

The Lamb is the Key:  
Unlocking Revelation, all of Scripture, and the Jesus Way  
through a layered reading of John's Apocalypse.

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Submitted to Dr. Bradley Jersak

April 28, 2022

John's Apocalypse

BIB5726

John's Apocalypse has been a troublesome book since the beginning. Many interpreters, taking their cue from the Revelator's promise to "show what must soon take place,"<sup>1</sup> have seen in Revelation a coded sequence of end-time events. The only work remaining is to decode the symbols to reveal the book's one true meaning. Yet, as ubiquitous and durable as this hermeneutic is, textual evidence suggests that most early Christian interpreters did not read it this way. This paper will demonstrate that for many of the earliest Christian communities, the image of the Slain Lamb from the second apocalyptic vision<sup>2</sup> was the key to reading this complex book. Not only that, the vision of the Slain Lamb unsealing the scroll shaped how they read all of scripture, even impacting their understanding of the nature of God. This hermeneutic is a necessary correction for modern Christians that can lead to a more beautiful, less violent view of Revelation.

Reading Revelation as a coded sequence of end-time events seems to have taken off during the Constantinian shift.<sup>3</sup> Prior, there was near-unanimous agreement that Babylon, sitting on seven hills,<sup>4</sup> was the Roman empire. Tertullian, writing in the 2nd century, declared: "[John] means indeed the present empire...what obstacle is there but the Roman state?"<sup>5</sup> The Church's alignment with the empire required a hermeneutical shift. If, as Eusebius claimed, the Emperor was an agent of Christ who liberated the Church,<sup>6</sup> then the beasts and other evil powers formerly identified with Rome must either be spiritualized or relocated into some distant and prophetic future.

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<sup>1</sup> Revelation 1:1 (NRSV).

<sup>2</sup> Revelation 5:1-14.

<sup>3</sup> Jordan D. Wood, "Assessing the 'Constantinian Shift': A Defense of the Theological Question" (Lecture, "For the Good of Many:" Constantine and the Edict of Milan in its 1700th Anniversary, St. Louis, MO, September 20, 2013), [https://www.academia.edu/11996556/Assessing\\_the\\_Constantinian\\_Shift\\_A\\_Defense\\_of\\_the\\_Theological\\_Question](https://www.academia.edu/11996556/Assessing_the_Constantinian_Shift_A_Defense_of_the_Theological_Question). The Constantinian Shift is a useful term that seems to have been coined by Jordan Wood. This phrase names the historical shift in the church's position, influence, and relationship to power starting with the Edict of Milan in 313 CE and culminating around 390 CE when Bishop Ambrose successfully forced Emperor Theodosius I to do penance. While Constantine was essential to this change, he is not culpable for the ways in which Christian leaders embraced imperial power, compromising Biblical interpretation and theology to justify doing so.

<sup>4</sup> Revelation 17:9.

<sup>5</sup> David W. Bercot, ed., *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, Scribd Ebook (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 791.

<sup>6</sup> Eusebius of Caesaria, *Eusebius: Church History, Life of Constantine the Great, and Oration in Praise of Constantine*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. Earnest Richardson, Logos Ebook, vol. 1, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series (New York, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1890), 583. Just one example of Eusebius' enthusiasm: "The universal Saviour opens the heavenly gates of his Father's kingdom to those whose course is thitherward from this world. Our emperor, emulous of his Divine example, having purged his earthly dominion from every stain of impious error, invites each holy and pious worshiper within his imperial mansions, earnestly desiring to save with all its crew that mighty vessel of which he is the appointed pilot."

The only real question was when? Hillary of Poitiers and his student, Martin of Tours, proposed dates at the end of the fourth century. As those dates passed without apocalypse, others would offer new schemes culminating in 500, 794, 800, 847, or 992 CE, with a crowd of potential new dates at the turn of the first Millennium.<sup>7</sup> Later, Pope Innocent III argued for 1284 CE, since that was 666 years following the founding of Islam.<sup>8</sup> Michael Servetus,<sup>9</sup> Thomas Muntzer,<sup>10</sup> Martin Luther,<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Edwards,<sup>12</sup> John Wesley,<sup>13</sup> and even Botticelli<sup>14</sup> all set dates for Christ's return. Most centuries have garnered a double fist-full of such predictions, almost all of which featured God's violent retribution against the wicked. The frantic declarations of Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, Tim LaHaye, and others like them are nothing new.

