


# Violence in the Bible and the Apocalypse of John: A critical reading of J.D. Crossan's *How to Read the Bible and Still Be a Christian*

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This critical reading/dialogue follows a straightforward structure. Firstly, it presents some of the major insights in J.D. Crossan's book, attending to its inner logic on his critique on the violence which little by little creeps into the biblical texts. Secondly, it engages in a critique of his reading of Revelation, which is Crossan's starting point for his discussion on violence. He observes here a direct contradiction with the Jesus of history, centre of interpretation for Scripture. This article points to certain lacunae in his reading of Revelation and, finally, moves to a conclusion offering new ways to interpret and question Revelation's violent imagery within its own literary context.

**Contribution:** This article is a critical dialogue with one of J.D. Crossan's latest books: *How to Read the Bible and Still Be a Christian: Struggling with Divine Violence From Genesis Through Revelation*. This is a vibrant and insightful book about how violence ultimately crept into the canonical texts, tainting even its 'good news'. Crossan's concern with this crude violence surfaces as he teaches different groups and he is asked why the Bible ends in Revelation on such a violent note, essentially with 'a war to end all wars', somehow buttressing the 'myth of redemptive violence'. The special focus of this article resides thus on a nuanced reading of Revelation which tries to understand, in context, the function of such violent images.

**Keywords:** Crossan; Apocalypse of John; Revelation; imagery; violence.

## Main thrusts in *How to Read the Bible and Still Be a Christian*

The title of the latest book of Crossan: *How to Read the Bible and Still Be a Christian: Struggling with Divine Violence from Genesis Through Revelation* expresses his maintained existential concern when approaching the Bible with an open and critical mind. There has been an ongoing effort for projecting violence outside the Bible, as if an unfortunate side-effect of wrong interpretations, rather than confronting the texts and their violent content. However, while most studies focused on the violence of the Old Testament, recent ones are looking more intently into the New Testament as well (Carter 2017; eds. Matthews & Gibson 2005). Crossan is aware of the Bible's own proclivity to violence, so his aim is to explain how this virtuous anthology which starts with the luminous chapters on creation (Gn 1–2), follows with the radical non-violent praxis of Jesus based on Jesus' concept of a non-violent God, could end then portraying such a gruesome view in Revelation, with a war to end of wars. 'Does the end of a book determine the meaning of the story?' (Crossan 2015:21). These different emphases lead him to conclude that we are dealing with a 'vision of a bipolar God' which needs further exploration (Crossan 2015:16–18). Crossan's nuance is to engage with the 'inner matrix' (his preferred word for 'context') of the biblical texts. Jan Assmann, a well-renowned Egyptologist, spoke in this very sense of a 'cultural semantic' of violence by which Israel's monotheistic faith is both presented and remembered. It is not that monotheistic faith is violent per se as that Israel's historical memory and social construction are embedded in violent narratives (Assmann 1996, 2014:41–42). Crossan does not dodge the problem either and confronts it head on. Scripture is not for him (not his words) the *norma normans* ('the norm/rule that governs') of the Christian faith, we need to look somewhere else.

So he proceeds: *If, for Christians, the biblical Christ is the criterion of the biblical God, then, for Christians, the historical Jesus is the criterion of the biblical Christ* (Crossan 2015:35, original emphasis).

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The historical Jesus is thus the norm of the Christian Bible, a view shared by many others (see Luciani 2010). This requires a 'proper' reading of Scripture that takes into account the rhythm-of-assertion-and-subversion that ultimately converged to present us with a written canon which ultimately brings 'wheat and tares' into the mix.

This researcher is well aware of the complexity of the hermeneutical task Crossan aims to carry. This has been the search of the Christian church all along, as Irenaeus, bishop of Lyon (c. 130–202 CE), pointed that the aim of interpretation of Scripture, as a mosaic made of *tesserae*, is to display beauty. Irenaeus writes against the Valentinians' heresies, because this group chooses passages and arranges them to fit their own lusts. There is no beauty in such a handling of Scripture, he concludes (*Adversus haereses* I, 8, 1). Any other way of interpreting the biblical texts would be lacking unless it reveals the *human* face of Jesus, God's final Word (Heb 1:2). Some may see this as a sort of cop-out, but this view of Scripture makes perfect sense (Crossan 2007:223, also 2015:243).

