

Violence of Non-Violence
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The Violence of Nonviolence in the Revelation of John

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Abstract: This article investigates the conviction among many biblical scholars that Revelation is a non-violent book. It first analyses some of the major arguments to support this thesis by investigating the book's perspectives on martyrdom, on witness, its spiritualizing language, and its message of divine judgment. It then analyses in more depth how the non-violent message of the book is embedded in and reflects violent language, how its seemingly positive portrayal of women is in fact permeated by gender violence and how it portrays divine violence. The article concludes with brief hermeneutical remarks that reflect on how the offensive dimensions of Revelation's violent non-violence can be interpreted.

Keywords: Violence; Non-violence; Violent non-violence; Revelation; Apocalypse of John; Gender violence; Divine violence; Verbal violence; New Testament hermeneutics

John's Revelation is often regarded as a non-violent book because of its strong stance against the violent behavior and actions of its evil opponents and its call to its readers not to retaliate. It, furthermore, sketches a future in which, by divine intervention, the present violent dispensation will be brought to an end and the violent perpetrators held accountable for their evil violence by being severely punished. Finally, it expects a paradisiacal new creation in which violence will be eradicated and nations will live in peace.¹

This non-violent interpretation of John is regarded as a reflection and confirmation of non-violent traditions in other parts of Christian Scriptures² and of a general picture of Early Christianity as a peace movement. Representative of such a reading is, for example, a remark by Hays that "from Matthew to Revelation we find a consistent witness against violence and a calling to community to follow the example of Jesus in accepting suffering rather than inflicting it."³

In recent research, this interpretation of Christian Scriptures and Revelation is being reconsidered, with increasing attention to their overt and covert forms of violence.⁴ In addition, more attention is also

1 Recently Kitts & Jerryson, "Introduction," 233, noted that the collocation of religion and violence, but also its individual terms is still contested. They offer a penetrating analysis (223-226) of the multifaceted nature of violence. Violence is, consequently understood in this article in a comprehensive sense as referring to all forms of abuse of people's personhood. For an insightful discussion of the understanding of violence, cf. Huber, "Religion," 53. Especially interesting is his manifold description of physical violence.

2 Much has been written about the historical setting of Revelation, which is important to understand its violent passages. For a discussion, cf. De Villiers, "Persecution."

3 Cf. Hays, "Moral Vision," 332, and 335-337. He also writes that "there is not a syllable in the Pauline letters that can be cited in support of Christians employing violence. Paul's occasional uses of military imagery . . . actually have the opposite effect: the warfare imagery is drafted into the service of the gospel, rather than the reverse" (332).

4 I have argued elsewhere that Christian Scriptures are not as non-violent as is often assumed. They, in fact, by times contain extreme forms of violence. Cf. De Villiers, "Hermeneutical Reflections," 245-283. For the violent and non-violent forms of religion, cf. Huber, "Religion."

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drawn to the reception history of Revelation which reveals how often (even mainstream) Christian groups who otherwise claim to be peaceful⁵, used the book to perpetrate and legitimize violent actions. As a result of such readings, but also because of hermeneutical developments with their constructivist approach to interpretation, researchers are increasingly arguing that Revelation and other Early Christian texts are not merely passive “victims” of violent readings, but in some way or other allow for or even actively evoke such interpretations.⁶ The following article continues this discussion by subjecting the arguments for Revelation’s non-violence to closer scrutiny. After analyzing claims that the book’s non-violence is profound and a key theme, this article will, however, point out that non-violence in Revelation is restricted and often severely challenged by the violent language with which it is communicated. In addition, and even more problematical is how the book’s non-violence is compromised by the violent social discourse in which it is embedded and which it shares in many respects without any critical remarks. Finally, it will show how the book’s theological understanding of God’s character that is used to call its readers to non-violence, is permeated with violence and evokes important ethical questions.

A non-violent book

The position that images, language and practices of Revelation are mostly non-violent,⁷ is based on some of the following arguments.

Martyrdom

A prominent aspect of Revelation is its ethical response to violence inflicted on its readers. Nowhere in the book are the readers called upon to commit physical acts of violence against their persecutors or to engage in revolutionary activities. This is indeed unusual, given the existence of other religious groups from that time who actively engaged in violent resistance against their rulers and authorities.⁸ This also contrasts to the involvement of Israel in holy warfare as narrated in Hebrew Scriptures.