In contrast, most Christians before the Constantinian Shift read the book of Revelation in a more layered manner. Revelation was not primarily about future social or political events but an unveiling of what God was doing in the world and how the persecuted could remain faithful. This way of reading the Apocalypse grew from the conviction that all of scripture was unsealed by the crucified Christ. The Emmaus episode in Luke's gospel established this pattern.<sup>15</sup> In his interaction with the disappointed disciples, Jesus did something that became paradigmatic for the Church: "Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the

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<sup>7</sup> "List of Dates Predicted for Apocalyptic Events," in *Wikipedia*, April 21, 2022, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=List\\_of\\_dates\\_predicted\\_for\\_apocalyptic\\_events&oldid=1083887449](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=List_of_dates_predicted_for_apocalyptic_events&oldid=1083887449). Wikipedia offers a fascinating crowd-sourced list of dates for the Apocalypse, many with original sources. It's shocking how long the list is.

<sup>8</sup> Smith, Thomas W., "How to Craft a Crusade Call: Pope Innocent III and Quia Maior (1213).," *Historical Research* 92, no. 255 (January 17, 2019): 23, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2281.12258>.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Servetus, *The Restoration of Christianity: An English Translation of Christianismi Restitutio*, trans. Christopher A Hoffman and Marian Hillar (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 2007). Servetus claimed that the reign of Satan began at the Council of Nicea, and would end with Armageddon in 1585.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Jay Gould, *Questioning the Millennium*. (London: Vintage, 1998), 48. Muntzer declared the Millennium to have begun in 1525.

<sup>11</sup> Eugen Weber, *Apocalypses: Prophecies, Cults and Millennial Beliefs Through the Ages* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2011), 66. Luther's prediction was that the world would certainly end before 1600.

<sup>12</sup> Weber, 171. Edwards predicted the year 2000 as the end of all things.

<sup>13</sup> Tom McIver, *The End of the World: An Annotated Bibliography* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1999), 269. Wesley's guess was 1836.

<sup>14</sup> Will Durant, *The Renaissance*, 1953 Edition, vol. 5, *The Story of Civilization* (Simon and Schuster, 1953), 139. Yes, the Renaissance painter!

<sup>15</sup> Luke 24:14-49. The method is shown in the interaction with the disciples on the road to Emmaus, and then reiterated and confirmed in Jesus' words to the disciples in the Upper Room appearance.

scriptures.”<sup>16</sup> For Jesus, his disciples, and all Christians through most of the first century, scripture comprised the Tanakh—the law, the prophets, and other writings that provided Judaism’s spiritual, ethical, and legal foundations. Rabbis, then and prior, read and taught scripture in a layered fashion that included the literal/historical sense of the text, but expanded beyond to other symbolic, spiritualized, or ethical readings. The earliest followers of Jesus were all Jewish.<sup>17</sup> They learned to read scripture in this way from their Rabbis, so this layered method was their natural hermeneutic.<sup>18</sup> In the Emmaus narrative, Jesus took this well-established Rabbinical hermeneutic and added a new layer. In addition to the historical, ethical, and spiritual meaning, Jesus showed how the text also pointed to himself. With this example in mind, the earliest followers of Jesus began to read all of scripture with the additional layer of finding Christ in it, one way or another.<sup>19</sup>

We cannot make good sense of Revelation without this background because Revelation is a thoroughly Jewish document crafted by an author well-versed in this multi-layered Rabbinic hermeneutic. Peter Leithart says, “Revelation alludes to or echoes...virtually every book of the OT. It is the NT’s ‘OT-est’ book...John does not use the OT ‘expositionally’ but ‘compositionally...He writes *with* scripture rather than *about* it.”<sup>20</sup> Stacking images, allusions,

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<sup>16</sup> Luke 24:27 (NRSV).