We do not have to travel far into the Bible to realise about the presence of violence. Very early, in Genesis 4, we witness a brother-kills-brother event. This chapter commences with 'religion': humans feel separated from the divinity (Gn 3) and need to make amends by bringing forth offerings. The familiar tale does not answer the question why God chose the shepherd over the farmer, but Crossan argues that we need to look much earlier to understand the story, based on a Sumerian tale that depicts the well-known genre of controversy or *logomachy*. This Sumerian tale is known as 'Dumuzid and Enkimdu: The dispute between the shepherd-God and the farmer-God' (Kramer 1981:45–50; Pritchard 1969:41–42). God's predilection for the second born is a 'common place' of biblical literature. Both Cain and Abel represent two phases in human development, the domestication of the ground and of animals. Somehow, God's pleasure with Abel sparks a negative reaction in the older brother (Gn 4:3–7).

This is the first time the term 'sin' (*hatta'h*) appears in the biblical account. 'Sin' is not defined, but Crossan ties it up to violence. Sin is like a panther ready to overcome a prey. However, the text affirms that Cain can still master over it, so it is not inevitable to succumb to its power (Gn 4:7). Crossan, in discussing the double account of creation, concluded that sin-as-violence is not based on genetics but on culture. It takes hold of humanity, develops in culture and becomes a normal standard for social living, though sin/violence is not part of creation. But it belongs to the sphere of morality, the actions of free-will creatures (Sarna 1966:26–27). This is what Crossan calls the *normalcy of civilisation*, a brilliant expression which clarifies what follows.

Cain, having the power to master over sin, is finally dominated by it and commits fratricide. Jealousy has led humanity to a heinous act. And, thus, even the ground, the '*adamah*' which gave rise to humanity, cries on account of the blood shed (Gn 4:9–12). Crossan is right. It is not God who punishes Cain, but that his actions have concrete 'human' repercussions. The

man is now family-less, a wanderer, the initiator of the first city, indefectibly tying sin-as-violence with culture. The ground is no longer friendly and other inhabitants may now want to take revenge on Cain (cf. Gn 4:14). The Lord's response to Cain expresses this normalisation of violence: 'Very well, then', YHWH replied, 'whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance'. So YHWH put a mark on Cain, so that no one coming across him would kill him (Gn 4:15).

How can it be that the punishment for killing the killer is suddenly multiplied by seven? This is just the beginning of the 'downwards progression': how good humans are at violence. Just a few generations later, Lamech prides at killing people for sport. The escalating of violence is clear: Lamech said to his wives (Gn 4):

Adah and Zillah, hear my voice, wives of Lamech, listen to what I say: I killed a man for wounding me, a boy for striking me. Sevenfold vengeance for Cain, but seventy-sevenfold for Lamech. (vv. 23–24)

The narration moved from fratricide to a sevenfold punishment for taking revenge to a seventy-sevenfold penalty for Lamech. In the short period of three to four generations, violence has reached its culmen. Sin-as-violence has taken control over humanity. Humanity has 'missed the mark' by a long stretch. The reverse of this will be found in the pericope where Peter, trying to impress Jesus with his willingness to forgive asks: 'Lord, how often must I forgive my brother if he wrongs me? As often as seven times?' To what a non-amused Jesus responds: 'Not seven, I tell you, but seventy-seven times' (Mt 18:22).

The story of the flood comes about because the earth was 'full of violence' (Gn 6:11), as if God had to press the 'reboot' button to start anew. But no matter about second opportunities, humanity has really gone on the violent spree ending in the construction of a city whose tower can reach the skies so that humans can once again try to reach the divine on their own strength (Gn 11).

At his point, Crossan returns to the earliest chapters of Genesis where humanity – male and female – is created in the image and likeness of God. The first story of creation, from the Priestly tradition (P) finds its climax in the 7th day, the day when God and all his creatures can rest, a sort of distributive justice (Crossan 2015:78). This is a way to (re) socialise and go back to 'being'. After all, we are human 'beings', not social 'doings'.

