

# PARADOXICAL CONQUERING IN THE APOCALYPSE OF JOHN:

## A SUMMARY OF MY DISSERTATION RESEARCH

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### Introduction

The investigations embarked upon in my dissertation have revealed that the Apocalypse of John expresses an ethical imperative for its readers and hearers to continually live as ‘conquerors’, but precisely in the sense demonstrated by the slaughtered Lamb. The Apocalypse of John promotes a Jesus who has emptied the lexical definition of νικάω of its violent and oppressive meanings and filled it with new purpose. John’s<sup>1</sup> Apocalypse also encourages Christians situated in Asia Minor toward the end of the first century CE<sup>2</sup> to adopt this reoriented vocation in the form of two mandates: being faithful witnesses to the testimony of Jesus in the midst of the Roman Empire and to passively endure hostility without taking up arms against their opponents. These observations are worthy of highlighting and summarizing in this paper.

### The Context of the Oppressive and Violent Conqueror is Essential

In the first chapter of my dissertation it is demonstrated that the myth of Roman victory was widely propagated throughout the empire. This ideology regarding the motif of conquering, which was dominant and pervasive in the culture, projected the image of the victors as those who have subdued their enemies with violence, bloodshed, and brutal force.<sup>3</sup> The manner in which Rome expanded their empire,

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<sup>1</sup> In Rev 22:9 John is identified as one of the prophets. In Rev 10:11 he is commanded to “prophesy” further. In 1:3; 22:7, 10, 18-19 the entire document is called a “prophecy”. Rev. 10:9-10 describes John eating the scroll in imitation of the prophet Ezekiel. In 19:10 the angel commands John to not worship him because he is a fellow servant with John’s brethren who hold the testimony of Jesus, and the testimony of Jesus is called “the spirit of prophecy.” There is a strong resemblance to the commissioning of the prophets in the Hebrew Bible with John’s own commissioning by Christ (Isa. 6:1-13; Jer. 1:4-19; Ezek. 2:1-3:11; cf. Rev. 1:10-20).

<sup>2</sup> After examining the arguments of both the early date and the late date for composition, the arguments in favor of the later are most compelling. First of all, Rome’s designation as “Babylon” in Rev 17:5 makes far better sense after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE than prior to its destruction. “Babylon” is likewise used to describe Rome in Jewish literature, but only after the temple’s destruction (especially *4 Ezra* 3.1-2, 28-31; *2 Baruch* 10.1-3; 11.1; 67.7; *Sibylline Oracles* 5.143, 159-60). The presence of prophets and a lack of apostolic presence seem to likewise reflect a time after the apostles died toward the end of the first century CE (cf. the *Didache*). The allusions to the various manifestations of the imperial cult better reflect the reign of Domitian than the reign of Nero. Irenaeus (140-202 CE) states that the visions of John’s Apocalypse were seen at the end of Domitian’s reign (*Against Heresies* 5.30.3). The testimony of both Eusebius (*HE* 3.17-18) and Victorinus of Pettau (*Apocalypse* 10.11) likewise attest to the time of Domitian. The Apocalypse is not quoted, cited, or mentioned prior to the second century CE, favoring the Domitianic date. The arguments of Kenneth Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation* (Tyler: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989) are based upon too many assumptions and dubious exegetical work. For a comprehensive argument favoring the late date, see Mark L. Hitchcock, “A Defense of the Domitianic Date of the Book of Revelation” (PhD diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 2005). For a more concise argument, see especially Adela Yarbro Collins, “Dating the Apocalypse of John,” *BibRes* 26 (1981): 33-45; David A. deSilva, “The Social Setting of the Revelation to John: Conflicts within, Fears Without,” *WTJ* 54 (1992): 273-302.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Velleius Paterculus, *Roman History* 2.90.4, “these then, were the provinces, so extensive, so populous, and so warlike, which Caesar Augustus, about fifty years ago, brought to such a condition of peace...” The calendar

through the subjugation of its territories and the fortitude of its legions, contributed to the dominant understanding of the conqueror.<sup>4</sup> The rulers of Rome, from Julius Caesar down to Domitian, each commanded the empire in a manner which lent credence to the understanding of a militaristic conqueror. The goddess Nike, who appeared in many avenues of life, both public and private, publicized the divine blessings upon the victors. The seven churches located in Asia Minor, although fairly distanced from the city of Rome and her emperor, were nevertheless bordered with many imperial temples which regularly offered sacrifices to Caesar. The images of the various emperors (both current and previous) in addition to the goddess Nike were present on the coins extant throughout each of the seven cities addressed by John.<sup>5</sup> The Apocalypse of John even uses the verb νικάω to describe the violent imperial opponents of the saints in Rev. 6:2; 11:7; and 13:7.<sup>6</sup>

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inscription of Priene (circa 9 BCE), a city southwest of Ephesus, depicts how the various provinces within the Roman Empire celebrating the peace established by Augustus, labeling it as “gospel”: “Since Providence, which has ordered all things and is deeply interested in our life, has set in most perfect order by giving us Augustus, whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit humankind, sending him as a savior, both for us and for our descendants, that he might *end war and arrange all things*, and since he, Caesar, by his appearance excelled even our anticipations, surpassing all previous benefactors, and *not even leaving to posterity any hope of surpassing what he has done*, and since the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the gospel for the world that came by reason of him which Asia resolved in Smyrna.” (italics mine).

<sup>4</sup> Over 100 of the occurrences of νικάω in the writings of Josephus denote violent military suppression of one’s enemies.

