

LOREN L. JOHNS

The Lamb Christology
of the Apocalypse
of John

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Mohr Siebeck

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The Lamb Christology of the Apocalypse of John

An Investigation into Its Origins
and Rhetorical Force

Mohr Siebeck

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*To Rachel,
with love and gratitude*

Preface

This book represents a slightly revised version of my doctoral dissertation in New Testament Studies, which I completed at Princeton Theological Seminary in Princeton, New Jersey, under the title, *The Origins and Rhetorical Force of the Lamb Christology of the Apocalypse of John*.

Having come to this point in my journey with this research project, I am quite aware of the ways in which I have benefited from the communities of which I have been a part and from individuals who have read and critiqued what I have written here. This project would not have been possible without the benefits I have reaped from the work of many other people.

Three people whose work in the Apocalypse of John were formative for me early on were Howard Charles, Ted Grimsrud, and William Klassen. I took an undergraduate course in the Apocalypse of John with Dr. Charles at Goshen College. He taught me to be honest with the text within the confines of the subjectivity with which we all must work—to work inductively without forcing preconceived ideas on the text or predetermining a hermeneutical outcome. His deliberate and thoughtful approach also lessened my fear of this book. Later, as theology book editor for Herald Press, I edited Ted Grimsrud's book, *Triumph of the Lamb* (1987), a helpful study guide intended for laypersons and church groups. His study excited me about this book and convinced me that there was potential in reading the Apocalypse ethically. Finally, I found several conversations with William Klassen to be helpful as I began to work with this project. Dr. Klassen provided key bibliographical help and pointed me in helpful directions.

The late Dr. J. Christiaan Beker pressed me early in this project to pay attention to the overall structure and design of this dissertation in order to maintain a healthy sense of the parts within the whole and the flow of the argument. I hope the results meet his high standards in this regard.

My family has been helpful and supportive in various ways. My father, Galen Johns, graciously read part or all of several drafts of this dissertation, catching errors, providing helpful feedback, and asking for clarification. Thank you. My wife Rachel and my daughters, Kendra and Jessica, have been patiently supportive all along the way.

My small group at West Philadelphia Mennonite Fellowship was gracious enough to participate enthusiastically in an extended study I led in the late 1980s on the relevance of the Apocalypse for life in modern Philadelphia. Bluffton College supported my research along the way and helped me to persevere as I completed my dissertation while teaching there. I would especially like to thank my colleague, Dr. J. Denny Weaver, who has been a good conversation partner and whose own work on the Apocalypse has emphasized the theological significance of a preterist reading of the Apocalypse—especially for a Christus Victor Christology.

I would like to thank Princeton Theological Seminary for making this research project possible. Its heritage of serious theological inquiry informed by careful historical-critical methods is as critically valuable to Christ's church today as it has ever been. I would like to thank Dr. Beverly Gaventa, whose careful and thoughtful reading of this dissertation went beyond the call of duty and helped me to avoid some misperceptions.

I would especially like to thank my dissertation committee for the careful reading and helpful suggestions they have given me along the way: Dr. Brian K. Blount, Dr. Ulrich Mauser, and my adviser, Dr. James H. Charlesworth. Each of them read carefully and offered me valuable counsel.

I am grateful to Dr. Charlesworth for his guidance of this project. His important essay, "The Apocalypse of John: Its Theology and Impact on Subsequent Apocalypses," was seminal in my own early reflection on the rhetorical significance of the Lamb Christology and the nature of the redefinitions of power it entailed. I have benefited greatly from his knowledge of the history and literature of Second Temple Judaism. On the more personal level, I found Dr. Charlesworth always to be available, eager and willing to discuss my research and to encourage me along the way. Thank you.

Finally, I would like to express my sincere thanks to Prof. Dr. Jörg Frey of the Evangelisch-Theologische Fakultät, University of Munich, who expressed interest in my work and recommended its publication in the WUNT 2 series.