The practice of the Sabbath reveals a major egalitarian bias: all people, free and slave, and all animals (even the land, i.e. law of Jubilee) are given a chance for rest. This event, signalled in the creation story, becomes a commandment in the law, but its source is found in creation, in God. This is part of being made into the image/likeness of God: humanity is not meant to be enslaved but to live freely. Perhaps, this is the reason why Jesus so adamantly opposed the pharisees and experts of the law who had created such a vociferous 'fence

around the law', preventing the 'people of the land' to ascertain the true *telos* of the law. Gone from sight the element of distributive justice, these enforcers of the law concentrated on insignificant details and minutiae that benefitted no one except the religious ego.

Crossan continues developing the transformation taking place within the biblical text, influenced by the matrix described in the first pages of his book. The Mosaic covenant, especially the version found in the Deuteronomy, which follows the Assyrian covenant pattern, concludes with a long list of blessings and curses. In fact, curses outnumber blessings (see Dt 27–30) as the matrix of state violence creeps into the covenant (Crossan 2015:91). Coercion in the form of curses is now dominant in Israel's imaginary.

This way of comprehending God makes it into the prophetic and the Psalmic tradition but with a more ambivalent opinion on the divine character. This tension is also present in the Wisdom tradition, which at first returns to the pristine Priestly tradition of Genesis. It is not God who punishes, but that the same acts carry (human) consequences. Thus, what it is proposed is not a 'utopia' as an 'eutopia', a good place, because human transformation is still a possibility to reckon with (Crossan 2015:137).

Moving to the New Testament, Crossan describes the matrix of first century CE. Through the study of the biblical sources, Josephus, Philo and Roman historians, we get a good glance of the events, concentrating on the Jewish resistance to imperialistic violence and how diverse and creative it proved (Crossan 2015:147; cf. Josephus *Bel* 2.200; *Ant* 18.272; Horsley 1993). Crossan focuses on other contemporary literature which is tendentiously violent in its rhetoric. Both the *Psalms of Solomon* and some *Sibylline Oracles* are straightforwardly in favour of the fall of the empire, in a similar fashion to John of Patmos and his circle of intellectuals (Rosell 2011, 2021).

Within this matrix, the towering figure of Jesus of Nazareth highlights the real possibility of peaceful (i.e. non-violent) resistance to evil. Crossan stresses the need to rescue the Jesus of history in all his radicality from amid the plethora of opinions and emphases which try to display him as rhetorically violent. The way Jesus is finally punished on a Roman cross is a witness that Rome considered him dangerous, but not violent.

However, the Jesus of history, the clearest representation of the radicality of God, ends up being presented rhetorically and physically violent (Crossan 2015):

The problem is emphatically not that the historical Jesus was proclaimed as Christ or Son of God by those earliest Christian Jews, but that the nonviolent Jesus became the violent Christ and the violent Son of a violent God. (p. 171)

After a quick but dense journey through the Gospels, where he explains how the Q Gospel ended up projecting both a violent John and a violent Jesus (in chapters 10–11), Crossan concerns again with the Book of Revelation, about which he

commented as the starting point. After Revelation, he returns to discuss Paul, in a rather strange chronological twist which is justified by his three-stages of Pauline thought discussed at length elsewhere (Crossan & Borg 2009).

When commenting on the Revelation of John, it is evident that in this normalcy of civilisation, the cosmic Christ has become a sort of 'badder' *Nero redivivus*:

Not Nero but Christ will destroy the cosmic Roman Empire, the divine Roman emperor and all of Roman imperial theology – but with a violence far more overwhelming than anything Rome or Romanisation can muster to defend itself. [...] This is Revelation's worst libel against God and worst slander against Jesus. It is also, to finish that trinitarian round, the worst sin against the Holy Spirit. (Crossan 2015:184–185)

Does the conclusion of a book determine the meaning of its story? he asks. Well, it all depends on how you read such a conclusion.