<sup>5</sup> Note this example minted in Thyatira. This coin depicts Domitian’s head crowned with a laurel wreath. The reverse of these coins illustrated a standing winged Nike holding a wreath and a palm branch. The appearance of a diversity of Domitian/Nike coins within Thyatira suggests that the city wished to positively honor his rule by suggesting that it was blessed by the goddess herself



<sup>6</sup> I follow the summary of Steven J. Scherrer who maintains that it “has been long recognized that chap 13 of the book of Revelation is a thinly veiled polemic—using language from Daniel 7—against the Roman Imperial Cult.” See especially his “Signs and Wonders in the Imperial Cult: A New Look at a Roman Religious Institution in the Light of Rev 13:13-15,” *JBL* 103 (1984): 599. Harland, *Associations*, 252 suggests that the beast might also have been understood as imperial power during the 1st century CE. Cf. also Schüssler Fiorenza, *Justice and Judgment*, 191; Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 733; Charles, *Revelation*, 1:345; Carter, *Revelation*, 90; Mangina, *Revelation*, 161; Roloff, *Revelation*, 155; Boring, *Revelation*, 155; Metzger, *Breaking the Code*, 75; Johnson, *Triumph*, 188; Fee, *Revelation*, 180; David L. Barr, *Tales of the End: A Narrative Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, 2nd ed. (Santa Rosa: Polebridge, 1998) 223; Witherington III, *Revelation*, 180; Mounce, *Revelation*, 244; Collins, *Combat Myth*, 172-86; Wright, *Revelation*, 116; Moffat, “Revelation,” 389; Duff, *Who Rides the Beast?*, 67; Kiddle, *Revelation*, 119, 241-9; Blount, *Revelation*, 246; Bauckham, *Theology*, 35; Krodel, *Revelation*, 248; Gorman,

If each of these images, symbols, public figures, and buildings contributed toward the widely accepted understanding of how a conqueror was to be perceived, the summons proclaimed by Christ to each of the seven churches to live as conquerors would have sounded quite strange. Not only are the seven letters each climaxed with the summons “to the one who is conquering” but they additionally pledge to reward those who respond faithfully.<sup>7</sup> It is quite certain that the prophet John did not desire for the churches to imitate the war heroes, generals, or soldiers of Rome by taking up the sword in response to their enemies. It is also highly unlikely that John the Jew, aware of the catastrophic result of the Jewish War which ended with the Roman legions destroying the Jerusalem temple, wished to encourage the churches in Asia Minor to try their hand at revolt.<sup>8</sup> The purpose of my dissertation’s first chapter was to illustrate the extent in which the understanding of the oppressive and militaristic ‘conqueror’ was recognized, embraced, and promoted throughout the Roman Empire, particularly during the period which John composed the Apocalypse.

### Christ Has Successfully Conquered, Albeit Paradoxically

My investigation has also demonstrated in the second chapter of my dissertation that within the narrative of John’s Apocalypse, Jesus Christ has climactically redefined the significance to the verb νικάω. The vision of the Lion/Lamb in 5:1-14 demonstrably set Jesus Christ as the model and example of the one who has conquered.<sup>9</sup> The striking element of this vision is the realization that Christ, who is given messianic titles symbolic of a powerful warrior king, is envisioned as a meek lamb that was brutally slaughtered. In other words, the images of rulership, power, and prestige attributed to Christ were replaced with the symbol of a docile animal which was conquered, implicitly, by the imperial agents. Nevertheless, John asserts that Christ *has indeed conquered*.

The conquering of the Lamb is defined paradoxically unlike the way Rome and her subjects understood, attributed, and propagated the term. The Lamb, in particular, was one who was martyred while enduring a nonviolent attitude toward his executioners. It isn’t the case that Christ fought the decisive battle against Rome and then lost. Rather, he was martyred in faithful obedience to the will of God. John also characterizes the Lamb with the designation “the faithful witness” (1:5; 3:14), a title which serves to establish Christ as the exemplar model for the Church’s evangelistic mission. Christ was martyred for his witness to the gospel concerning an alternative empire which stood at odds with the Roman Empire. For Christ, the kingdom of God was at hand and would soon put an end to all opposing regimes, power structures, and rulers.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, the second chapter of my dissertation demonstrated that the Lamb has thoroughly redefined νικάω in that he has died as a martyr for his faithful witness to the gospel of the coming kingdom of God.

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*Reading Revelation Responsibly*, 124; Keener, *Revelation*, 335-6; Reddish, *Revelation*, 250; Elaine Pagels, *Revelations: Visions, Prophecy, and Politics in the Book of Revelation* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2012) 32-3; Caird, *Revelation*, 161-4 (with some nuance); Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, 209; Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 202; Glasson, *Revelation*, 79; Thompson, *Apocalypse and Empire*, 13; Rowland, *Open Heaven*, 431; Boxall, *Revelation*, 187; Harrington, *Revelation*, 138, 140; Kraybill, *Apocalypse*, 49-50, Fair, *Conquering*, 260; Wilson, “Revelation,” 324-5; Giblin, *Revelation*, 133, who all identify the beast from the sea as Rome.

<sup>7</sup> Revelation 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21.

<sup>8</sup> See esp. L. I. Levine, “Jewish War (66-73 C.E.),” in *ABD*, 3:844.

<sup>9</sup> Particularly in Rev. 5:5, “the Lion that is from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered so as to open the book and its seven seals” (ἐνίκησεν ὁ λέων ὁ ἐκ τῆς φυλῆς Ἰουδα, ἡ ρίζα Δαυίδ, ἀνοίξει τὸ βιβλίον καὶ τὰς ἑπτὰ σφραγίδας αὐτοῦ).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Matt. 4:17; 23; 9:35; 24:14; 25:31-34; Mark 1:14-15; Luke 4:43; 16:16.