<sup>17</sup> Almost all the earliest Christians were Jewish, including Jesus and most of the authors of the books that comprise the New Testament. Before the crucifixion and through most of the first century, Jesus’ followers were a sect of reformist Jews. (This is arguably the case in some communities into the early 2nd century.) There was debate as early as the events of Acts 15 as to whether gentiles joining the community were joining a form of Judaism or something different, but it really wasn’t until after 70 CE with the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, that the distinction between Judaism and Christianity began to become more clear. Even then, the two groups didn’t universally see each other as two separate religions until sometime in the early 2nd century. An interesting example of this evolution can be seen in Melito’s sermon *On Pascha*, which was likely written between 160-180 CE. Melito was a Quatrodecimen. This group maintained a number of Jewish practices and observances, including the one they are named for, celebrating Pascha in the night on the 14th of Nisan, following the Jewish practice. Unlike modern “messianic Christians,” Melito and those like him were not Christians appropriating Jewish practices. They saw themselves as Jews, following the Jewish Messiah. While there were many new things in their religious belief and practice that came from Jesus, for the Quatrodecimens and others like them, these new things were in continuity with their Judaism rather than in contradiction to it.

<sup>18</sup> Bradley Jersak, “Interpretation of Sacred Texts Lecture” (Class Lecture, Interpretation of Sacred Texts Class, St. Stephen’s University, March 24, 2022).

<sup>19</sup> Sometimes Christ was seen in messianic prophecies (i.e. Isaiah’s Suffering Servant, Isa 53) but there were many other acceptable ways to find Jesus in scriptures that seem unrelated to him in a literal reading. Allegory (i.e. Jesus is the rock that provided water, Num. 17:6), positive examples (i.e. Jesus is a better Joshua who leads his people into a better promised land.), negative examples (i.e. Jesus is unlike the wicked kings of Israel that led their people into idolatry), and many others. Augustine’s counsel suggests that when faced with any confusing passage, the best practice was to “carefully turn over in our minds and meditate upon what we read till an interpretation be found that tends to establish the reign of love.”

<sup>20</sup> Peter J Leithart, *Revelation 1-11*, vol. 1, International Theological Commentary (Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018), 4–5.

and quotes from the Septuagint, the Revelator created a layered mosaic that draws on the historical meaning and symbolism of his source texts while re-contextualizing them to reveal his vision of Jesus Christ.<sup>21</sup>

John's Apocalypse opens by telling the reader that it is "The revelation of Jesus Christ..."<sup>22</sup> Revelation, translating *αποκαλυψις*, means an "uncovering" or "laying bare."<sup>23</sup> Michael Gorman explains this is "a revelation about Christ, from Christ, or both."<sup>24</sup> This unveiling begins with a vision of Christ addressing seven churches in Asia Minor.<sup>25</sup> Starting with Chapter 4, a second vision brings the Revelator into the Divine throne room. He hears thunder and music. He sees fire, lightning, four fantastical creatures, and twenty-four elders singing praise to the One on a radiant throne. This sensory explosion is interrupted when John notices that the throne's Occupant holds a scroll "sealed with seven seals."<sup>26</sup>

An angel asks, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" Something is terribly wrong, and the Revelator "began to weep bitterly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or look into it."<sup>27</sup> Then one of the elders comforts him; Someone worthy has been found! "See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals."<sup>28</sup> The "Lion of the tribe of Judah" is a Messianic reference drawing on Jacob's Genesis 49 prophetic blessing that rulership would never depart from Judah's house.<sup>29</sup> The "Root of David" is an image from Isaiah 11, referring to a "spirit-filled servant of Yahweh" of Jesse and David's

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<sup>21</sup> Phillip G. Kayser, "Cross References of Old Testament to Revelation," Biblical Blueprints, accessed April 12, 2022, [https://kaysercommentary.com/Sermons/New%20Testament/Revelation/Revelation%201\\_1-11/GraphicsCharts/Cross%20References.md](https://kaysercommentary.com/Sermons/New%20Testament/Revelation/Revelation%201_1-11/GraphicsCharts/Cross%20References.md). This commentator cites over 1000 references to Hebrew scripture in the book of Revelation!

