



History unveiled: Theological perspectives from St John's Revelation

**Author:**Daniel Mihoc^{1,2} **Affiliations:**

¹Department of Orthodox Theology, Faculty of Theology, Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Sibiu, Romania

²Department of Systematic and Historical Theology, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

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Corresponding author:

Daniel Mihoc,
daniel.mihoc@icloud.com

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This article aims to highlight St John's peculiar perspectives on the meaning and the consequences of Christ's sacrificial death for our apparently evil-dominated history and to bring a new light on the mystery of evil the Book of Revelation speaks about. My analysis begins with St John's Christocentric perspective on history, continues with the significance of its driving forces revealed in the vision of the seals and ends with an evaluation of the evil triad, which tries to stop the unfolding of the salvific work of God. Alongside Christ, Christians play an essential role in the conflict with these powers and, thus, in transforming the world according to God's plan. The outcome of this conflict does not depend on which side has more power, as one may conclude under the effect of the violent imagery of the book, but on the Lamb's blood's lasting effects, which enable each Christian to become a conqueror, sharing in his Lord's victory.

Contribution: This article highlights some of the contributions of the Book of Revelation to a Christian theology of history and argues that the main point is the overwhelming value of Christ's blood and its reception for the much expected victory over evil. To transform the world, the victory won by Christ has to be actualised by each of his followers.

Keywords: Revelation; theology of history; Christocentric; blood of the Lamb; Church; Kingdom of God.

A Christocentric history

We call the last book of the biblical canon *St John's Revelation*, and this title is indeed congruent with its literary genre and content: a pastoral letter (Boring 1989:5), written in an apocalyptic and prophetic language, based on a series of revelations received by a remarkable prophet named John. However, the author introduces his writing as 'a revelation of Jesus Christ' (ἀποκάλυψις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ).¹ What follows compels us to understand this introductory statement both as a revelation *from* Jesus Christ and as a revelation *about* Jesus Christ (Aune 1997:6). He is the main character of the narrative, but he is also the main interpreter of it (Prigent 2001:105). But the contribution of St John is considerable. Conveying Jesus' revelation (Rv 1:11) is not a simple task, but he performs it outstandingly. Indeed, not only does he manage to convey it but he does it so that in his writing everything is challenging while nothing is without meaning. In a famous passage from Letter LIII to Paulinus, written in 394, Jerome stresses this richness saying that 'the Apocalypse of John has as many mysteries as words' and that 'manifold meanings lie hid in its every word' (ed. Schaff 1995:102). These words may be hyperbolic, but they explain why the Apocalypse never ceases to exert an irresistible attraction for people interested in understanding God's comforting message for people confronted with the vicissitudes of history. Everyone can see that St John 'is profoundly concerned with human history' (Gilbertson 2003:45), but few understand how much his view of history is related to Jesus Christ. For the seer, history is Christocentric; it cannot be separated from Christ, nor understood without him. If his 'presentation of Christ may be claimed to be of the highest order' (Guthrie 1994:397), this is not only because of his ability to portray Jesus' theanthropic person and work in a very impressive way but also for his unique perspective on what the victory won on the Cross means for the whole subsequent history.

1. Throughout Church's history, many failed to see in these words more than an empty claim, intended to give weight to a strange apocalyptic writing. Most of the Fathers completely ignore it while some are against it. In Western Christianity, the most prominent biblical scholar who shared this view was Martin Luther. In his introduction to the Book of Revelation, he writes: 'I miss more than one thing in this book, and it makes me consider it to be neither apostolic nor prophetic' (ed. Bachman 1960:399).

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A meaningful history

The main theme of the Apocalypse is the transformation of 'the kingdom of the world' into the Kingdom of God and of his Christ (Rv 11:15). In powerful images, the seer points out stages, events, processes and characters involved in this operation. For him, history is not a merely human affair, but first of all the materialisation of God's salvific plan for his creation.