## John's Audience is to Conquer in Imitation of the Lamb

Chapter three explored the seven letters addressed by John to the Christian communities in Asia Minor (Rev. 2-3). Each of these letters were placed in their historical context in order to best evaluate, with the highest degree of historical likelihood, how John's readers and hearers residing in Asia Minor toward the end of the first century CE might have understood their contents.<sup>11</sup> The churches are applauded for their areas of faithfulness but are also chastised when they are guilty of mishandling their Christian responsibilities. Each of the letters ends with an expectation for the faithful to live as habitual conquerors (2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21). John hopes to encourage his audience to demonstrate the manner of 'conquering' which is in imitation of the life and death of the Lamb.

After the seven letters were examined thoroughly, I summarized that two noteworthy mandates in particular stood out as best accounting for the various expectations of the churches which Christ expressed. The first mandate involved the followers of Christ becoming faithful witnesses of Jesus' gospel testimony.<sup>12</sup> This vocation required the church to be Christ's witnesses in the midst of the Roman Empire, professing a different kingdom to be ruled by another king: Jesus Christ. Those who desire to be conquerors in accordance to the paradigm set forth by the Lamb were to follow his faithful example of testifying the gospel. The second mandate which was reputedly impressed upon the believers in Asia Minor was the summons to maintain a passive and nonviolent attitude of endurance toward anyone who might oppose the Church and its mission.<sup>13</sup> The small churches, which were each attempting to cope with the wider Greco-Roman culture in which they lived, were to refuse to take up arms against their oppressors, regardless of the nature of hostility and the identity of the opponent.<sup>14</sup> Faithfulness to this mandate may indeed lead to martyrdom, as John is already aware of in the case of Antipas (2:13) and in the obvious case of Christ. In short, those who lived as Christian conquerors were to primarily operate as Christ's witnesses of the gospel of the kingdom and doing so while maintaining a nonviolent demeanor and attitude, willing to accept martyrdom if need arose. Failure to hold fast the testimony of Jesus or a refusal to respond with endurance was considered disloyal by the prophet John, worthy of the severest forms of judgment.

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<sup>11</sup> This point, I regard, is the most important piece of evidence which is, sadly, neglected by fundamentalist readers of the Apocalypse of John.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. 2:4, 10, 13; 3:3, 8, 10, 14, 19-20; 12:11.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. 2:2, 3, 10, 13, 19; 3:10, 14. See also 1:9; 12:11; 20:4-5.

<sup>14</sup> The particular manner of conflict experienced by John's audience was likely to be of the sort described by Pliny the Younger in one of his letters to the emperor Trajan. The exchange between Pliny and Trajan (circa 112 CE) demonstrates that Christians could indeed be killed simply for being Christians. According to Trajan's response, in order to avoid being killed, Christians would have to repeat an invocation to the gods, offer prostration (using wine and frankincense) to Trajan's image, and subsequently curse Christ. There was not an active program of persecution where Christians were sought out and hunted down. Pliny's request for advice from Trajan presupposes, rather, that there was no formal precedent for dealing with the Christian sect. Trajan responded by stating that if the occasion arose then the penalty of death was certainly warranted, although he orders that the Christians should not be actively sought out. The nature of the conflict was one that would not have been perceived by the imperial authorities as out of place. The emperor Domitian, as a conservative citizen of Rome, would have felt no qualms about "keeping the peace" by threatening what he would have perceived as an unpatriotic, upstart religion. The *Pax Romana* was, after all, the most decisive and prized sign of the times. Christians who refused to participate with the imperial cults or other forms of religious activity which they deemed offensive would almost certainly encounter harassment at the local level, which would include social ostracism, public shame, and even the seizure of their property

## Conquering Involves Maintaining the Witness of Jesus unto Death

The fourth chapter demonstrated the extent in which one of the mandates urged upon the Christian ‘conquerors’, living as Christ’s faithful witnesses within the Roman Empire, permeated the Apocalypse of John.<sup>15</sup> By examining the various occurrences of the key phrase of John’s witness terminology, ἡ μαρτυρία Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, I revealed that the nuances of both the subjective and the objective genitives were evoked in its placement and usage.<sup>16</sup> The testimony which Jesus kept and loyally proclaimed during his earthly ministry was about the imminent kingdom of God to be established upon the earth, replacing all other rulers and empires in the process. In addition to the content of Jesus’ own testimony, ἡ μαρτυρία Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ clearly pointed to Jesus the Messiah as the object of trust, faith, and obedience.

The testimony of Jesus carried with it a multiplicity of motifs which add to the richness and character of this important mandate given to John’s audience. It was demonstrated that those who choose to maintain this testimony were exemplified in various visions with suffering, death, and martyrdom (6:9-11; 11:7; 12:11). In pointing toward the faithfulness of Christ as the martyr *par excellence* (1:5; 3:14) it was demonstrated that, if the situation arose, his witnesses were to accept the fate of martyrdom if the opportunity arose, rather than recanting or compromising the testimony. My investigation also observed a prophetic nuance within the testimony of Jesus (19:10). Both the prophet John (1:2, 9) and the martyr Antipas (2:13) were noted as outstanding examples of faithful witnesses from whom the seven churches were to draw encouragement and motivation.