<sup>22</sup> Revelation 1:1 (NRSV).

<sup>23</sup> Thayer, Joseph H., *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, Logos eBook (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997), 26.

<sup>24</sup> Gorman, Michael J., *Reading Revelation Responsibly: Uncivil Worship and Witness*, Kindle eBook (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 62.

<sup>25</sup> Revelation 1:9-3:22

<sup>26</sup> Revelation 5:1 (NRSV).

<sup>27</sup> Revelation 5:4 (NRSV).

<sup>28</sup> Revelation 5:5 (NRSV).

<sup>29</sup> George A. Buttrick, ed., *The Interpreter's Bible: James, Peter, John, Jude, Revelation.*, vol. 12 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1957), 406.

lineage.<sup>30</sup> This warrior Lion was deemed worthy on the basis of conquest. John turns to look at this victorious Lion, and the unveiling occurs.<sup>31</sup> Instead of seeing a lion, mane damp with the blood of his defeated enemies, he sees “a lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered.”<sup>32</sup> This victorious Lion, who is really a slaughtered Lamb, takes the scroll. At this, the gathered elders and fantastic creatures all begin to praise the Lamb’s worthiness. The angel had declared the Lion worthy because he had conquered. This song, then, should be a tribute to that victory. How is the victory portrayed? “For you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe...”<sup>33</sup>

The victory of the Lion is the polyoptic image of a slain lamb which is also alive. This is the first of twenty-nine times the Lamb appears in the Apocalypse. The Revelator chose an image rich with layered scriptural meaning. God provided an animal sacrifice<sup>34</sup> to save Isaac on Mount Moriah.<sup>35</sup> The enslaved Hebrews prepared a lamb that provided both sustenance for their escape and blood to mark their homes for salvation, forever commemorated by the Passover lamb.<sup>36</sup> In the Sinai wilderness, Moses enumerated the ritual sacrifices that included lambs.<sup>37</sup> In 1 Samuel and 2nd Chronicles, the sacrifice of lambs is portrayed repeatedly, culminating in Ezra at the dedication of the rebuilt temple where hundreds of lambs were sacrificed as sin offerings for the returning exiles.<sup>38</sup> Slain lambs were the centerpiece of the sacrificial system that bound Israel to God in symbol and ritual, communicating forgiveness, reconciliation, thanksgiving, and covenant belonging. To say that a lamb was a potent and central symbol in the relationship between Israel and God would be an understatement.<sup>39</sup> Through the narrative

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<sup>30</sup> Leithart, *Revelation 1-11*, 1:259.

<sup>31</sup> Gorman, Michael J., *Reading Revelation Responsibly*, 119. Gorman calls this moment “the Christophany.”

<sup>32</sup> Revelation 5:6 (NRSV).

<sup>33</sup> Revelation 5:9 (NRSV).

<sup>34</sup> The English translates this animal as “ram.” The underlying Hebrew is רֶמֶס, which means a male goat or sheep. Interestingly, it also is a root word in Hebrew for leader or one who governs, so there is already a stacking of meanings at this ancient point. The Septuagint renders the Hebrew into κριος, which carries the same double meaning.

<sup>35</sup> Genesis 22:8.

<sup>36</sup> Exodus 12.

<sup>37</sup> Exodus 29, 34; Leviticus 9, 12, 14, 17, 22, 23; Numbers 6, 7, 15, 28, 29; Deuteronomy 32.

<sup>38</sup> 1 Samuel 7, 15, 17; II Chronicles 29, 30, 35; Ezra 6-8.