In light of the valuable help I received from these communities and individuals, I take responsibility for whatever flaws remain in this study. Despite the long labor I endured in giving birth to this work, I was encouraged by the vision of the end and a conviction that the study was both worthwhile and valid in its findings. May the reader conclude in agreement ... or at least be blessed along the way (cf. Rev 1:3).

Vicit agnus noster.

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Chapter I

Introduction

1. Introductory Observations

Religion is dangerous business. Arguably, more people have been murdered in the name of religion than for any other reason in the history of humanity. Religion has inspired humanity's most profound acts of benevolence *and* its most horrifying acts of violence.

Historically, religion has been capable of inspiring the sort of imagination that motivates people on the deepest level—perhaps uniquely so. When Pontius Pilate first became prefect of Judea around 26 CE, he publicly displayed in Jerusalem several military standards bearing medallions of the emperor. The Jews of Jerusalem saw this display as a wanton disregard of the command against “graven images.” When the Jews of the city staged a protest at his residence in Caesarea Maritima, Pilate ordered his troops to provide a display of force, drawing their swords and threatening to kill them if they continued to protest.

However, the protestors' deep commitment to the Law of Moses inspired them to bare their necks, showing that they were prepared to die rather than tolerate such a violation of the Decalogue. Their religious zeal ran so deep that they even offered the necks of their wives and children to the sword rather than wink at this display of blasphemy. It was a powerful and effective demonstration of nonviolent resistance, motivated by religious zeal. In this case, Pilate backed off, though in others he did not.¹

Many sources of power lie latent within religion. The key to religion's power lies in its ability to excite the imagination. Some religions do this through scriptural interpretation, preaching, teaching, and liturgies, while others excite the imagination in other ways. Ultimately, it is not religion itself, but religious *labels*, or the personal and corporate *interpretations* of religion that are most dangerous. For instance, during the Crusades the crusaders la-

¹ See Josephus, *War* 2.9, 2–3 §169–174; *Ant* 18.3, 1 §53–59; Philo *Embassy* 38 §299ff.; see also 3Mac 1:1–2:24. Examples of heroic and/or foolish self-sacrifice abound in the history and literature of Early Judaism and in subsequent history.

beled another ethnic group as “the Infidel” and associated eternal salvation with whole-hearted participation in a “Holy Crusade” against a foreign land and people. Pope Urban II and others were able to create an interpretation of the spiritual meaning of the Crusades that was powerful enough to motivate tens of thousands of people to leave home and family and to slaughter innocent men, women, and children in the name of Christ—even though such activity was personally painful, costly, and ultimately anti-Christian from the perspective of many Christians today. The power of the Crusaders’ vision and the labeling power of words that promised eternal salvation were enough to lead them into their despicable repudiation of the gospel at a high cost to themselves and to others.

More specifically, the power and influence of the New Testament Revelation to John (Apocalypse of John) on the life of the church in the last two millennia have been extensive. The influence of the Apocalypse on the history of Christian art is unparalleled. Marcion rejected the Apocalypse because it was too Jewish.² The first three centuries of interpretation saw a polarization on the issue of its millenarianism: some rejected it because of its millenarian theology;³ some accepted and gladly proclaimed it because of its millenarianism;⁴ and still others made peace with its millenarianism by spiritualizing its message.⁵

Personal reactions to the Apocalypse have varied wildly. Augustine found in the Apocalypse’s vision of future punishment and reward significant support for his theology.⁶ But Augustine also admitted discomfort with the book:

² See Tertullian, *Against Marcion* III.14 and IV.5. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 3. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons (1925), 333, 350.

³ E.g., Gaius (early 3rd cent.), Dionysius of Alexandria (d. c. 264), and Eusebius (c. 260–c. 340).

⁴ E.g., Justin Martyr (c. 100–c. 165); Irenaeus (c. 130–c. 200), although his views on this matter are mixed; Hippolytus (c. 170–c. 236); Victorinus (d. c. 304).