## Front cover and back cover: When the structure just does not quite fit

There seems not to be an attempt, on Crossan's part, to present a balanced picture of Revelation; just scattered glimpses here and there, some beautiful remarks on the new heavens and the new earth, but one gets the idea that there is really no interest in engaging with the book in detail. In the search for a more detailed commentary on Revelation in his writings, this researcher's efforts have met with only general impressions, and not elaborated comments (cf. Crossan 2007:217–235). It is as if, in his aversion to Revelation's violence, Crossan had developed a sort of 'willful disinterest' about it (see also Grimsrud 2017). However, his main concern is precisely to be able to present a unified vision of Scripture despite the violence, he admits, found in it. It could be just too easy to dismiss his criticism on the violence of Scripture as a personal and biased projection, but more disturbing are some biblical interpretations which simply gloss over these violent images as something to be ascribed to God as if this cruel presentation of the divinity is justified because he is, well, God (cf. Caird 1984:279). No, Crossan's insights force interpreters to look carefully at Scripture and deal with its inner matrix.

Certainly, Revelation contains many a violent image which has been used to justify a violent version of Christianity, and Crossan affirms that eventually, 'the radicality of God succumbs to the normalcy of civilization' (Crossan 2015:174). Thus, 'Jesus is changed first into the rhetorically violent Christ within the Gospels and then into the physically violent Christ of Revelation' (Crossan 2015:185). This can be shown in how contemporary interpreters distill such a view. Thus, C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* (1950) display the grim recalling of such an unfortunate pairing: Aslan much resembles the Lion of Judah and the White Witch could stand for Babylon/Rome (the *female* evil counterpart). Aslan finally does away with her by killing her. Violence is met with stronger violence.

To understand John's violent imagery, we need a fulcrum against which we can affix such images to adequately make sense of them, lest we completely do away with the Jesus of history who taught to 'show the other cheek'. This is not a proposal to dig deep until we find an original (pacifist) layer, but rather to engage with Revelation on its own terms, considering 'its centre' so that a less distorted image may be recovered. Indeed, we can affirm that Revelation reproduces the gospel message *in nuce*, but John has chosen to dress it with such violent images that it often appears as pure 'retributive justice'.

Revelation 1–3 address the situation of the Asia Minor churches in their struggle to be true to Jesus the faithful witness (Rv 1:5). The problem with these communities of believers is not that they are suffering persecution *qua* Christians, but that they are succumbing to Rome's imperial seduction. This is not difficult to understand if we consider that the imperial cult was the key to political and economic advances. Submitting to the *status quo* was the manner to be in the loop and Rome presented her oppression/leadership as benefitting the (subdued) nations, what is called *soft power* (Thompson 1990:95–115; Walker 2002:48). Revelation 4–5 follow, showing an open window into the heavens where God, and not Rome, reigns. This vision works as the centre of interpretation of the book, especially Revelation 5:1–6.

The 'one worthy of opening the seven seals' refers to the one who can reveal the mysteries of history. The Lion of Judah, symbol of strength and conquest, is announced, but a lone slaughtered lamb appears. John skilfully plays with this dual image: conquering (Lion) is carried out by a slain Lamb (yet standing, a symbol of his resurrection).

The Lamb's victory is to be found in his sacrifice (Rv 5:9), which translates to the destruction of the enemies. There is a clear difference between the Lamb and the Dragon, lest the two were to be mistaken (Barr 2006:205). Thus, the Book of Revelation can be summarised with a rotund phrase: 'pure gospel', a suggestive imagined/imaginary expression that Jesus has reverted the flow of history (i.e. the 'normalcy of civilisation') by showing that real power is found in service and sacrificial love (cf. Jn 15:13).

Somehow, the Jesus of history as the centre of Scripture is still in view, though John's fervour in his use of militaristic/violent images sometimes seems outlandish. We will describe a plausible purpose for these violent images which can be read as devoid of 'real violence', for no war ensues (Bauckham 1988).

Crossan mentions the appearance of a rider both in Revelation 6:2ff and 19:11, confirming this fateful divine violence. Despite John's exacerbated violent images, Crossan deserves credit because it is exactly his insight which perfectly fits here: human consequences derive from humanity's own lusts and violence against the other. Humanity was supposed to dominate sin, but sadly it has fully taken control of our lives. Rome has perfected this, for it presents her abusing of

'allied' nations as a sort of *cura* (Latin for 'care' or 'attentive administration', promoting Caesar as the benevolent yet disciplinarian father) for the peoples of the earth. But Revelation is about dis-veiling what is hidden, which is nothing less than Rome's lie and humanity's willingness to go along with it: she conquers for her own sake, not for the good of the world. She is a whore drunk with the blood of the nations, her victims (Rv 17:6). That is why, John of Patmos, in the Spirit, calls the Christ-following communities to go back to their first love, because the last things – the eschatological – have already been said.