<sup>39</sup> Even so, within the prophetic tradition, there were hints that something more was going on with the sacrificial lamb. In Isaiah 1:11, the prophet voices God’s concern: “What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices...I have had enough of burnt offerings...I do not delight in the blood...of lambs.” In 11:6, Isaiah portrays a future when the sacrifice of lambs will have come to an end, and lambs would live in peace next to predators and children. In 40:11, Isaiah speaks of a Messianic leader, or perhaps God, as a caring shepherd, who doesn’t

of Hebrew scripture, the lamb also accumulated both the symbolism of divine care and, simultaneously, of suffering that Israel would repeatedly experience. When John the Baptist declared of Jesus, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,”<sup>40</sup> he linked Jesus to this tradition of the sacrificial lamb and everything that symbol already meant. On the back of this declaration in John’s gospel, the Apocalypse grants Jesus the title, “Lamb that was slain.” This title appears far more frequently in the Apocalypse than “Jesus Christ” or “Christ.”<sup>41</sup>

For the Lion’s victory to be imaged in a Slain Lamb, a complete revision of theology was required. Lions denote strength, violent ability, and leadership, qualities not often associated with lambs, but the “sevenfold ascription of power, wealth, wisdom, might, honor, glory and blessing” means that this lamb “is no symbol of weakness, but of strength through suffering.”<sup>42</sup> Richard Bauckham comments: “By juxtaposing the two contrasting images, John has forged a new symbol of conquest by sacrificial death,”<sup>43</sup> suggesting, according to Guthrie, that “God is going to achieve victory by totally unexpected and apparently inappropriate means.”<sup>44</sup> The lamb, then, is not merely a symbol of Christ crucified but also a revelation of the nature of God. “What the Lamb does, God does. There is complete accord between them.”<sup>45</sup> After the sixth seal is opened, the Lamb and the One seated on the throne are identified so closely as to be one. The elder tells John: “For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life.”<sup>46</sup> Jean Pierre Prévost states it clearly: The Slain and Exalted Lamb is “the true face of God.”<sup>47</sup> This is not a momentary episode in Jesus’ existence. This is an unveiling of the eternal nature of God. Gorman: “In his exaltation Jesus remains the Lamb, the crucified one. He participates in

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sacrifice lambs, but protects them. Even stranger, in chapter 53, Isaiah speaks of someone, perhaps a messianic figure, that is oppressed and afflicted in a great act of injustice, and who responds by behaving like a gentle lamb being led to the slaughter.

<sup>40</sup> John 1:29 (NRSV).

<sup>41</sup> Guthrie, Donald, “The Lamb in the Structure of the Book of Revelation,” *Vox Evangelical*, no. 12 (1981): 64.

<sup>42</sup> Guthrie, Donald, 65.

<sup>43</sup> Bauckham, Richard, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 74.

<sup>44</sup> Guthrie, Donald, “The Lamb in the Structure of the Book of Revelation,” 65.

<sup>45</sup> Guthrie, Donald, 65.

<sup>46</sup> Revelation 7:17 (NRSV).

<sup>47</sup> Prévost, Jean Pierre, *How to Read the Apocalypse*, trans. Bowden, John and Lydamore, Margaret (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1993), 83.

God's identity and reign, making him worthy of worship, as the slaughtered Lamb, and only as such. This is the consistent witness of the New Testament: that the exalted Lord remains the crucified Jesus."<sup>48</sup>

Taking the Lamb that was Slain as the interpretive key of Revelation opens a path out of the frenzied tradition of date-setting and its frequent accompaniment of violent images of God. Brian Zahnd makes this point: "The lamb conquers by being sacrificed not by waging violence. Rome, like all empires, rules through violent beastly power, but God rules through the lamb's power of co-suffering love."<sup>49</sup> Any apparent violence and conquest in the words of Revelation must be read through the transforming lens of the Slain Lamb. This is the only One worthy to open the scroll and explain the mysteries within.

Various explanations have been given as to what precisely this scroll represents. Gorman: "This scroll has been variously identified as the Scriptures, the Book of Life, and a legal document, but most often as the eschatological plan of God to judge and save the world—a plan that is, rather literally, about to unfold."<sup>50</sup> All of these interpretations have their strengths, but all fail if the assumption is that one or another of these readings is the "one true meaning" of the text. Following the layered Rabbinical hermeneutic, the earliest Christians started with a different assumption. For them, the "one true meaning" was that every text contained layers of meaning. That meant the scroll and its opening could be several things simultaneously.