The Apocalypse depicts various visions of faithful witnesses functioning in this important mandate. In 6:9-11 the souls under the altar are described as those who suffered martyrdom because of their witness.<sup>17</sup> Their deaths evoke a testimony that begs the question of divine justice, a question at least some of John’s audience were certainly asking themselves. The extended vision of the two witnesses in 11:1-14 shed much light upon the Church’s mandate. It was demonstrated that the two witnesses represented the prophetic and evangelistic vocation of the Church.<sup>18</sup> Their testimony was met with resistance, violence, and a shameful death at the hands of the beast from the abyss. Fortunately, the witnesses were vindicated with resurrection and exaltation because they loyally maintained their testimony. A further description of Christians martyred on behalf of the testimony of Jesus was examined

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<sup>15</sup> J. Sweet, “Maintaining the Testimony of Jesus: The Suffering of Christians in the Revelation of John,” in *Suffering and Martyrdom in the New Testament*, ed. W. Horbury and B. McNeil (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 102-3, notes that “the apocalyptic part is not so much an attack on the world to encourage the Church, as an attack on the Church, which is embracing the world – to its own deadly danger, and in betrayal of its true role of convicting the world by its witness.”

<sup>16</sup> See Petros Vassiliadis, “The Translation of Martyria Iesou in Revelation,” *BT* 36 (1985): 129-34; Fred Mazzaferri, “Martyria Iesou Revisited,” *BT* 39 (1988): 114-22; Ellingworth, “Marturia,” 138-9; B. Dehandschutter, “The Meaning of Witness in the Apocalypse,” in *L’Apocalypse johannique et l’Apocalyptique dans le Nouveau Testament* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1980), 283-8; G. W. H. Lampe, “The Testimony of Jesus is the Spirit of Prophecy (Rev. 19:10),” in *The New Testament Age: Essays in Honor of Bo Reicke*, Vol. 1, ed. William C. Weinrich (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1984), 245-58; Merrill. C. Tenney, “The Meaning of ‘Witness’ in John,” *BSac* 132 (1975): 229-41; Allison A. Trites, “Μαρτυς and Martyrdom in the Apocalypse: A Semantic Study,” *NovT* 15 (1973): 72-82. Beale, *Revelation*, 183-4, argues persuasively that “it is perhaps best to see an intentional ambiguity and therefore a ‘general’ genitive which includes both subjective and objective aspects.”

<sup>17</sup> τὰς ψυχὰς τῶν ἐσφαγμένων διὰ τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ διὰ τὴν μαρτυρίαν ἣν εἶχον.

<sup>18</sup> Swete, *Revelation*, 134; Beale, *Revelation*, 573; Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 602-3; Bauckham, *Theology*, 85; Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, 178; Fee, *Revelation*, 150.

in 20:4-6, which showed that those beheaded for their faithfulness and refusal to assimilate toward imperial expressions of worship were promised vindication, resurrection, and enthronement in the eschatological kingdom of God.<sup>19</sup> Finally, the metaphor of the lampstand within the Apocalypse contributed to both the identity and the vocation of John's readers as Christ's witnesses.<sup>20</sup>

My examination and discussion of the various ways in which John expresses the mandate to live as Christ's faithful witnesses contributes to the conquering motif. While the dominant understanding of a victorious conqueror included overpowering one's opponents with force, violence, and even death, The Apocalypse of John symbolizes the Christian conquerors in a very different manner.<sup>21</sup> Their mission and vocation involves testifying to a gospel about an enduring and everlasting empire which would topple the powerful regime of Rome. Their allegiance was to another king, lord, and savior, who himself was a victim of Roman execution. These witnesses would not be considered victorious by living in a manner which preserved their lives; rather they conquered by dying on behalf of their testimony and allegiance to this rival empire and king. Instead of accommodating themselves to the Roman Empire and its lifestyle, the Christians placed their citizenship, hopes, ambitions, and sights on the kingdom of God which will be consummated at the *parousia* of Jesus Christ. The summons for John's audience to become and live as conquerors therefore took on a paradoxically different meaning than the exalted victors regularly praised in the Greco-Roman culture.

#### Conquering Involves Enduring Nonviolently

The fifth chapter inquired into the second mandate of the Christian conquerors, that of enduring opposition with nonviolence. The prized trait of faithful believers, ὑπομονή, was argued to carry in its definition of endurance and perseverance the important motif of nonviolent resistance. The very meaning of ὑπομονή definitively required the refusal to take up arms, enact revenge, or return evil for evil. John expected each of his readers to adopt this mandate as their own, which he himself demonstrated right from the Apocalypse's inception (1:9).<sup>22</sup> The Christian community residing in Smyrna was warned

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<sup>19</sup> Osborne, *Revelation*, 704-5; Krodel, *Revelation*, 333-4; Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1988. Morris, *Revelation*, 231, argues that, "John's concern here is with the martyrs." Allison Trites offers a compromising solution by suggesting that "one might apply the prophecy spiritually to all believers through the centuries who have remained faithful to Christ." See her "Witness and the Resurrection in the Apocalypse of John," in *Life in the Face of Death: The Resurrection Message of the New Testament*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 285.

<sup>20</sup> The image of the lampstand represents the Christian community seven times in John's Apocalypse. The first four occurrences appear in the opening vision, where one like a son of man is depicted as standing in the midst of the seven golden lampstands (ἐν μέσῳ τῶν λυχνιῶν), which are classified as the seven churches (1:12, 13, 20 [twice]). I can be observed in John's letter addressed to Ephesus that Christ threatens the removal of their lampstand if they refuse to repent (2:1, 5). The vision of the two witnesses appropriately depicted the dual figures as "the two lampstands" in 11:4.

<sup>21</sup> Carl E. Braaten, "The Significance of Apocalypticism for Systematic Theology," *Int* 25 (1971): 497, argues that "the apocalyptic eschatology can reactivate the mission of the gospel in the world."