But what about Revelation 19 with the rider on the white horse who conquers and celebrates his victory over the enemies (19:11–16)? If we look at the scene, it appears to be the announcement of a bloody war where enemies are split asunder by the sword-in-mouth of the rider. But, if we pay careful attention to detail, we notice that prior to the war, the rider's cloak is already soaked in blood. Is this the announcement of Christ's second (bloody) coming? Or, is it a retelling of the gospel story: victory through sacrifice?

Admittedly, this 'gospel image' needs to be stripped from the violent imagery in which John has wrapped it, which is not an easy task. John, eager to present a victorious Jesus against the apparently all-powerful Roman Empire, has used a violent rhetoric that may blur the deeper message. The wrappings are violent, whether imagined and rhetorical, but the core of the message, 'if read well', is not. What we have is a retelling of the vision of Revelation 5: The Lion is in fact the Lamb in a 'blended metaphor' which presents the two images in dynamic tension. This 'blended' aspect (violence-Lion/sacrifice-Lamb) should not be lost in translation. The language of conquest (*nikáō*) is found throughout the book, which prevents the reader to ignore this aspect, although it is linked to resilience and patience in the side of those who resist/suffer (Rv 2:2). These two images do not cancel each other, 'the Lamb does not mute the violent imagery' (Bauckham 1998:215; Hulen 2011:789 speaks of a new forged symbol of 'conquest by sacrificial death', original emphasis). Victory, thus, comes through suffering and selfless love, unlike Rome's 'victory as conquering' (to coin Crossan's oft-used expression). The 'wrath of the lamb' is Jesus' absorption of evil, which encompasses the (metaphorical) display of violence against the enemy. The passage of Revelation 19 is not a picture of Christ's second coming, but rather 'another' image of what Jesus' love-sacrifice entails. This is in keeping with the structure of Revelation, which uses repetition or a plurality of perspectives, to speak about the same event, in order for readers to gain more insight with each new image.

The obliteration of all enemies follows in Revelation 20. Both beast and false prophet (Rv 20:10) are not to be understood as individuals, but rather as personifications of 'unjust structures', constructed and buttressed by society, thus 'structural' evils. These structures 'are shown as already defeated' in John's visions. The 'killing of the rest', attested to in the text, is symbolic as it is carried out by the Rider with the 'sword of his mouth', an Old Testament image of

judgement already anticipated in Revelation 2:16. This image appears in Isaiah 11:4, in Isaiah 49:2 and in the LXX in *Psalms of Solomon* 17:24-25 (Klaasen 1996:308). The hope is that one day, they'd just be a distant reminder of a bad dream because a new heaven and a new earth, in the shape of a city (Rv 21:1-2), have descended to signal the start of a new era of healing and prosperity: progress without violence, communal affluence without oppression.

We need to pause a moment to regroup some of the ideas presented so far. I, together with others, understand Revelation 19 as a retelling of the *kerygma*, not as the threat of a Second Coming. Collins (1998:278) presented a different opinion, using the metaphor of D-day versus V-Day, awaiting a future resolution. However, such an affirmation of 'pure gospel' might just look ludicrous for, after all, we still suffer evil in the form of violence, be it rhetorical or physical. Some do away with this interpretation on these very grounds (Gager 1975:56). So, what is John trying to say? It is not a dualistic understanding where 'heaven forces itself upon earth', but rather a call to the community of believers to start living in the now 'as if' all these things have taken place. Crossan is right when writing that projecting our hopes into the Kingdom's future is many a time an excuse for not engaging radically with the present (Crossan 2015:167).

God's actions await a human response. After all, if Jesus is Messiah – if he is king – there must be people that follow him. This is what we call an 'eschatology of participation', that is, the victory is already won, but it needs to be experienced anew every day in daily life, the realm of decision and choice, and it requires of a 'new humanity' to make it a reality (Callahan 2009:52). This way of living goes beyond the traditional 'already-but-not-yet' and presents a more nuanced perspective: 'already-here-despite-us'.