First, the Slain Lamb unlocked the mystery of Revelation itself. The Lamb put the events of the vision into motion, and those events cannot contradict the Lamb's nature. The war the Lamb wages will be waged in the way of sacrifice. The wrath the Lamb exerts will be a wrath of sacrifice. Richard Hays comments: "The shock of this reversal discloses the central mystery of the Apocalypse: God overcomes the world not through a show of force but through the suffering and death of Jesus."<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Gorman, Michael J., *Reading Revelation Responsibly*, 122.

<sup>49</sup> Brian Zahnd, "Discussing Revelation, Week 7, Revelation 5" (Class Lecture, John's Apocalypse Open Table Study, St. Stephen's University, October 21, 2021).

<sup>50</sup> Gorman, Michael J., *Reading Revelation Responsibly*, 119.

<sup>51</sup> Hays, Richard B., *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*, eBook (London: HarperOne, 2014), 174.



Second, the Slain Lamb unlocked the mystery of all of scripture. In the Emmaus narrative,<sup>52</sup> it was the resurrected Jesus—the Lamb who recently had been quite literally slain—who opened up the mysteries of scripture. He took scripture the disciples already knew and showed them what they had previously been unable to see. While scripture already had a historical and literal meaning from Israel’s history and certainly had additional layers of ethical and spiritual meaning, Jesus revealed a final layer, unveiling the hidden ways that he could be found “in all the scriptures.” Even at the Synagogue in Luke 4, Jesus read scripture in this way. The ancient words of Isaiah already carried their own historical meaning, but Jesus added this interpretive layer: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”<sup>53</sup>

Victorinus of Pettau wrote the earliest extant commentary on Revelation in the final decades of the third century. Commenting on the scroll of Revelation 5, he wrote: “This book signifies the Old Testament, which has been given into the hands of our Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>54</sup> A century later, commenting on the same verse, Jerome would write, “The book is the entire holy scripture.”<sup>55</sup> Apringius of Beja, writing in 600 CE, said, “All Scriptures that were closed and sealed, he opened and unsealed.”<sup>56</sup> Fr. John Behr, noted expert on the Patristics, summarizes: “It’s Christ who opened the book. Before Christ, the book was closed. Paul knew scripture inside and out. He was trained by the Rabbi Gamaliel. Did it lead him to Christ? No. It led him to persecute Christians. It wasn’t until he encountered Christ that scripture was opened for him.”<sup>57</sup> Eugene Peterson points out that Philip’s interaction with the Ethiopian court official in Acts shows an example of the disciples reading scripture in this way only a few months after the resurrection.<sup>58</sup> “Philip taught him how to read in the way that he himself had been taught to read. He preached Christ

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<sup>52</sup> Luke 24:27, NRSV.

<sup>53</sup> Peterson, Eugene H., *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John & the Praying Imagination* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 64. Peterson points out that this episode in Luke may be the first instance of Jesus using this hermeneutic on the scripture that came before him, saying, “Jesus unsealed the scroll by revealing its present meaning.”

<sup>54</sup> Bercot, *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, 1895.

<sup>55</sup> Jerome, “Jerome on Revelation 5:1,” Catena Bible & Commentaries, accessed April 11, 2022, <https://catenabile.com>.

<sup>56</sup> Apringius, “Apringius of Beja on Revelation 5:1,” Catena Bible & Commentaries, accessed April 11, 2022, <https://catenabile.com>.

<sup>57</sup> John Behr, “Discussing Revelation, Week 7, Revelation 5” (Class Lecture, John’s Apocalypse Open Table Study, St. Stephen’s University, October 21, 2021).