St John's addressees are going through a crisis and need answers. The answer comes from God through his Prophet John, who is commissioned to write down what is going to be revealed to him and to send the writing to the 'seven Churches in Asia' (Rv 1:11). Here seven could mean all (Boring 1989:75), but also may be seen as a way to emphasise 'the divine origin and authority of the message' (Aune 1997:29). They all were subjects of Rome, which had so many times missed its calling (cf. Rm 13:1-4). John was exiled (Rv 1:9), some Christians are going to be imprisoned (Rv 2:10), and Antipas, bishop of the Church in Pergamum (according to the Synaxary), was condemned and executed (Rv 2:13), but there is no precise indication about the authorities responsible for these sentences. What is sure is that, by the time of the writing, the hatred towards Christians already had quite a long history and that the prophet knows that it will continue and will make many more victims (Rv 7:14; 11:2-10; 12:17; 13:6-7; 17:6; 18:24; 19:2; 20:4).

Where is God in this history? Is there really a divine plan unfolding? St John's answer is manifold. First he asserts God's knowledge and care: he knows the needs of his servants and has decided to reveal to his servants what they need to know. History has already reached its climax in the Cross and Resurrection of his Son. Through the victory won by his paradigmatic martyric testimony (Rv 1:5), Jesus has become the Lord of history (Rv 5:1f.). From the morning of the Resurrection, history unfolds under his authority, but this does not mean the disappearance of evil. Although defeated, Satan enjoys some liberty and uses it against humankind. His actions are terrible, but the seer points out that the people are free to choose between God's calling and Satan's deceptions, even if this liberty is not so evident because they live in a world full of constraints. How can one be free if their very life is threatened? Is there any place for human fulfilment in the concrete conditions of our world? The answer of St John is masterful. Yes, there is, answers he, but everything depends on Jesus Christ and the relationship with him. In what follows, we will approach his answer from several perspectives.

The enthronement of the Lamb

In the prophetic message to the Church in Laodicea, the Exalted Christ points out the consequences of his victory: '[...] I overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne' (Rv 3:21). In John 20:17 Jesus forbids Mary Magdalene to touch him, for he had not yet ascended to his Father. Later, Jesus affirms that 'all authority in heaven and on the earth'

has been given to him (Mt 28:18). What happened between the two moments? Why this ascension before the Ascension? The great vision of the Heavenly Liturgy (ch. 4-5) enlightens us, revealing some of the mysteries of the morning of the Resurrection (Prigent 2001:248).

The seer sees in the right hand of the One sitting on the Throne a scroll sealed with seven seals (Rv 5:1). This scroll must be opened, but the operation can be performed only by someone worthy to do that. Understanding that no one in the whole creation is worthy to open and read the scroll, John weeps bitterly (Rv 5:4). He does not know yet the content of the 'book' but understands that what God offers concerns his plan for the creation, which cannot be carried out in the absence of someone able to take and open it (Beale 1999:348). A deep understanding of history is expressed here; the seer knows that the fulfilment of God's *oikonomia* implies a synergic action: the Creator needs the collaboration of his creation.

Then one of the elders heralds the victory of 'the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David' (Rv 5:5). Seeking to see the Lion, about whom he was told, the seer sees a Lamb with seven horns and seven eyes. The Lamb is perceived 'as though it had been slain' (Rv 5:6), a transparent reference to Christ's Passion and its lasting consequences. From now on the Lamb (τό Ἀρνίον) becomes 'John's definitive title for Christ' (Boring 1989:108).