<sup>22</sup> The first mention of the nonviolence motif, uttered by John himself (1:9), presents our inquiry with several problems which need to be resolved. John states that he shares with his readers and hearers "the tribulation, the kingdom, and the nonviolent endurance in Christ" (συγκοινωνός ἐν τῇ θλίψει καὶ βασιλείᾳ καὶ ὑπομονῇ ἐν Ἰησοῦ). According to John, "tribulation" is something he and his fellow Christians have suffered and are currently experiencing. "Endurance" is the appropriate nonviolent response toward this hostility, regardless of its level of intensity. The "kingdom" is God's empire to come which John and his readers pledge their true allegiance and citizenship. The difficulty arises in that modern readers are separated two millennia from the context and circumstances of the composition of the Apocalypse. Even though "tribulation" and "endurance" are general terms

concerning their impending imprisonment, torture, and death. Christ exhorted them to maintain their faithfulness, without retaliating with violence, unto death (2:10). Believers in Pergamum were likewise noted for the example of faithful martyrdom within their community, the believer Antipas (2:13). He is held up as the paradigm illustrating how the believers in Pergamum were to appropriately respond to opposition while faithfully living as Christ's witnesses.

The mandate to endure with nonviolence was also demonstrated in John's vision of the multitudes (7:9-17), where Christians from every nation, tribe, people, and language were presented clothed in white robes and carrying palm branches, symbols which represented the victory bound up in one who has conquered.<sup>23</sup> Their identity is revealed as those who have experienced the great tribulation and washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb. It is suggested that many of these would have suffered as martyrs in the midst of the tribulation. John gives no indication that the multitude responded in their distress by taking up arms or by reciprocating brutality. The vision concludes with the redeemed standing before the throne of God receiving the rewards associated with the eschatological kingdom of God.<sup>24</sup>

John offers two other decisive declarations illustrating the nature of the ὑπομονή of the saints. The initial instance comes after an extended discussion of believers suffering at the hands of the beast from the sea, which is described particularly as making war with the Christians and fatally conquering them. John issues a summons for those with an ear to pay attention to his announcement, which indicates the destiny of several of his audience. Some are headed for imprisonment and some will be killed with the sword. This statement is then clarified as nonviolent endurance, which is the faithfulness of the saints (13:10).<sup>25</sup> The second reference appears in the midst of a vision concerning the judgment of Babylon/Rome. The most severe threats were uttered toward any who compromised the true worship reserved for God and the Lamb, choosing instead to offer prostration and maintain religious solidarity with the beast. John here links the nonviolent endurance of the saints with those who are maintaining the commandments of the true God, nonviolent endurance, which is the faithfulness of Jesus (14:12).<sup>26</sup> It was argued that the most appropriate way of articulating the phrase τὴν πίστιν Ἰησοῦ is to highlight Christ's

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which both John and his original Asian audience understood, because John does not frequently give specific examples, it becomes difficult for scholars to appraise the true extent of the threat. Many scholars insist that the punishment of exile can be observed in Rev. 1:9 since John mentions that he was on the island called Patmos "on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus." However, it was demonstrated in our Introduction that there is no evidence outside of John's Apocalypse which indicates that Patmos was an island used to exile guilty criminals. On the contrary, Patmos contained an established and populated Hellenistic community.

<sup>23</sup> Following the established imagery expressed on the Greek coins, palm branches were regularly depicted as symbols of victory in Judaism (1 Macc. 13:51; 2 Macc. 10:7; John 12:13). Both the wreath and the palm branch are recognized symbols of victory in the Apocalypse of John (2:10; 3:11; 6:2; 12:1; 14:14).

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Charles H. Giblin, "Recapitulation and the Literary Coherence of John's Apocalypse," *CBQ* 56 (1994): 92. The links between 7:15 and 21:1-4 indicate that this vision has been recapitulated. Since 21:3 foresees the eschatological tabernacle of God coming down and dwelling with humans, this suggests that the location of the vision is upon a renewed earth, not in heaven. The 144,000 are also mentioned in 14:1 upon Mt. Zion.

<sup>25</sup> The 27<sup>th</sup> edition of Nestle-Aland as follows: εἴ τις εἰς αἰχμαλωσίαν, εἰς αἰχμαλωσίαν ὑπάγει· εἴ τις ἐν μαχαίρῃ ἀποκτανθῆναι αὐτὸν<sup>25</sup> ἐν μαχαίρῃ ἀποκτανθῆναι. Ὡδὲ ἐστὶν ἡ ὑπομονὴ καὶ ἡ πίστις τῶν ἁγίων. ("If anyone is destined for captivity, into captivity he goes; if anyone is destined to be killed with the sword, with the sword he will be killed. Here is the nonviolent endurance, which is the faithfulness of the saints.")

<sup>26</sup> See especially the exhaustive study by Sigve K. Tonstad, *Saving God's Reputation: The Theological Function of Pistis Iesou in the Cosmic Narratives of Revelation*, JSNTSup 337 (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2012) 165-94. It should be noted that one of the other primary lexical options, "the faith of Jesus," is closely bound up in Jesus' own faithful behavior, since he walked and behaved in a manner which was certainly based upon the things he believed and hoped for.

own faith which has repeatedly been used as a model for the appropriate Christian response to confronting the culture in which they reside. Just as Christ has been established as the exemplar of true conquering, believers are to follow suit by imitating his faith and nonviolent attitude, which results in obedience to the commands of the true God.