The question then becomes how to make this 'here and now' present. John's first answer is both worship and life-practice. It is not coincidental that John starts with a mention of the throne room displaying Jesus as the 'ruler over the kings of the earth' (Rv 1:4-5). But worship is more than recognition of his sovereignty – it is celebration of his achievement 'and participation' in his victory (Rv 1:5-6). In worship, the community anticipates this reality into their daily lives. Barr is right in affirming that the community of faith that recognises Revelation as a 'live performance' will experience a profound transformation both at a personal level and of their world (Barr 1984:49). In worship, the community is able to visualise what is not obvious to the eyes (Smith 2013):

[A]nd herein lies a central aspect of Christian worship: it is an alternative imaginary, a way that the Spirit of God invites us into the Story of God in Christ reconciling the world to himself. But [...] if such a story is really going to capture our imaginations, it needs to get into our gut – it needs to be written on our hearts. (p. 105)

Is this a sort of cop out, a *desideratum*? Revelation could be accused of many things, but not of being lukewarm. The answer is: worship the Lamb who conquers through his

blood (Rv 12:10-11) 'and' be ready to stand firm for whom you worship, even to the point of death. There is no magic wand, only the sheer determination to be faithful to him who walks amid the churches (Rv 1:13). This faithfulness/perseverance (*hypomonē*; cf. 2:2-3) translates as 'resilience' because God, in Christ, takes on the 'roles of domination' (i.e. warrior, lord, king, etc.) carrying on the 'dirty work' on their behalf so that they can live and benefit from its fruits (Kreider 2016:29-30; Weber 2015). And this is done through self-sacrifice, so that the myth of redemptive violence is exposed and made devoid of its supposed benefits (Wink 1998:42-62). The followers of the Lamb are never encouraged, nor do they engage in battle, for the Lion/Lamb conquers on their behalf (cf. Rv 17:14). They are asked to resist, and there is a price to pay for such faithfulness (Skaggs & Doyle 2007:226).

Thus, the following problem arises for these Christ-following communities: the benefits of submitting to the beast seem more advantageous, in the short-term, than following the Lamb (Kraybill 1996:197-198). That's why John needs to remove the veil and let them look at the stark reality. John presents the futility of accommodation, for there is no way to live in both worlds and be faithful to the Lord. His use of metaphors and imagery is not so much the description of historical reality as 'exaggerated projections' which convey not just plausible scenarios, but typical fears associated with epochs of terror such as Nero's or Domitian's reigns (Mayordomo 2013:215).

## But, is it then all settled?

Of course not. This is, and will always be, a dialogue that each generation needs to confront head-on in mature and creative ways. There is no last word on the matter. John of Patmos, sometimes, seems unsure about the limitations of language to convey what he has seen. His explanations often regress to terms such as 'like', 'as if' or adjectives like 'equal to', 'similar', which means that we cannot expect a linear or literal presentation of facts. However, much can be gained from the perspective presented here, in spite of its inherent limitations.

Firstly, what do we do with the violence in Revelation, even if rhetorical or imaginary? We need to recognise that violence is not 'out there' but amid us, even 'within' us. It is not right to think that others are the problem where violence is concerned, whereas we are just affected by it. We can be both victims and/or perpetrators. Revelation points not just to political and cultural violence, but to ecological violence as well (for a helpful typology on violence, see Galtung 1999:40). When studying Revelation in depth, the problem of violence is dealt with in a holistic manner, not devoid of tensions.

Secondly, there is a call to resistance, sure, but in non-violent ways. John of Patmos proposes a way out of the system which admits no middle ground. As a matter of fact, he uses provocative language. To the church of Laodicea, he writes (Rv 3):

[I] know about your activities: how you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were one or the other, but since you are neither hot nor cold, but only lukewarm, I will spit you out of my mouth. (vv. 15–16)

John's 'perceived world' is at war and Christ-followers cannot be tepid in this matter: you are either sided with the Lamb or with the Dragon. The Apocalypse creates a state of mind which makes all be ready to 'detect the enemy' around (Nogueira 2020:641). The problem, now as then, is that society's veneer, used to conceal this blurring of values, is so effective that most seem to have a hard time distinguishing one from the other. Crossan is right in pointing out how violence has little by little even crept into the biblical texts and their interpretation, and rampantly in the history of the church, proudly 'pacifying' the nations for Christ at the pace of the sword and the stake. Quickly, too quickly perhaps, the community of the Lamb acted like the community of the Dragon without noticing the subtle transformation.

