account for their own claims.

Interpreting Revelation as multiple metaphors may be useful in contexts in which ethical action demands recognition of the moral complexity of the situation. Allan Aubrey Boesak's approval of the death of "the tyrants who with immeasurable arrogance dare to challenge the *Kyrios*"<sup>57</sup> makes sense in the context of apartheid South Africa in the 1980s. Yet in many situations in our modern world, the identification of who is with or against God is more difficult. The decision to cast one side of a conflict as deserving of God's judgment can even be a contributing factor in a decision to undertake violence. For example, in the wake of 9/11, the U.S. pursuit of a war against the "axis of evil" cast the complex world situation in binary terms and led to a war in Iraq that cost many lives and that later appeared unjustifiable. In a situation such as this, reading Revelation simply as God's violent triumph over evil could reinforce the problems leading to unethical action.

In complex moral situations, reading the language of Revelation as multiple metaphors may provide resources for cultivating moral decision making. First, John's language provides a window into a rich theological tradition that can be brought to bear on a variety of situations. Understanding Revelation's language as multiple metaphors involves ascribing a different rhetorical function to the language: John is not advocating or describing ultimate violence but is giving the reader ways of understanding a complex concept, the eschaton. In this light, multiple metaphors may give readers a way of exploring ethical tensions in their understanding and experience of the divine. Interpreters have noted that John seems well aware of the inability of human language fully to express who God is. For example,

<sup>56</sup> See esp. Brian K. Blount, "The Witness of Active Resistance: The Ethics of Revelation in African American Perspective," in *From Every People and Nation* (ed. Rhoads), 28-46; Allan Aubrey Boesak, *Comfort and Protest: Reflections on the Apocalypse of John of Patmos* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987); Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, chap. 7.

<sup>57</sup> Boesak, *Comfort and Protest*, 124.

the repeated use of the words “as” and “like” (ὡς and ὅμοιος, e.g., 1:12-16) indicates the difficulty John has describing his vision in a straightforward way.<sup>58</sup> He is also reluctant to name God directly, but instead speaks of “the one seated on the throne” (e.g., 4:9, 10; 5:1, 7). Actions are not attributed directly to God but are expressed with the passive voice (e.g., 6:2, 4, 8)<sup>59</sup> or by additional circumlocutions: “I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying . . .” (6:6). Likewise, speaking metaphorically allows John to give voice to attributes of God without seeming to define God rigidly.

The use of multiple metaphors may serve a similar purpose, allowing John to give voice to somewhat contradictory aspects of God’s nature. The metaphor of Christ’s battle against his enemies speaks to God’s judgment against oppression and injustice. The metaphor of the city of God with its gates open suggests that salvation is not foreclosed and thus points to the love and forgiveness of God. Much of Christian tradition holds that both of the notions are true: God will judge the unjust; God is merciful. Instead of viewing the language of Revelation as resolving the tension between the two statements in favor of one or the other, I suggest that the tension should remain as part of the meaning created by the use of multiple metaphors.

This understanding of the rhetorical function of the language may change the way the reader understands Revelation in relation to ethics. Viewed in this way, the metaphors of Revelation 19 and 21 do not give information about the end-time but communicate something of the nature of God, a nature that pervades past and present as well as the future. Although modern readers may try to solve the apparent tension between God’s righteous judgment and God’s mercy, John’s language does not clearly do so. The question, How will God triumph over evil without limiting God’s forgiving nature? is not one John appears to ask. Instead, he envisions an end in which both precepts remain true without dissolving the tension between them. The vision gives a theologically rich starting point from which readers may come to understand themselves in relation to God and the world. If the metaphorical worldview John creates invites the reader to enter into John’s worldview and reason according to its terms (as I argued above), then it seems ethically important that there are multiple systems of logic represented, none of which dominates the book as a whole. The ethical application of Revelation, then, cannot simply involve the application of norms but requires substantial discernment.

Thus, reading Revelation’s language as multiple metaphors may be ethically productive because it asks the reader to be aware of the complex interplay of values and norms, not simply to choose between two options, violence and nonviolence. The interpreter’s job is to understand the larger values or norms that are in play—

<sup>58</sup> The language also reflects the wording of Ezekiel’s throne vision (Ezekiel 1 LXX).

<sup>59</sup> Aune, *Revelation*, 2:394-95.

and often in tension. Inculcating the ability to recognize the tension may be a primary point of such an interpretation. In the context I mentioned above of the U.S. response to terrorism, the reappearance of the kings of the earth in the New Jerusalem calls into question whether this group can be understood only as the epitome of evil. Reading tension between the metaphors of the final battle and the holy city suggests that neither the evil nature of the kings nor God's violent response is absolute. In the U.S. context, such an interpretation might be employed to argue against the use of binary terms to define the world situation. The reading assumes that ethical action will not involve the application of predetermined rules or values but will require discernment and the ability to recognize the complexity of a situation in relation to the values involved.

A second ethical resource from this perspective is that John's language may function as a mirror of the interpreter's embeddedness in violent systems. For those of us who interpret from positions of relative power and wealth, understanding one's own position in relation to violence is essential for an ethical approach to Scripture. The U.S. government perpetrates violence every day on behalf of its citizens. From my perspective as one of these citizens, to speak to others about the ethics of violent action or to criticize another's violent interpretation of Revelation requires a strong self-awareness of the systems of violence in which I participate and from which I benefit. Even if I advocate nonviolence and work to end violence, I do not do so from a morally pure position. Recognizing my own complicity in violence seems an important step toward moral accountability.

Becoming aware of the conventional metaphors John uses may help readers to be more self-conscious about the way their own language participates in conventions of violence. As I argued above, John employs the conventional metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR to create new meaning regarding the day of the Lord. Interpreting the violent metaphors requires readers to imagine the day of the Lord as a triumph of God over enemies. The familiarity of the metaphor can mask its violent content. Many of the commentators who insist that John's message is really one of nonviolence go on to sum up their understanding of Revelation with phrases that reproduce conventional metaphors of the battlefield: "God's word overcomes evil",<sup>60</sup> "evil is conquered by the death of the Lamb",<sup>61</sup> "Christ has conquered the powers of evil through his faithful witness."<sup>62</sup> Our search for a moral vision in Revelation may be one that eschews violence, but we often miss the ways our imaginations are fundamentally already shaped by the logic of the battlefield. We think in terms of victories and conquering.

<sup>60</sup> McDonald, "Lion as Slain Lamb," 46.

<sup>61</sup> Barr, "Apocalypse as a Symbolic Transformation," 50.

<sup>62</sup> Johns, *Lamb Christology*, 175.

In John's vision we never escape these violent metaphors. John is as embedded in them as we are. Yet exploring the conventional nature of John's metaphors may serve as a reminder that modern interpreters do not have the moral high ground, looking down upon John, who witlessly reinscribes the violence of Rome. All of us speak from within the limits of human language and culture. John's vision does not remove him from such constraints, and neither does our own ethical vision. Revelation does not provide the reader with a purely nonviolent message. Yet it may still offer opportunities for reflection and honest self-critique that are a key to the interpreter's ethical appropriation of the text. Recognition of the ways that violent imagery is embedded in the ways we speak and think may be a step toward an honest appraisal of our own motives and context.



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