⁵ Origen (c. 185–c. 254), Methodius (d. c. 311), Tyconius (d. c. 400), and Augustine (354–430) were among the church fathers who “saved” John’s Apocalypse for the church through an allegorizing interpretation, even though Origen and Methodius, and Tyconius and Augustine, respectively, were opponents on most other issues. Although Tertullian (c. 160–c. 225) said little about the Apocalypse, he too “spiritualized” its millenarianism.

⁶ Cf. his *De Civitate Dei*, esp. Books 20–22. Nevertheless, one must admit that the Apocalypse was not as significant in his theology as has sometimes been supposed. His inspiration for the theologically programmatic concept of “the city of God” does not come from the Apocalypse’s vision of the New Jerusalem. Augustine identifies Ps. 87:3 as the immediate inspiration for his identification of this city with the church: “Glorious things are spoken of thee, O city of God” (11.1). His development of the paradigm of the city of God as a way to understand and organize Christian theology

Though this book is called the Apocalypse, there are in it many obscure passages to exercise the mind of the reader, and there are few passages so plain as to assist us in the interpretation of the others, even though we take pains; and this difficulty is increased by the repetition of the same things, in forms so different, that the things referred to seem to be different, although in fact they are only differently stated.⁷

The Apocalypse was not quickly or easily canonized. Although it enjoyed canonical status earlier in the West, it remained suspect throughout the first millennium in Eastern Christianity. In the West, the Apocalypse was treated with suspicion by many people at different times. Today, despite its official canonical status, it continues to be regarded with suspicion. It is the only major book of the New Testament on which John Calvin wrote no commentary.⁸ Martin Luther said, “My spirit cannot accommodate itself to this book. There is one sufficient reason for the small esteem in which I hold it—that Christ is neither taught in it nor recognized.”⁹

In 1887, Friederich Nietzsche called Revelation “jenen wütesten aller geschriebenen Ausbrüche, welche die Rache auf dem Gewissen hat” [the wildest of written outbursts, which wreaks vengeance on the conscience].¹⁰ He saw the book as an expression of the repressed hatred that pious weaklings often have toward the powerful. In his 1898 Jowett lectures on eschatology, R. H. Charles referred to the thought of the Apocalypse as “unadulterated Judaism.” In his

depends on a merging or harmonizing of diverse biblical concepts and literatures, including the Psalms of Zion, Jesus’ teaching of the kingdom of God, and Paul’s dualisms of flesh vs. spirit and chosen people (children of the promise) vs. unchosen people (children of the flesh). When he does discuss the New Jerusalem that comes down out of heaven and the blessings that are associated with it, he concludes that it cannot be speaking figuratively of the church in the present age, but of some future blessing (20.17). Quotations and allusions to the Apocalypse play a minor role, overall, in his theology.

⁷ Augustine, *The City of God*, translated by Marcus Dods, with an introduction by Thomas Merton, The Modern Library (New York: The Modern Library, 1950), 32.

⁸ Calvin wrote commentaries on 24 of the 27 books of the New Testament. The three on which he wrote none are 2 and 3 John and the Apocalypse.

⁹ Martin Luther, in the preface to his 1522 translation of the Bible. For more on Luther’s approach to the Apocalypse, see Winfried Vogel, “The Eschatological Theology of Martin Luther; Part II: Luther’s Exposition of Daniel and Revelation,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 25 (Summer): 183–99; Rodney L. Petersen, *Preaching in the Last Days: The Theme of “Two Witnesses” in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); H.-U. Hofmann, *Luther und die Johannes Apokalypse* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1982); Gottfried Seebass, “The Importance of Apocalyptic for the History of Protestantism,” *Colloquium* 13 (October 1980), 24–35.