The Christological image painted here (Rv 5:5-6) is so rich that S. Bulgakov (2019:43) sees in it the whole history of salvation. It connects two messianic titles, which suggest force and royalty (Gn 49:9; Is 11:10) with the sacrificial image of Isaiah 53. As R. Bauckham (1999:74) points out 'the key to John's vision of the slaughtered Lamb (Rv 5:5) is to recognise the contrast between what he hears and what he sees (Rv 5:5-6)'. The Lion is the Lamb. Fulfilling his salvific work, Jesus acted with the temerity of a lion in assuming the ministry of the Ebed Yahweh (Is 42-53). Thus, through this impressive antithesis, St John expresses a complex Christology (Allo 1933:62). Jesus Christ won and was exalted through his faithful testimony and sacrificial death. As in the Fourth Gospel, the Risen Christ bears on his glorified body the marks of his sacrifice. He is ὡς ἐσφαγμένον, an image difficult both to forget and represent, which reminds us that his all-powerful lordship is the consequence of his Cross.

As expected, the Lion-Lamb takes the scroll. The scene indicates a transfer of authority and elaborates what the 'seven horns' and the 'seven eyes' suggested. The heavenly court recognises his identity and, consequently, worships him as God (Bauckham 1999:60). To him are brought 'the prayers of the saints' (Rv 5:8), meaning that he can answer them. Like in the first doxology (Rv 1:5-6), he is praised for his redemptive work and the double dignity he has bestowed upon his faithful: through his blood, he has redeemed people from every nation and has made them kings and priests (Rv 5:10a). And, immediately, the same voices proclaim the

implication and the goal of this dignity: 'they will reign on the earth' (Rv 5:10b), anticipating the vision of the thousand-year reign (Bulgakov 2019:45).

The driving forces of the history

The Lamb does not delay to open the seven seals of the book (Rv 5:5). Opening them, he reveals its mysteries. First we have a series of four horsemen (Rv 6:1–8). The image of a horseman suggests force and movement. The last three represent different facets of evil (every kind of conflict, crisis, death and Satan). The first is very different from the others. His distinct features are a bow and a crown; he is victorious and is going to conquer (Rv 6:2). Many have identified him with a force of evil, not allowing themselves to break the apparent symmetry of the series, but all his characteristics, as well as the wide context, suggest something else. The bow is a symbol of the Covenant; the crown suggests victory or power. All these are consonant with St John's image of Christ, the unique victor *par excellence*, who in Revelation 19:11–16 is portrayed riding a white horse. This obviously intended parallelism and the movement of this horseman from victory to victory hints at his Church, who partakes of his triumph and actualises it in the world. Through the Church, God's salvific *oikonomia* has to reach the 'ends' of the earth, conquering and transforming it (Rv 11:15). The victory of Christ is the foundational historical event on which the Church is built as a victorious community, which cannot help but conquer. St John loves to speak about this process and emphasise the responsibility of each Christian in fulfilling it. Each Christian is called to conquer with Christ, following his commandments (Rv 12:17; cf. 14:4b), as the seven prophetic messages point out (Rv 2:7.11.17.26–27; 3:5.12.21). The victory of the Church includes the conquering of each member of it. That is why the wedding robe of the Bride is made up of the 'righteous acts of the saints' (19:8).

As for the following three horsemen, they stand for some destructive forces. J. Ellul (1975) has rightly noticed that:

[E]ach one represents three aspects, mixed but different. Each one stands at the same time for an 'immaterial' abstract power, which acts at the material level, causing plagues, catastrophes. (p. 155)

These powers seem all-powerful and their destructive action impossible to counter, let alone overcome. But the seer offers us enough data that indicate the opposite. First the context speaks about the absolute victory of Christ and his lordship over all Creation. Then St John is very careful to point out that they are allowed to do some things, but are prevented from doing some other things or extending their malefic actions over the entire earth. The question is who is restraining them to unleash their destructive power? The answer is suggested already in the first chapter: Christ, the one who has 'the keys of Hades and Death' (Rv 1:19), is the one who limits the power of Satan over humankind. Death is no more all-powerful; on the contrary, like Christ, 'the first born from the death' (Rv 1:5), everyone has the power to overcome it by following him faithfully.