This call to refrain from violence, was a major issue to the author given that violence is a carefully considered theme in Revelation. The author is acutely aware of physical violence that played such a prominent role in the community’s past. He repeatedly refers to the violent action against Christ as the

5 The crusades offer examples of the warlike use of Revelation. The influential author, Bernard of Clairvaux, for example, used the images of Revelation’s New Jerusalem to call his peasant audience to war. Another example was the fifteenth century Hussite Taborites from Bohemia who argued that they were living in the time of the Antichrist that demanded from them to kill unbelievers as enemies of Christ. Cf. Newport, “Apocalypse,” 17 and, more extensively, Kaminsky, “History,” 342, who pointed out the immense social implications of this movement that started out under leadership of Czech intelligentsia in Prague and was continued with the millenarian, revolutionary actions of the Taborites and their mostly peasant following. For more recent examples, cf. Kippenberg, “Violence” and Juergensmeyer, “Terror.” Another recent example is the widely popular rapture teaching that effectively promotes war in the Middle East and that is closely linked with Revelation. Cf. Rossing, “Apocalyptic Violence,” for an insightful discussion of this teaching’s dangerous sub-text and its covert promotion of violence.

6 Cf., e.g., De Villiers, “Fear.”

7 Streett, “Strange Woman,” provides many examples. Cf. Mueller, “Christological Concepts,” 62-63; also the categorical remark of Johns, “Lamb Christology,” especially on 202-203, that in its non-violent rejection of evil, Revelation contains a theology of peace. Cf., though, also the more apprehensive remarks by Collins, “Persecution”; Rossing, “Apocalyptic Violence” and, on a more popular level, Lawrence, “Apocalypse.”

8 Cf., e.g., Brighton, “Sicarii,” 2-11 for a comprehensive overview of scholarly interpretations of the Sicarii as an example of such groups. Such groups provide an insight in the social situation of first century Palestine where some groups clearly harboured revolutionary sentiments or even actions. It is, though, true that other groups increasingly spoke out against rebellious actions. Cf. Martin, “Future”; also Brandon, “Trial.” Such warnings were a result of the Jewish war (66-70 C.E.) and the destruction of Jerusalem, whereafter some Jews rejected rebellions against Rome and cooperated with Roman authorities to round up guilty parties. The non-violent message of Revelation may be an indication of the growing trend towards non-violence among faith communities in Roman territories (confirmed by a similar trend towards non-violence in the Gospels). This trend shows how boundaries were gradually being drawn up between revolutionary movements like the Zealots and some followers of Jesus. It must be remembered, though, that this non-violence was often found among groups whose existence and well-being were closely linked to or dependent on some form of co-existence with their authorities and rulers.

main response of evil to God's work. The opponents of Christ are described as "those who pierced him" (ἐξεκέντησαν; Rev.1:7), setting the tone for repeated references in the rest of the book to the violent death and crucifixion of Christ. He furthermore underlines that this violence is inflicted on an innocent Christ, but also allocates a special meaning to it which conveys how God responds to violence. The author clearly distances himself from physical violence: Christ's violent death is, namely, interpreted theologically by the seminal and non-violent symbol of the lamb⁹ whose self-sacrificing death represents a loving act of liberating evil people from their sins (Rev.1:5; cf. also 5:12; 6:1;12:11; 13:8; 14:1, 4; 17:14; 19:7). The impact of this language is that the violent end of Christ intends to bring about the end of violence. His death and the shedding of his own blood represent the rejection of and victory over violence (Rev.12:11; 1:5; 5:6, 9; cf. Rev. 7:14).¹⁰

This image of the Lamb who conquers violence without retaliation and through suffering, is foundational for passages that reflect this non-violent ethos. The theological interpretation of Christ's self-sacrifice becomes an ethical model for the Lamb's followers: they are to oppose evil like he did, that is, without violence, even if it means their own death. They are conquerors through the blood of the Lamb and not through waging literal war against evil (Rev.12:11). As with the Lamb, violence is borne by them, not handed out (e.g. Rev.2:10, 13; 6:12).

Witnessing

The non-violent nature of Revelation is confirmed by and closely related to the author's call to believers to "witness" to their faith. Witnessing is a key theme in Revelation: Jesus is described as the faithful witness (Rev.1:5 and 22:20), John calls himself a witness (Rev.1:2) and the faith community finds its identity in witnessing to the nations. The motif of witness is emphasized through its prominent location in the book's narrative. The episode of the two witnesses in Revelation 11 represents a turning point in the book – introducing its second part (Rev.10-19) which recounts the attack of the evil triad on the followers of the Lamb. Revelation 11 appears in the middle of Revelation. It thus places the theme of witness in the heart of the book and delineates it as the main response of the community to the violent opposition of the nations to the gospel.

The two prophets, emulating the non-violent example of the Lamb, also witness to the nations with the "fire from their mouths." Their fiery prophetic call to conversion is done through the power of the blood of the Lamb. The powerful outcome of their witness is evident from their ultimate victory: through their witness they triumph over evil when they are resurrected (Rev.11:11).¹¹ Their witness is, therefore, anything but a sign of weakness. In it divine power is at work.