That is the reason John has no qualms about admonishing these communities of believers to break up with the system that threatens with swallowing their first love and ultimate loyalty. Using sexual imagery, he commands them to 'come out of her' (Rv 18:4), that is, to interrupt their love-affair at once (Claiborne & Haw 2008:151. Cf. Barreda Toscano 2016; Kraybill 1996:199–200). To come out (pull out) of the system is more than denying the worship of Caesar. It is to opt for the way of the Lamb, that is, victory over the system acquired through service and sacrifice. It doesn't seem much at present, but it implies a life focused on something deeper than that which is apparent to the senses, and this requires boldness and resilience.

The new order that looms – in the form of a city which descends from 'above' (Rv 21:2) – presents another dynamic tension in Revelation. The New Jerusalem has an area roughly equivalent to the distance between Rome and Jerusalem (Rv 21:16, 12000 *stadia* per side, about 2200 km, with 70-metre-high walls). Her building materials are precious stones, gold, pearls, jasper, sapphire, agate, emerald, onyx, ruby, chrysolite, beryl, etc. John's description of these construction materials is not a list of heavenly clouds, rainbows, etc., but of elements humans mine from earth. That John pauses here (Rv 18:11–17a) to describe in all detail, these building materials are at odds with what, just a few chapters before, he has been criticising in all detail about Rome/Babylon's spoiling of the subjugated nations (cf. Bauckham 1991).

John makes a sharp economic critique of the Roman Empire and then he reflects these same elements to describe the prosperity of the new city. What's the difference? The New Jerusalem displays a prosperity not won by oppression and which is for all inhabitants to enjoy. Perhaps, this is a clue to understand his logic when speaking about violence. To do away with violence you need to 'become that which you are trying to overcome'. After all, God has been doing that all along for Israel in the Old Testament. God assumed the

'roles of domination' so that Israel did not have to get her hands dirty. Jesus the Christ does the same now: he is the divine warrior so that the faithful do not have to engage in violence (cf. 2 Cor 5:21). The Lion-Lamb blended metaphor holds this dynamic tension in place and there is no easy way out.

Lastly, we need to reflect on the 'function' of these violent images. After all, we are confronted not only with violent images but invited to rejoice in Babylon/Rome's demise: 'Now heaven, celebrate her downfall, and all you saints, apostles and prophets: God has given judgement for you against her' (Rv 18:20). Isn't this, too, violence, even if imaginary/rhetorical? Maintaining the offensive nature of the images, perhaps such a strategy may allow people undergoing suffering to channel their thirst for vindication and wishes for revenge in ways which are not physically violent; what T. Pippin calls a 'cathartic or apocalyptic arousal' (Pippin 1992:17). Is there a cathartic or therapeutic value to such images? (Dietrich & Mayordomo 2005:188).

Human response in the face of domination (be it political, physical or even imagined) is complex and diverse. James. C. Scott spoke of these expressions as 'hidden transcripts', not the outburst of frustration with no inner logic, but as an inchoate scream of rage, finely drawn as a visual image, using the same cultural raw materials which make up the dominant culture's understanding (Scott 1990). Thus, we cannot take away the right to rage for those who experienced the cruel domination of the empire. Perhaps, John of Patmos appears too human for us who, today, look for idealistic ways to obliterate violent behaviour from our world forever, while he signals a rudimentary first step in this direction: 'just imagine it, but do not act likewise' (Mayordomo 2006:65; Cf. Yarbro Collins 1984:171).

The apocalyptic imagination is not so much concerned with offering a better future world as a call to action in the present. It is not communicated via exhortations and appeals to the law but tries to activate our emotions and our fantasies. A better world is possible if we act differently, even at the cost of our own lives.

Perhaps, only perhaps, John of Patmos's success in presenting such an intricate imaginary narrative might have ultimately worked against him. The history of the church is witness to the many abuses carried out in the name of the 'Christ Victor', without understanding the subtext that guided his whole reflection on violence. Crossan's sensibility to such a display of violence in the biblical texts forces us to read these texts anew and, for that, we should be truly grateful.

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