¹⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, Nietzsche’s Werke (Alfred Kröner Verlag, 1919), 7:331.

historical and theological context, this statement was not considered a compliment. However, the views and attitude of Charles regarding the Apocalypse changed dramatically over his course of study. This negative remark was printed in the 1898 first edition of his *Studies in the Apocalypse*,¹¹ but it was removed in the 1913 second edition of that book.¹² George Bernard Shaw called the Apocalypse the “curious record of the visions of a drug addict which was absurdly admitted to the canon under the title of Revelation.”¹³

D. H. Lawrence expressed “dislike” and “resentment” at the Apocalypse of John and found it “annoying” and “ugly.” In fact, Lawrence judged the Apocalypse to be “the most detestable of all [the] books of the Bible.”¹⁴ In his 1936 *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments*, C. H. Dodd spoke harshly about the theology of the Apocalypse. It reflects, he thought, “a relapse into a pre-Christian eschatology.”¹⁵ “The God of the Apocalypse can hardly be recognized as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,”¹⁶ nor does its fierce messiah reflect the early kerygma. Dodd advised his readers to have done with such “eschatological fanaticism.”¹⁷

In the introduction to his modern “literary-critical interpretation” of the Apocalypse, Harold Bloom says, “The influence of Revelation is out of all proportion to its literary strength or spiritual value.”¹⁸ In Bloom’s words,

¹¹ R. H. Charles, *Studies in the Apocalypse* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark [1899], 347).

¹² R. H. Charles, *Studies in the Apocalypse*, 347. By the time he finished writing his International Critical Commentary on the Apocalypse in 1920, he considered its theology among the best in the New Testament. He defends the book against those who regarded it as somehow sub-Christian. For instance, he says, “Nowhere in the N.T. is the glory of the exalted Christ so emphasized” (see Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, Vol. 1. The International Critical Commentary. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark [1920], cxi; see also cix–cx). I am indebted to G. R. Beasley-Murray for pointing out this shift in Charles’ thought; see G. R. Beasley-Murray, “How Christian is the Book of Revelation?” in *Reconciliation and Hope: Essays Presented to L. L. Morris*, R. J. Banks, ed. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 276.

¹³ George Bernard Shaw, *The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1933), 73.

¹⁴ *Apocalypse*, by D. H. Lawrence. Penguin Twentieth-Century Classics (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974 [originally published 1931]). See esp. 5–9.

¹⁵ C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments*, 2d ed., reprint, 1936 (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1944), 40.

¹⁶ C. H. Dodd, *Apostolic Preaching*, 41.

¹⁷ C. H. Dodd, *Apostolic Preaching*, 41. Dodd later reiterated this judgment, calling the Apocalypse “only superficially Christian” (C. H. Dodd, *The Authority of the Bible* [London, 1960], 180).

¹⁸ “Introduction,” *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, ed. Harold Bloom. Modern Critical Interpretations (New York: Chelsea House Publications, 1988), 1–2.

Resentment and not love is the teaching of the Revelation of St. John the Divine. It is a book without wisdom, goodness, kindness, or affection of any kind. Perhaps it is appropriate that a celebration of the end of the world should be not only barbaric but scarcely literate. Where the substance is so inhumane, who would wish the rhetoric to be more persuasive, or the vision to be more vividly realized?¹⁹

The rhetorical power of the Apocalypse historically to inspire and motivate interpreters of every kind make it nearly unique as a study in reader-response criticism and in the ethics of interpretation. G. K. Chesterton was certainly correct when he said that “though St. John the Evangelist saw many strange monsters in his vision, he saw no creature so wild as one of his own commentators.”²⁰ The evocative power of the Apocalypse is never more pronounced—for better or for worse—than when the book captures the imagination of a whole community.