The opening of the fifth seal (Rv 6:9–11) reveals the ones who have overcome death by their faithfulness to death. Many identify them with the martyrs, and they are right. The martyrs are the Christians *par excellence*. But the image of the martyr is much wider: each Christian is a potential martyr when he or she is ready to follow Christ to the last consequences, even if that implies the danger of death. Thus, they are already conquerors together with him. That is why the Seer can include them in the heavenly assembly, which stands before the throne and worship God unceasingly (Rv 7:9–10), or in the multitude, which reigns with Christ 'thousand years' (Rv 20:1–10). In our context, the martyrs are seen as a driving force of history, not only in their paradigmatic faithfulness to their Lord, which includes a transformation for the world around them, but also in their heavenly life after death. Their prayers are heard and answered. The author of 2 Peter teaches that, through their faithfulness, the Christians can hasten the coming of the Day of God (Rv 3:12), that is, the fulfilment of the divine plan and thus the end of the history. The answer to their prayer (Rv 6:10) is twofold. First of all they are given white robes (Rv 6:11a). The symbol will be explained in the second vision of the 7th chapter: they are white because they have been washed in the blood of the Lamb (Rv 7:14). But it can also be seen as a sign of their victorious lives and death (cf. Rv 3:4–5; 7:9; Michaelis 1967:248). Second of all they are told to rest a little, until the completion of the number of their fellow servants and brethren (Rv 6:11). In other words, history will last until the fulfilment of the number of martyrs. This is the essential that is happening in our history, 'the recruitment of the people of the saints' (Marrou 1995:107). Of course, martyrdom, regardless of its form, means suffering. St John is aware of this reality, but he understands that suffering belongs to the divine salvific plan. As D. Barr (2006:212) points out, 'God acts through the process of suffering'.

The sixth seal brings some revelations directly related to the question of the martyrs. We have here two parallel and antithetic images. The first reveals a great cataclysm that seems to bring the whole universe to disintegration (Rv 6:12–17), while the second brings to the forefront a twofold image of the Church (Rv 7:1–8; 9–17).

The earthly and cosmic catastrophes affect 'the dwellers on the earth', that is, the ones who follow Satan and his earthly instruments. They are represented under seven characteristic classes (Rv 6:15), which 'encompass all of human society' (Prigent 2001:277). All these find themselves helpless in the face of natural elements, which act as instruments of God's judgement before the Great Judgement; they turn themselves against the humans who, having the possibility to know the Creator through them, 'did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful' (Rm 1:20–21).

We have here the first mention of God's wrath. P. Prigent (2001:277) notices that mentioning God in this context, St John cannot help but speak of the Lamb, who – although glorified – carries the marks of the Cross (Rv 5:6). The Cross

is the supreme revelation of God's love for humankind, but it includes the highest warning on the gravity of sin. The Redeemer is the Judge. The One who dies out of love on the Cross is the same One who will judge the unrepentant world who refuses his forgiveness. The rejection of the redemption means nothing else but an acceptance of the Judgement (Allo 1933:106).

The Church

As it has been already pointed out here, the second part of the revelation opened by the breaking of the sixth seal contains a twofold image of the Church (Rv 7:1–17). There are two distinct visions that speak about the same reality but from different perspectives (Prigent 2001:288). The answer to the difficult question that closes the sixth chapter is given here: 'Able to stand' (Rv 6:17) are only the servants of God who are sealed with 'the seal of the living God' (Rv 7:2-4).

Together with Christ, the Church was the main subject of its first chapters. Already the address and the prologue have sketched the relationship between Jesus Christ and the Church. Christians are 'servants' of Christ (Rv 1:1). Their new status is the fruit of his love, which became manifest in his salvific sacrifice. 'By His blood', they are released and/or washed² of their sins and have become 'kingdom' and 'priests' (Rv 1:5–6). Then, the prophet heralds that 'He is coming with the clouds' (Rv 1:7), emphasising the fact that the time of the Church is the time of the 'coming' of the triumphant Son of Man, that is, of the fulfilment of Daniel 7:13–14.