For the sake of being exhaustive, Rev. 18:6 was examined and demonstrated to not provide a contrary voice in the midst of what otherwise seems to be an undeviating testimony to nonviolent perseverance on the part of John's audience. Judgment and punishment are the prerogatives, in the Apocalypse, of both God and Christ. They alone possess the authority to execute violence, indicating further that Christians are to repent from that tendency, refusing to grasp at an authority which they do carry.<sup>27</sup>

The mandate to respond to violence with nonviolence contributes greatly to the radical redefinition of *νικῶν* in the Apocalypse. While the many conquerors of the Greek and Roman world were praised and remembered for their victories over their enemies in battle,<sup>28</sup> John has definitively demonstrated that the true model of conquering is to be found in the Lamb who refused to take up arms against his opponents, suffering martyrdom in the process. Christians are called to take upon themselves this highly unusual and strange attitude which refuses to love their lives in this age but seeks to attain the life in age to come.<sup>29</sup> In order to do so, they repent from the urge to seek retribution, retaliation, and revenge on behalf of their enemies and maintain their confidence that the one true God will set the world right through Christ on the Day of Judgment.

From the perspective of the Greco-Roman world, Christians who are oppressed, slandered, imprisoned, or beheaded by Rome do not resemble the typical conqueror in the slightest. In fact, they look as if they are *being conquered*, as the language in Rev. 11:7 and 13:7 suggests. John's Apocalypse reveals another picture for those who imitate the Lamb as the true king, savior, and lord. Their witness toward and allegiance to the coming kingdom of God confronts and subverts the claims of peace and salvation which the Roman Empire abundantly propagated.<sup>30</sup> Those who endure as Christ demonstrated, remaining

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<sup>27</sup> John derives the image of 'paying Babylon back' from Jer. 50:29 (LXX 27:29). The context of this passage involved Yahweh bringing foreign nations and their archers against Babylon (50:9). God commands the archers to fire upon Babylon (50:14), eventually summoning them to encamp around the city and "repay her according to her deeds" (50:29). Jeremiah foresees a Gentile nation overthrowing Babylon, not Israel.

<sup>28</sup> It comes as no surprise that the goddess Nike was embodied uniquely in the enduring person of the Roman emperor. The legend of the goddess directly lent legitimacy to the emperor's successful conquests and expansion of the empire. In this, Julius Caesar was called *Victoria Caesaris*, Augustus was labeled *Victoria Caesaris Augusti Imperatoris*, and Vespasian was identified as *Victoria Imperatoris Caesaris Vespasiani Augusti*. These titles gave the impression that Nike had blessed these rulers and guaranteed the enduring success of Rome.

<sup>29</sup> Harrington, *Revelation*, 195. In regard to the subject of violence in John's Apocalypse, Harrington remarks that "There must be a response to injustice... That courageous response, which may and can demand the ultimate sacrifice, is always non-violent... The only weapon of the oppressed is *hypomone*."

<sup>30</sup> Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* 14.1, is a prime example: "For these later ages, the enlarged boundaries of the habitable world, and the vast extent of our empire, have been a positive injury." Velleius Paterculus, *Roman History* 2.126.3, argues along the same lines, "The *pax augusta*, which has spread to the regions of the east and of the west and to the bounds of the north and of the south, preserves every corner of the world safe from the fear of brigandage." John Dominic Crossan states that Rome "announced world conquest, global rule, and eternal sovereignty." Virgil likewise describes this era as the "golden age" in *Aeneid* 6.791-5; *Eclogue* 4.4-10. He depicts Anchises declaring to Aeneas that Rome's purpose is to "rule the world... to crown peace with justice, to spare the vanquished and to crush the proud" (6.851-3). See also the helpful comments in *God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now* (New



loyal to the true God in heaven and refusing to assimilate to the Roman culture, will be rewarded with the symbols of victory: white garments, palm branches, crowns, and thrones in the Lamb's glorious kingdom to be consummated at his *parousia*.<sup>31</sup> The reality faced by John's audience is that the Apocalypse claims that those who imitate the actions of the conquerors of the Greco-Roman world will be severely humbled on the Day of Judgment. However, those who follow the Lamb, God's faithful witness, will be exalted to share in the eschatological reign when Christ returns in power and glory.

### Assessing the Thesis

The purpose of my dissertation was to note how the motif of conquering was used by the prophet John to reorient the theology and practice of the believers residing in Asia Minor. I also placed on the table the hypothesis asking whether or not the motif of conquering could function as an acceptable lens through which the Apocalypse should be interpreted. At the outset of my inquiry I surveyed various attempts by scholars and commentators in order to understand the nature and significance of νικάω within the Apocalypse. Each of these attempts failed to recognize the extent and significance regarding the contrast between the two definitions of νικάω, one defined by violence and the other defined by the crucified Lamb. John's Apocalypse attests to both of these definitions, one characterizing the activity of the beast(s) and the other regarding the nature of the victory of the Lamb. If we are to take seriously the climactic statements to the Christian conquerors in the letters to the seven churches, in addition to the various other indicators of the mandates which describe the faithful throughout the narrative, it becomes clear that John intended the motif of the Lamb's paradoxical redefinition of conquering to saturate the Apocalypse. The motif encompasses many of the theological themes pervasive throughout the book, such as the true God, Christology, salvation, judgment, eschatology, repentance, ethics, death, resurrection, prophecy, and even restoration.