The 1993 tragedy experienced near Waco, Texas, with the Branch Davidians led by David Koresh has only confirmed in the minds of some the strange and negative influence of John’s Apocalypse. Koresh’s fascination with the Apocalypse is well-documented.²¹ Appeals to the Old Testament conquest narratives and to the Apocalypse have been used to incite numerous wars and “resistance movements” such as the one led by David Koresh.²²

The Apocalypse of John is arguably the most dangerous book in the history of Christendom in terms of the history of its effects. It has been used to inspire and mobilize countless Christian communities over the centuries, from Montanism to David Koresh’s Branch Davidians.²³ The movements inspired by

¹⁹ Bloom, “Introduction,” 4–5.

²⁰ G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: John Lane Co., 1908), 29.

²¹ See, for instance, Peter Steinfels, “Bible’s Book of Revelation Was Key to Waco Cult,” *New York Times* 142 (1993): 16; cf. also James D. Tabor, *Why Waco?: Cults and the Battle for Religious Freedom in America*, coauthor Eugene V. Gallagher (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 8–9, 53–55, 191–203.

²² Koresh himself found the Apocalypse to be the key to the interpretation of the entire Bible. He said, “Every book of the Bible meets and ends in the book of Revelation” (David Koresh, “The Decoded Message of the Seven Seals of the Book of Revelation,” unpublished paper, with a preface by J. Phillip Arnold, compiled by James D. Tabor (Houston: Reunion Institute, 1994), 7. Koresh specifically claimed that the Branch Davidians were the beneficiaries of the Apocalypse and that the original readers of the Apocalypse were simply a part of the grace the Davidians were about to receive (cf. p. 8). Furthermore, Koresh claimed that he himself was the Lamb who was worthy to open the sealed scroll (Rev 5) as well as the rider on the white horse (Rev 19; cf. “Comments and Clarifications,” James D. Tabor and J. Phillip Arnold, p. A, attached as an appendix to *The Decoded Message*).

²³ For historical surveys of millennialism in the Middle Ages and in the Reformation, see Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians*

apocalyptic literature in general and the Apocalypse of John in particular have been multifarious.²⁴ Some groups, such as the medieval monastic orders of the

and *Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); Richard Kenneth Emmerson, *Antichrist in the Middle Ages: A Study of Medieval Apocalypticism, Art, and Literature* (Seattle, Wash.: University of Washington Press, 1981); Thomas Arthur Dughi, *The Breath of Christ's Mouth: Apocalypse and Prophecy in Early Reformation Ideology*. Ph.D. Dissertation (Johns Hopkins University, 1990); Richard Kenneth Emmerson and Bernard McGinn, eds. *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992); G. Kretschmar, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes: die Geschichte ihrer Auslegung im 1. Jahrtausend* (Calwer Theologische Monographien, Band 9; Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1985); Bernard McGinn, *Visions of the End: Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979); F. Rapp, "Apocalypse et mouvements populaires au Moyen Age," *L'Apocalyptique*, ed. by F. Raphaël, *Études d'Histoire des Religions*, no. 3 (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner); Pierre Prigent, *L'Apocalyptique*, ed. by F. Raphaël, *Études d'Histoire des Religions*, no. 3 (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner); and Ned Bernard Stonehouse, *The Apocalypse in the Ancient Church: A Study in the History of the New Testament Canon* (Goes, Netherlands: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1929).

For a helpful overview of the influence of the apocalypse in the Middle Ages, see "The Exegesis of the Apocalypse in Latin Christianity," chapter two of *The Calabrian Abbot: Joachim of Fiore in the History of Western Thought*, by Bernard McGinn (New York and London: Macmillan and Collier Macmillan, 1985), 74–97. For the influence of the Apocalypse on the English renaissance and post-renaissance Victorian literature, see C. A. Patrides and Joseph Wittreich, eds., *The Apocalypse in English Renaissance Thought and Literature* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984). James H. Moorhead pursues some of the same issues in his survey of the influence of apocalyptic thought during the American civil war; see *American Apocalypse: Yankee Protestants and the Civil War, 1860–1869* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978).