At the same time, this non-violent witnessing represents a serious challenge to its audience. Stemming from a courtroom context, it means that the community has to unmask the true nature of unjust and evil structures (Rev.11:6). It is a dangerous task, as is shown by its consequences: their witness brings about their own deaths (Rev.6:9; 11:7; 20:4).¹² In witnessing and being killed in the great city, they follow in the footsteps of "their Lord" who was "also" killed in the city where he witnessed (Rev.11:8).

The non-violent ministry of the witnesses is confirmed in a special manner when it is described as a prophetic activity. As indicated in the preceding chapters of the book (Rev.6-9), they seek the conversion, not the extermination of the nations (Rev.11:13). They desire the salvation of all nations. In fact, Revelation is characterized by a missionary zeal that calls on nations to abandon their violent lifestyle, to respond

⁹ Rossing, "Apocalyptic Violence," rejects attempts to find the background of the Lamb image in a militaristic figure in early Jewish texts (Test. Jos. 19.8; Test. Ben. 3.8; 1 Enoch 89–90). According to her, the author of Revelation interpreted the image to indicate Jesus's vulnerability. "At the very heart of God is a slain Lamb, Jesus. And the key to the book is that this slaughtered Lamb has somehow 'conquered'."

¹⁰ This contrasts with the evil triad who seek to conquer through violence.

¹¹ Cf. Mueller, "Christological Concepts," 42-66, for a thorough description of both the vulnerable and powerful dimensions of the Lamb Christology in Revelation.

¹² Cf., e.g., Rossing, "Apocalyptic Violence," and, especially, the extensive discussion of Bauckham, "Climax," 210-237.

positively to the “eternal gospel” (Rev.14:6) and to inherit paradise together with the community.¹³ This is indicated by remarks in Revelation 21:24-26 about the participation of the nations in the future city of peace. Revelation’s message proclaims the transformation of the violent dispensation and context into peace.

Spiritualizing language

The non-violent nature of Revelation is further evident from the author’s spiritualizing of violent images that he takes over from his traditions. The book is known especially for its extensive use of the holy war tradition in Hebrew Scriptures that speaks of Yahweh as the Divine Warrior who leads Israel into victory.¹⁴ This motif is used in Revelation to characterize Christ as divine warrior. This happens most pertinently in Revelation 19:11-21 where Jesus is described with various motifs from the divine warrior traditions: he wears a royal robe (Isa. 62:2-3), leads the heavenly army in battle, rules with an iron rod (Isa. 11:4b, 49:2) and treads the wine press of the divine wrath (Isa. 63:3; Joel 3:13).¹⁵ There is, however, a fundamental difference between his portrayal and the traditional versions: The author allegorizes the images by depicting him as wearing “many crowns,” wearing a robed “dipped in blood”¹⁶, but as having the name “Word of God.” That is, he has a sword, but, in an act of judgment, it comes from Christ’s mouth and, furthermore is described as the Word of God (cf. also Rev.1:16; 2:16; 19:15, 21).

The previous parts of Revelation prepared the way for this climactic episode with similar spiritualizing motifs. In the introductory vision of the book, the author portrayed Christ as the One like a Son of Man who protects the church by *holding* seven stars in his right hand, before he contrasts it with the image of the sharp, double-edged sword that *comes* from Christ’s mouth (Rev.1:16). The judgment is reiterated when the author warns in the message to the church in Pergamum that the Son of Man will make war against the Nicolaitans with the sword of his mouth (Rev.2:16). “The sword in these vignettes symbolizes the irresistible power of divine judgment,”¹⁷ comments Mounce in his widely read exposition of the book. The two witnesses in Revelation 11 also prophesy with the word of their mouth. It is clear that these images of the star and the sword cannot be understood in physical terms, thus pointing towards their symbolic function and use. They are two key terms of salvation (holding the stars) and judgment (sword from the mouth), illustrating the non-violent nature of the divine actions in Christ. The sword is ostensibly, therefore, not about a physical sword as a weapon of attack held in the hand of the Son of Man, but is a symbol of judgment of the author’s evil opponents.¹⁸ The non-violent nature of this image is also confirmed, reputedly, when it is fitted into the larger combat that takes place between the Lamb and his followers, who acts non-violently, and evil, who engages in murderous violence (e.g. Rev.13:6, cf. 15).

Divine judgment

Closely related to the previous motifs, is Revelation’s understanding of divine judgment. The book insists that believers need to trust God to punish their persecutors rather than take matters in their own hand. At the beginning of the visions, the slain witnesses ask God, “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until

¹³ Cf. Bauckham, “Climax,” 238-337. He describes conversion as the centre of Revelation’s prophetic message. At the same time, though, he notes (238) that it is an underestimated theme in research on the book. Of special interest is how, through an intertextual link with Hebrew Scriptures, the importance of this theme comes to the fore. This alerts to the need to read Revelation in terms of its close relationship with Hebrew Scriptures. Cf. now also McNicoll, “Conversion.”