However, one remarkable theme which pervades the Apocalypse admittedly does not comfortably fit into the motif of conquering as a lens for interpretation. The subject of worship, which scholars almost unanimously argue is dominating within the Apocalypse, fails to pleasantly fit into the motif of the Lamb's redefinition of νικάω.<sup>32</sup> These two themes regularly overlap, as I observed in the vision of the Lion/Lamb (5:1-15), the vision of the multitudes (7:9-17), the account of the two witnesses (11:1-14), and the oracles against Babylon/Rome (14:1-13). Since it would be unwise to suggest an overarching motif

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York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007) 15; Peter Green, *Alexander to Actium: The Historical Evolution of the Hellenistic Age* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990) 679-82.

<sup>31</sup> Friesen likewise observes this strand within the Apocalypse, arguing that the "primary exhortation in the book is to endure" (*Imperial Cults*, 188).

<sup>32</sup> Many scholars have indicated the extent in which the theme of worship saturates John's Apocalypse. See especially Otto A. Piper, "The Apocalypse of John and the Liturgy of the Ancient Church," *CH* 20 (1951): 10; Lucetta Mowry, "Revelation 4-5 and Early Christian Liturgical Usage," *JBL* 71 (1952): 75-84; Massey H. Shepherd, *The Paschal Liturgy and the Apocalypse* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1960); John J. O'Rourke, "The Hymns of the Apocalypse," *CBQ* 30 (1968): 399-409; Vernon Kooy, "The Apocalypse and Worship – some Preliminary Observations," *Reformed Review* 30 (1976): 198-209; Richard L. Jeske, "Spirit and Community in the Johannine Apocalypse," *NTS* 31 (1985): 452-66; David L. Barr, "The Apocalypse of John as Oral Enactment," *Int* 40 (1986): 243-56; Fred B. Craddock, "Preaching the Book of Revelation," *Int* 40 (1986): 270-82; David Aune, "The Influence of the Roman Imperial Cult Ceremonial on the Revelation of John," *BibRes* 28 (1983): 5-26; idem, "The Apocalypse of John and Graeco-Roman Revelatory Magic," *NTS* 33 (1987): 481-501; David G. Peterson, "Worship in the Revelation to John," *RTR* 47 (1988): 67-77; Thompson, *Apocalypse and Empire*, 53; idem, "Hymns in Early Christian Worship," *ATR* 55 (1973): 458-72; Eugene H. Peterson, "Learning to Worship from Saint John's Revelation," in *Christianity Today*, October 28, 1991, 23-5.

for interpreting the Apocalypse which unsuccessfully accounts for such a central theme as the directive to worship, we must look beyond the motif of redefined ‘conquering’ toward more encompassing suggestions.<sup>33</sup>

This is not to say that John’s use of νικάω is theologically or ethically deficient. I have demonstrated that it accounts for the thematic conclusions of the letters to the seven congregations in Asia Minor. It also is an appropriate umbrella under which the mandates of maintaining the Lamb’s witness and responding to hostility with nonviolent endurance are appropriately contained. It further reinforces the dominant summons through the Apocalypse for its readers and hearers to recognize Jesus Christ not simply as the person through whom God has brought salvation and redemption to humanity but also as the definitive model for their faith, loyalty, theology, and moral values. By effectively demonstrating that the manner of conquering which the Lamb has accomplished is theologically superior to the dominating alternative definition, John persuasively summons his audience to reorient their priorities and to align them to the voice of the Spirit. Furthermore, since the Spirit directs each of the churches to give their attention toward its authoritative voice, John’s redefinition of νικάω has the potential to speak to readers in both modern and ancient times.

#### Propositions for Further Studies

Our investigation into the theme of redefined conquering within the Apocalypse of John offers many insights for subsequent readings of this notoriously obscure Christian document. In particular, many of our findings can indeed offer hermeneutical solutions to some of the modern theological and prophetic readings of the Apocalypse, especially those guilty of fanatical speculation in regard to the document’s many symbols and numbers.<sup>34</sup>

Our first chapter established the cultural milieu in which the Apocalypse was both composed and first read/heard. It set out to effectively establish the extent in which the Roman myth of conquering was propagated not only in the capital city but throughout the far reaches of the empire. In particular, the political and imperial dimensions were cited in attempts to appropriately paint a historical picture of what the culture of John’s readers looked like. Our introduction interacted with modern scholars in the assessment of why John took it upon himself to compose his Apocalypse and send it out to seven Christian congregations located in Asia Minor. We also called attention to the genre of the Apocalypse, noting its literary functions as an epistle addressed to specific recipients. This evidence compels us as responsible historians to, as best as the historical facts allow, situate the Apocalypse firmly in the Greco-Roman world of the first century and to strongly consider what John’s recipients would have understood by its symbols and message while avoiding anachronistic reconstructions. Our first proposition for modern readers of the Apocalypse is therefore to appropriately situate the document in its historical context (last first century Asia Minor under the reign of Domitian) prior to moving onto the process of interpreting the visions and symbols located within.

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<sup>33</sup> Contrary to the statement by David Hellholm: “In the Apocalypse of John the message is on the one hand the promise (illocution) of those who conquer that they shall live in unity with God in the new world of his (proposition), and on the other hand the threat (illocution) that the lot of the cowardly and unfaithful is ultimately separation from God described by the singular concept of a “second death” (proposition). This constitutes *the summary* of the Apocalypse of John from the lips of the Supreme Divinity on the throne.” (“The Problem of Apocalyptic Genre,” *Semeia* 36 [1986]: 46, italics mine).

<sup>34</sup> For example, Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth* and the *Left Behind* series.