²⁴ The identification of the social location of the communities that have produced and valued apocalyptic writings is a point of debate. Norman Cohn has confidently generalized that the Jewish apocalypses "were directed to the lower strata of the Jewish population as a form of nationalist propaganda" (*Pursuit*, 20). Paul Hanson has argued that apocalypticism had its origins in a shared sociological status: "one of disenfranchisement and alienation from the institutional structures of the community" (*The Dawn of Apocalyptic: The Historical and Sociological Roots of Jewish Apocalyptic Eschatology*, 2d ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), e.g., 409. In contrast, Leonard Thompson denies that one can speak of a "genre-specific social, historical setting" of apocalypses. He argues that apocalypticists shared a *perception* of crisis, but that "any social situation can be perceived as one of crisis" (*The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* [New York: Oxford, 1990], 25, 28; emphasis mine). At least one phenomenological study of apocalyptic movements throughout history has tended to confirm Thompson's theory: see Stephen L. Cook, "Millennial Groups in Power: Toward a New Basis for Studying Biblical Apocalyptic Groups," presentation at Society of Biblical Literature annual meeting, 1992, in San Francisco.

late Middle Ages and the nineteenth-century Millerites, found in the Apocalypse a rationale for nonparticipation in society and thus withdrew from society to await the return of Christ.²⁵ Other groups, such as the violent, revolutionary Münster Anabaptists, found in the Apocalypse a rationale for why they should take up the sword to help God bring in the kingdom.

Interestingly, although the Apocalypse has inspired in some readers much chaos and violence, it has provided for other readers significant hope, peace, and comfort. In his fascinating book, *Irenic Apocalypse: Some Uses of Apocalyptic in Dante, Petrarch and Rabelais*, Dennis Costa argues that modern characterizations of the Apocalypse that are univocally violent are essentially “misappropriations” of the text. While the images of the Apocalypse are surely violent, the book aims to liberate a people and leave them at peace. It is this “irenical” function that is often missed in today’s discourse. Even such an author as Dante, often associated with the most violent of images, found in apocalyptic language a means of resolving nonviolently his own political and spiritual aspirations.²⁶

Although readings of the Apocalypse in some contexts have inspired Christians to withdraw from society and “wait,” readings of the Apocalypse in other contexts have inspired Christians to become more engaged in society. In his compelling little study of the Apocalypse, Allen Boesak says that it should be no surprise that the Apocalypse is a source of encouragement and hope for an oppressed people. He sees in the book a “sharp, critical commentary on contemporary historical events.”²⁷ Apocalyptic literature “always appears against a background of persecution and suffering ... [and] is ... meant as

²⁵ The increasing influence of the Apocalypse in the late Middle Ages is due primarily to the influence of Joachim of Fiore. Umberto Eco’s fascinating *The Name of the Rose* recounts part of this story (William Weaver, trans. [New York: Warner Books, 1984]). See also Bernard McGinn, *The Calabrian Abbot: Joachim of Fiore in the History of Western Thought* (New York: Macmillan, 1985). The systems of thought articulated by William Miller (early to mid-nineteenth century) and the works of Hal Lindsey (late twentieth century) provide the focus for Stephen O’Leary’s attempt to articulate a theory of millennial rhetoric in Stephen D. O’Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

²⁶ Cf. Dennis Costa, *Irenic Apocalypse: Some Uses of Apocalyptic in Dante, Petrarch and Rabelais* (Saratoga: Cal.: Anma Libri, 1981), 1–3, 44–45; cf. also R. E. Kaske, “Dante’s DXV,” in *Dante*, John Freccero, ed. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1965), 122–140. Costa does not go so far as to suggest that the Apocalypse articulates a nonviolent *ethic*. Rather, his point is that the vision is essential irenic—that whatever the means to the goal, the goal actually is an irenic Paradise, not cataclysmic destruction or violence for its own sake.