<sup>58</sup> Acts 8:26-40.

to him, and Christ unsealed the scroll...revealing the word of God so that it was understood personally and immediately.”<sup>59</sup>

Following the Reformation, western Protestant Christianity largely settled into a flat hermeneutic, focusing almost entirely on the historical/literal sense of the text. Authorial intent, historical context, and the literal sense of the words became paramount. Much great scholarship has come from this stream of interpretation, expanding our understanding of the text, but by losing the ancient layered way of reading, taught first by the Rabbis and then by Jesus, various Christian traditions have fallen into many difficulties with the text. The interpretation of Revelation has been a particular victim of this struggle. Commentators are often inconsistent and arbitrary in which parts of the Apocalypse they read literally or symbolically, with the distinction falling according to what validates their theology. Nowhere are these errors more frequent and flagrant than among those interpreters who read Revelation as a sequence of coded clues to God’s end-time activities rather than seeing Revelation as an unveiling of the work and character of God in Christ.

This layered reading of scripture allowed the Apostles and Patristic interpreters to see Revelation as focused, not primarily on an antichrist or certain terrible world events, but on Jesus, his faithful witness, and those who follow him despite the pressures of empire and evil. Following Rabbinical practice, early Christians understood that “prophecy, in the biblical tradition, is not exclusively or even primarily about making pronouncements and predictions concerning the future. Rather, prophecy is speaking words of comfort and/or challenge, on behalf of God, to the people of God in their concrete historical situation.”<sup>60</sup> In this light, Revelation offers sweeping encouragement to people caught in a world that feels out of control and antagonistic.

If the Slain Lamb is the interpretive key to Revelation, it must change how we read the book. The One who opens the scroll wages holy war through self-sacrifice. Jesus does no killing. His only weapon is his convicting word. The blood on his robes is his own. We mustn’t fall into the trap of making the Exalted Christ of Revelation say or do

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<sup>59</sup> Peterson, Eugene H., *Reversed Thunder*, 65.

<sup>60</sup> Gorman, Michael J., *Reading Revelation Responsibly*, 34.

things that would be anathema to Jesus in the Gospels.<sup>61</sup> Gorman summarizes: “Christ is Lord, Christ is victorious, and Christ conquers by cruciform faithful resistance: not by inflicting but by absorbing violence; not by actually killing but by speaking his powerful word.”<sup>62</sup> In the same way, Revelation must not be leveraged to permit Christians to behave in ways that violate Jesus’ teachings. “Lamb Christology is inseparable from ethics...the slaughtered lamb reveals God and also reveals what it means to be faithful to God.”<sup>63</sup> Readings of Revelation that justify violence in the name of religion, or that ignore the environment on the basis that all the earth will be burned up in the end, or that call for an urgent fear-based evangelism, have literalized symbols in such a way as to obscure the unveiling of Jesus in this text. Like Jesus, his followers are to be faithful witnesses, trusting their lives to God, holding tight to Jesus’ way of other-centered, co-suffering love, even when that path requires self-sacrifice or death. Eugene Peterson, speaking as a pastor, points to the practical implications of this book:

“The task of faith, for those who agreed to be [Jesus’] disciples, was to accept the literal truth of the title Son of Man under such conditions, to immerse themselves in cross-bearing, self-denial, suffering, and death at the same time that they believed that everything they did and spoke was part of the victorious rule of God’s kingdom.”<sup>64</sup>

The victory of the Slain Lamb unlocks Revelation, all of scripture, and re-voices Jesus’ invitation for all subsequent generations. The way for Christians is the way of the Slain Lamb. The visions of the Apocalypse reveal God’s nature. This turns the chaos of existence into a kind of hopeful order. Regardless of which empire wields power or which oppressive spiritual forces seem in ascendance, the invitation continues to be the same: self-giving sacrifice. This will be true in every age until all things are made new, and finally, God is “all in all.”

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<sup>61</sup> This phrase, or one very much like it, comes from Bradley Jersak, although I have no source, only memory.

<sup>62</sup> Gorman, Michael J., *Reading Revelation Responsibly*, 89.

<sup>63</sup> Gorman, Michael J., 123.

<sup>64</sup> Peterson, Eugene H., *Reversed Thunder*, 30.

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