The first vision presents Jesus as the Son of Man in the middle of his Church, represented by seven lampstands, and holding in his right hand seven stars, which stand for the 'angels' of the seven Churches (Rv 1:12–20). The meaning of the image is explained in the seven prophetic messages that follow (Rv 2–3). They show what it means to be in communion with Jesus Christ in his Church, how the Lord cares for his servants, how he leads them to the fulfilment of their calling, how they participate in his glory and which is the finality of their historical journey (Buda 2019:137).

The 'new song' brought to the Lamb in Heaven (Rv 5:8–10) is also the song of the Church, which celebrates the New Passover fulfilled by his blood. Each faithful is a partaker of this event because, through this holy blood, they have become citizens of the Kingdom and priests (cf. Rv 1:6).

The two visions of the seventh chapter offer two complementary perspectives on the Church: First in relation with the Old Covenant's people of God, in organic continuation with it and as co-inheritor of its blessings (Rv 7:1–8); Second in relation with her universal calling, as a multitude of people called out from all nations of humankind

²The manuscript tradition witnesses these two readings. Most commentators prefer the first one. I believe, together with J. Comblin (1965:221) that it seems impossible to choose between them. St Andrew of Caesarea uses both readings: 'The glory belonged to him, it says, who freed us through love from the bondage of death and (who) washed the stains of sin through the outpouring of his life-giving blood and water' (Constantinou 2008:20).

(Rv 7:9). In these two images, St John gathers ecclesiological themes already present or planned to be elaborated. He speaks about God's care for his servants, about their sealing (Rv 7:2f.; 14:1) – a transparent reference to the Sacraments of Baptism and Unction (Mihoc 2017:143) –, about their white robes and the way they managed to make them white in the blood of the Lamb (Rv 7:9.15; cf. 1:6), about their calling to serve God unceasingly and their privilege to stand, while still on earth, before his heavenly throne, in his heavenly temple (Rv 7:9f.; cf. 11:2), where they are serving him unceasingly (Rv 7:15).

Through all these powerful images the seer points out that within human history, a great and mysterious work is unfolding, that it involves both heaven and earth, and that, in the Church, time and eternity merge. Everyone is called to enter and participate in this mystery. But to enjoy it, people need to bring their contribution. Their faith and faithfulness are required; their effort is compulsory. The blood of the Lamb has no salvific value for them if they do not wash their robes in the blood to whiten them. This washing and its result, are very important in the theology of Revelation. It stands for what we call 'the subjective salvation', that is, the reception of the salvific work of Jesus and the transformation of the earthly human beings into heavenly beings (Prigent 2001:289).

Being aware of all those gifts, Christians fulfil their priestly service, worshipping their Saviour continually (Rv 7:15). Their worship is modelled according to the heavenly liturgy (cf. 5:8–10) and their supreme sacerdotal model is Jesus Christ, whom they follow faithfully (Rv 14:4b).

Christ is not only the model for individual Christians, but for the Church as well. What he did during his earthly life is continued throughout history by his Church. The prophetic vocation, the priestly ministry and the royal dignity of Jesus Christ are carried out and actualised by the Church in her life and mission. The allegorical narrative of the two witnesses-prophets (Rv 11:1f.) portrays the Church carrying out her mission by bringing faithfully prophetic testimony (Bauckham 1999:84), with royal authority, at the price of their own lives.

Jesus Christ is also the ultimate pursuit of the Church. The historical present is a time of preparation. With each victory of her children, the Church gets closer to her final destination, which is represented first by the image of the wedding of the Lamb (Rv 19:7–9) and then by that of the New Jerusalem (Rv 21:2f.). Being in communion with her Lord, the Church is already living in the reality of the New Jerusalem. At the same time, she is eagerly awaiting the time of her full identification with it. St John does not speak about the creation of the New Jerusalem, but about its descent into a renewed world. But this world is already present in our history from the moment of the Resurrection. Jesus Christ is the centre around which – in the Church and through the Church – the new world is built.