²⁷ Allan Boesak, *Comfort and Protest: Reflections on the Apocalypse of John of Patmos* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), 16.

comfort, encouragement, and inspiration for people in times of dire stress and great difficulties.”²⁸ The Apocalypse is “protest literature” because it is inherently subversive. It shows little respect for the *status quo*.

In the Quaker tradition, the Apocalypse of John has shaped and empowered a tradition of prophetic engagement with the world that is unique among the Protestant churches.²⁹ Friends have often understood social engagement in the world as an expression of the “apocalyptic battle” reflected in John’s Apocalypse. Because this engagement is filled with conflict, “battle” imagery and terminology are appropriate even though the tactics themselves are those of nonviolence. George Fox and the early Quakers referred to this radical engagement with the world as “the Lamb’s war,” drawing on imagery from the Apocalypse. This “Lamb’s war” is in one sense political, but one waged through the prophetic power of the word, not through the traditional tactics of violence or power politics. Among the three historic peace churches,³⁰ the Friends have articulated the clearest vision of engagement with the world, with the powers of darkness. Arguably, it was George Fox’s reading of the Apocalypse and his Apocalypse-inspired language that most directly effected this difference.³¹

One recent study of the Apocalypse offers a thorough-going political reading. Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther’s *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now* sees in Revelation a consistent critique of the Roman Empire and of any government that, like the Roman imperial cult, demands the allegiance that belongs to Jesus alone.³² Throughout this book the

²⁸ *Comfort and Protest*, 15.

²⁹ For a compelling exposition of the influence of the Apocalypse on the life and thought of both George Fox personally and the larger Quaker tradition, see Douglas Gwyn, *Apocalypse of the Word: The Life and Message of George Fox (1624–1691)* (Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press, 1986).

³⁰ The historic peace churches in the United States consist of the Mennonites, the Friends (Quakers), and the Church of the Brethren.

³¹ Note the judgment of Douglas Gwyn, one of the leading contemporary interpreters of Fox: “Though Fox clearly has a singular grasp of scripture as a whole, Revelation is the only text for which he particularly notes a breakthrough in interpretation. It is also the only book of the Bible to receive an extended, point-by-point interpretation in his writings. But its significance to him is best revealed by the way its language infuses and informs page after page, volume after volume of his works” (Douglas Gwyn, *Apocalypse of the Word*, 186). Gwyn’s interpretation of Fox emphasizes Fox’s indebtedness to apocalyptic thought in contrast to the mystical interpretation of Rufus M. Jones and the “Protestant” interpretation of Geoffrey Nuttall and Hugh Barbour (cf. Douglas Gwyn, *Apocalypse of the Word*, xiii–xxiii, 213–18).

³² Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now*, foreword by Elizabeth McAlister (Orbis Books, 1999).

authors mine the Apocalypse for lessons for today's Christians seeking to understand how to follow Jesus on the way of discipleship. For them, such practical discipleship entails a critique of empire conjoined with real engagement with the poor and disenfranchised.

Howard-Brook and Gwyther say, for instance:

Despite the spiritualized and politically disengaged interpretations of scripture that have become the norm in our churches, seminaries, and Bible study groups, it is clear to us that Revelation, like all the other biblical texts, was involved in a pitched battle over issues of spirit such as economics and politics.... Because Revelation took seriously the world of the Roman Empire—and declared it a blasphemous caricature of God's sovereignty over the world—we can take our own world no less seriously.³³

Thus, for some readers, the message of the Apocalypse is not a message of "escape" from this world, but a celebration that the domination system of this world has been defeated in the death and resurrection of Jesus and that Christians must resist the seductive power of that domination system. Its message is a message of nonviolent resistance and its power lies in its unmasking of the present order.³⁴ As Richard Bauckham has said, "Those who imagine early Christianity as a quietist and apolitical movement should study the book of Revelation."³⁵ And as Bauckham has said elsewhere, the message of the Apocalypse "is not that the here-and-now are left behind in an escape into heaven or the eschatological future, but that the here-and-now look quite different when they are opened to transcendence."³⁶ The Apocalypse is, in fact, "the most powerful piece of political resistance literature from the period of the early Empire."³⁷

No confessional stance or religious commitment is required to recognize the subversive power and this-worldly potential of the Apocalypse. In the Japanese occupation of Korea during the Second World War, the Japanese were wary of the subversive power of preaching from the Apocalypse. As a result, they prohibited Korean preachers from preaching from the Apocalypse.³⁸

³³ Howard-Brook and Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire*, xxiv.