In assessing the various citations and allusions from the Hebrew Bible which John makes in the Apocalypse, I observed a noteworthy and repeating trend. When it comes to alluding to the Hebrew Bible, John, functioning as a prophet, regularly takes more liberty in applying his citations to new and perhaps different interpretive ends than the original authors had intended.<sup>35</sup> While it is certain that some of the quotations in the Apocalypse closely resemble some measure of uniformity to the books in the Hebrew Bible,<sup>36</sup> John seems to have no quarrels or reservations about freely changing and reapplying his citations precisely to further his own theological, ethical, and prophetic endeavors. Although the scope of our study was unable to deal with all of John's citations within the Apocalypse, we nevertheless repeatedly observed that many of his allusions to the Hebrew Bible went arguably beyond the original author's intent.

<b>Passage alluded to</b>	<b>Reference in the Apocalypse</b>
Ps. 2:8-9	Rev. 2:26-27
Isa. 60:14	Rev. 3:9
Zech 1:8 (LXX); 6:2-7	Rev. 6:2-8
Dan. 8:11-14	Rev. 11:2
Zech. 4:14	Rev. 11:4
Dan. 7:3	Rev. 13:1
Dan. 7:4-6	Rev. 13:2
Dan. 7:7	Rev. 13:3
Dan. 7:5 (LXX)	Rev. 13:5
Jer. 15:2, 43:11 (LXX 50:11)	Rev. 13:10
Ezek. 37:5	Rev. 20:4
Ezek 38:1	Rev. 20:8
Ezek. 38:22-23	Rev. 20:11-12

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. Steve Moyise, "Does the Author of Revelation Misappropriate the Scriptures?" *AUSS* 40 (2002): 3-21, who interacts and rightly criticizes Beale's "The Influence of Daniel." See also the insightful response to the debate between Moyise and Beale by Jon Paulien, "Dreading the Whirlwind Intertextuality and the Use of the Old Testament in Revelation," *AUSS* 39 (2001): 5-22, to which Beale responds in "A Response to Jon Paulien on the Use of the Old Testament in Revelation," *AUSS* 39 (2001): 23-34.

<sup>36</sup> Moyise, "Does the Author of Revelation Misappropriate the Scriptures?" 6, observes, for example, that the particular order of Ezekiel's significant visions is retained by John's structure. This is all the more noteworthy if Aune's analysis of the Apocalypse being a product of an editor (indicating at least two pens involved in the final product, is correct

As a seer, John exercised the freedom to reapply these texts according to his purposes. He certainly recognized within the texts a sense of divine authority which he could redirect into a different context, hoping that his audience would recognize the authoritative force which the citations carried.<sup>37</sup> In other words, John regarded the authority which the scriptural texts possessed as more important than the specifics of their original contexts. His ability to reapply the citations in a manner which suited his theological, ethical, and prophetic intentions displays a respect in the ability of those texts to continue to orient the lives of God's people, even hundreds of years after they were originally composed.<sup>38</sup> In light of how John typically reworks the Hebrew Bible, our second proposition for modern interpreters of the Apocalypse is that the original intentions and context of the citations/allusions should not be forced into rigid and literalist readings of the various visions. John needs to be allowed the freedom (which he possesses and habitually exercises) to use the texts in whatever manner the Spirit inspires him. Therefore, each allusion or citation must be interpreted on a case by case basis, unshackled from the bonds of the intent of the original authors.

The third chapter of this dissertation observed that each of the letters to the seven churches concluded with the verbatim summons to give heed to what the Spirit is saying to the churches (Ο ἔχων οὖς ἀκουσάτω τί τὸ πνεῦμα λέγει ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις). While one should never lose sight of the fact that John indeed composed these letters to seven real churches which existed as Christian communities, located in Asia Minor at the end of the first century, it seems that John intended each of the churches to not limit their reading to simply their own personal letter. The summons issued by the Spirit calls for attention to be given by each of the churches, not just the specific congregation addressed. John felt that the messages given to each of the churches was applicable to the other six.

Our third proposition for further readings is that, while recognizing John's original message and symbols located in the Apocalypse were primarily intended (and likely made sense) to the readers and hearers in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea, the summons issued by the Spirit should continue to direct churches in the twenty-first century. The fact that, within the first few centuries of the Church's existence John's Apocalypse was regularly read, copied, and shared, reveals that the Christians derived practical meaning in John's visions. Throughout the last two millennia, many Christian groups have found comfort and hope in the pages of the Apocalypse; particularly those who have suffered persecution, social ostracism, and hate crimes.

If John was able to recognize the life-changing and transformative power of the Hebrew Bible and use it to give comfort to the communities in Asia Minor, then it seems appropriate for Christians in the modern era to find direction and godly insight from these texts as well. The call to live as paradoxical conquerors in the midst of a fallen Babylon world is just as radical and contrary to cultural expectations today as it was at the end of the first century. The mandate for the Church to bear the witness of Jesus, in the form of the gospel of the coming kingdom of God, continues to be a pressing and important vocation (sadly neglected in most churches). Furthermore, the mandate to endure opposition with nonviolence and love still demand's the Church's obedience, despite modern political and patriotic temptations.

Although John composed the Apocalypse two thousand years ago in order to meet the needs of the seven Asian churches, its radical message which attempts to persuade its readers to imitate the Lamb

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<sup>37</sup> See the discussion in J. Ramsey Michaels, "Old Testament in Revelation," in *DLNT*, 852-4.

<sup>38</sup> Jimmy Jack McBee Roberts, "A Christian Perspective on Prophetic Prediction," *Int* 33 (1979): 247.

who has conquered continues to exhibit direction, hope, and transformative capabilities for those today who would offer their ear in faithfulness and obedience.

## Dustin's Very Selective Bibliography of the Apocalypse of John

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