The enemies of Christ

As pointed out here, the Apocalypse includes revelations about the mystery of evil. Satan and his earthly instruments have a special place in St John's prophecy. The history of humankind is related to them as well. Satan is the enemy *par excellence* of Christ and his Church. He is 'the serpent of old' (Rv 12:9), who, from the very beginning, tries to foil God's plan for humankind. He even tries to destroy the Messiah (Rv 12:5), but his work turns against him (Rv 12:7–12). His main strategy is deception; that is why he can be called 'the deceiver of the whole world' (Rv 12:9). He tries to dash the Church and her work, but – protected by God – she resists him. In his war against the Church, he understands that vulnerable might be only her offspring, 'who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus' (Rv 12:17). Therefore, he starts a total war against the Christians. In his war, Satan uses two 'beasts'. Together they form a kind of demonic trinity (Böcher 1983:90), which parodies the Holy Trinity.

The ungodly world built by Satan and his followers has neither a strong foundation nor durable bonds. The catastrophe of Babylon (Rv 17:1f.) is an image of a satanic world that unconsciously destroys itself. The explanation given to the prophet throws light upon the situation: everything was always under God's control and the proof is exactly in the apparently inexplicable fall of this satanic reality: 'God has put it into their hearts to fulfil His purpose, to be of one mind, and to give their kingdom to the beast until the words of God are fulfilled' (Rv 17:17).

The fate of Babylon is shared by everyone associated with her ungodly life (Rv 18:9–23). All the reality built up by Satan is actually a war declared to the Lamb, the real Lord of the world. The combat is lost from the very start, as the initiator is already defeated (Rv 12:7–9). The result is the final victory of the Lamb, in which his followers participate (Rv 17:14). Apparently, the destruction of the forces of evil is the result of a violent battle in which the strongest army wins (Rv 19:11–21). But, interestingly, the seer does not report how the armed confrontation unfolds. Instead, he is interested in stressing some characteristics of the combatants and the results of the battle. The King Jesus rides on a white horse (cf. Rv 6:2) and is accompanied by heavenly armies with white horses. His robe is dipped in blood, while those of his followers are white (Rv 19:13–14). The contrast is meaningful: the King is both the sacrificed Lamb and the divine Judge prophesied in Isaiah 63:1–3 (Beale 1999:957), while his companions are those who have 'washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb' (Rv 7:9; cf. 3:5). These images suggest that this battle is not a single event. In John 16:11 Jesus affirms that Satan 'has been judged'. Therefore, all his subsequent history should be seen in the light of this statement. The enforcement of the sentence involves the victory won by the sacrificial death of Jesus (Rv 12:11) (12:11) and the conquering of his followers, who accompany him in this battle. Like their Lord, Christians are called to conquer even if this means suffering and death. They are able to win because the victory

has been won by the Lamb. Joining Christ and following him faithfully, they share in his power and victory (Barr 2006:219). They overcome Satan 'by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony' (Rv 12:11), but 'only their master is truly credited with the victory' (Prigent 2001:545).

Conclusion

St John's inspired insights pointed out here reveal some of the mysteries of history. Writing to a threatened community, he stresses that human history is not under satanic control, as it could be seen; *au contraire*, it is the expression of an unfolding divine plan transforming the shape of the fallen world. The keystone of this process is the victorious Lamb, in whom history has reached its climax. From the morning of Resurrection, history goes to its fulfilment under his authority. He is the Lord of the Church, through which his salvific work is continued throughout history. Satan and his earthly instruments seem to rule the world according to their plans. Ironically, exactly their actions bring them to ruin and thus contribute to the fulfilment of God's plan. Conquered by the Lamb and unable to destroy his Church, they are making war with the Christians. In this war, the followers of Lamb are called to conquer as their Lord has conquered. The fulfilment of this calling is essential for the realisation of God's plan. 'By the blood of the Lamb' and their faithfulness to him, they are bringing their contribution to the annihilation of evil and the transformation of the world according to God's plan.

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