³⁴ Cf. Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, The Powers, vol. 3 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1992), 324.

³⁵ Richard Bauckham, "The Fallen City: Revelation 18," chapt. 6 in *The Bible in Politics: How to Read the Bible Politically*, by Richard Bauckham (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 101.

³⁶ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, New Testament Theology (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 7–8.

³⁷ Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 38.

³⁸ *Comfort and Protest*, 17.

The idea that the Apocalypse is “resistance literature” is not new. Already in 1920, R. H. Charles wrote:

*The object of the Apocalypse was to encourage the faithful to resist even to death the blasphemous claims of the State, and to proclaim the coming victory of the cause of God and of His Christ not only in the individual Christian, and the corporate body of such individuals, but also in the nations as such in their national and international life and relations. It lays down the only true basis for national ethics and international law. Hence the Seer claims not only the after-world for God and for His people, but also this world.*³⁹

But “resistance literature” does not say enough, since there are many conceptions of resistance and as many corresponding political perspectives.⁴⁰ For many scholars, “apocalyptic” is nearly synonymous with “other-worldly” and escapist. This questionable association derives in part from German scholarship’s dislike of any works which “breathe anything but the clarity of a timeless and logical terminology.”⁴¹

³⁹ R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, Vol. 1, *The International Critical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1920), xxii; emphasis mine. Although Charles’s claim that the Apocalypse “lays down the only true basis for national ethics and international law” is probably too bold, he is correct in seeing the ethic of the Apocalypse as a politically engaged, practical ethic.

⁴⁰ For a helpful delineation of the various “political perspectives” reflected in the literature of Early Judaism and a discussion of how the Apocalypse fits within that literature, see Adela Yarbro Collins, “The Political Perspective of the Revelation to John,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 96 (1977): 241–56. Cf. also Klaus Wengst, “Babylon the Great and the New Jerusalem: The Visionary View of Political Reality in the Revelation of John,” in *Politics and Theopolitics in the Bible and Postbiblical Literature*, edited by Henning Graf Reventlow, Yair Hoffman, and Benjamin Uffenheimer, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series*, no. 171 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 189–202; Bauckham, “Fallen City”; Oliver O’Donovan, “The Political Thought of the Book of Revelation,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 37 (1986): 61–94; Walter Dietrich, “Gott als König: Zur Frage nach der theologischen und politischen Legitimität religiöser Begriffsbildung,” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 77 (1980): 251–68; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Visionary Rhetoric and Social-Political Situation,” chapt. 7 in *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 181–203; Thomas Harding, “Take Back the Apocalypse,” *Touchstone* 3, no. 1 (January 1985): 29–35; Elemer Kocsis, “Apokalyptik und politisches Interesse im Spätjudentum,” *Judaica* 27 (1971): 71–89; J. A. du Rand, “An Apocalyptic Text, Different Contexts and an Applicable Ethos,” *Journal of Theology in South Africa* 78 (1992): 75–83; and Heinz Schürmann, *Studien zur neutestamentlichen Ethik*, in collaboration with Thomas Söding, *Stuttgarter biblische Aufsatzbände* (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1990); see esp. 269–286, 307–378.

⁴¹ Klaus Koch, *The Rediscovery of Apocalyptic: A Polemical Work on a Neglected Area of Biblical Studies and Its Damaging Effects on Theology and Philosophy*, trans-

Index of Ancient Sources

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