¹⁴ Cf. Bauckham, “Climax,” 85 for a full discussion. Note, for example, how, in Revelation 7:2-14, the traditional call for warfare is allegorized. Cf. also Finamore “Kinder,” 213.

¹⁵ Cf. Longman, “Divine Warrior,” for more information. He also provides an overview of research on this theme from the beginning of the twentieth century with the work of Schwally and the influential studies of Von Rad.

¹⁶ Cf. Beale, “Book of Revelation,” 438, for the metaphorical quality of this image.

¹⁷ Mounce, “Book of Revelation,” 60.

¹⁸ The sword is sharp and double-edged to indicate the threatening nature of judgment.

you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” (Rev. 6:9-10; cf. 7:14; 14:1-5).¹⁹ They are then told to wait until the full number of saints have been killed. God will act against the opponents and do so in God’s own time.²⁰ There is no doubt: God will judge evil at the end of time.²¹ In the meantime, any other form of violence is out of the question. What the saints do, is to wait for God’s actions.

Non-violent, yet violent

There can be little doubt that the non-violent interpretation of Revelation has a strong basis in these four arguments. And yet, other insights evoke questions about the consistent nature of this non-violence and reveal violent dimensions that are not often spelled out by those who emphasize the non-violence of Revelation. New linguistic insights and deconstructive readings, driven by a hermeneutics of suspicion, but also by an awareness of the many faces of violence have informed this re-evaluation.²²

Dangerous language and imagery

First of all, it has not escaped the attention of many scholars that Revelation’s non-violent message with its lofty ideals of martyrdom and witness, is, paradoxically, articulated in violent language of war. Readers may well be told not to be involved in retaliation and warfare, but for the rest they are being drenched in a harsh, dark and destructive narrative about carnage, war (Rev.12:7-8; 16:14; 17:14; 19:11,19), murder (Rev.9:1-6; 11:7; 13:7), plagues (Rev.9:20) and devastating natural disasters initiated by both divine and evil characters. Even the septet of letters with its message of comfort to the seven churches, has a full quota of threats and curses (Rev.2-3). The following sections with their four septets of seals, trumpets, scales and angels (Rev.6-16), repeatedly raise the spectre of the divine wrath that is unleashed through much violence against the mighty of the earth and their communities (Rev.6:1-15).²³ This continues right to the end where the Rider on the white horse, no longer a Lamb, leads armies of heaven in the final war against the nations to strike them down (Rev.19:11-16). The slaughter ends with a grim portrait of birds gorging themselves on the flesh of the author’s opponents (Rev. 19:17-21).

Descriptions in the narrative for the enemies of God are not less gruesome. They are depicted as violent, dangerous animals and animal-like armies from the underground who torment or kill people (Rev.9:7-11, 17-20). Even the divine or angelic characters are fearsome and act threateningly. They violently shed blood, rule with an iron fist (Rev.9:15; 19:15), strike down nations (Rev.19:2,15,21) and tread the winepress so that blood flowed as high as the horses’ bridles for a distance of 200 miles (Rev.14:20). In a climactic scene God and the Lamb throw evil forces into a lake of fire where they will be tortured forever (Rev.21:20). The author has no reservations to depict the Son of God as killing children (Rev.2:23).²⁴ Even heaven is a place of war (Rev.12:7).

¹⁹ Klassen, “Vengeance,” 300-311, argues that this does not refer to avenging, but to vindication of God’s sacrificial action in Christ. But the divine violence in Revelation is hardly anything else than avenging what was done to or by followers of the Lamb (cf., e.g., Rev.2:23).

²⁰ Behind this understanding of divine judgment, there is a creation theology which assumes that the world and humanity were created without violence and evil, but have become devoid of God’s righteousness after evil rebelled against God and was banned to the earthly realm where it leads people astray (Rev.12:7-9; Bauckham, “Climax,” 47. The book expects a return to its original status with the coming of the new earth (Rev.21:24). All this is, however, in the hands of God, as is clear from Rev.11:17-18. Cf. also Finamore, “Kinder,” 213-214.

²¹ Though believers trust on God for the final judgment, they are not passively resisting evil. They are involved in a cosmic conflict between good and evil especially in their witnessing, as was spelled out above. John uses war imagery to recruit his readers into active engagement in the struggle against evil. Bauckham, “Climax,” 69-70; 40, describes how the author depicts human participation in militaristic language, but “carefully” re-functions it to refer to witness.

²² Cf. De Villiers, “Hermeneutical Reflections,” for a discussion of overt and covert forms of violence.

²³ Both Neufeld, “Killing Enmity,” 124-129 and Farmer, “Beyond,” 115ff. provide insightful discussions of the book’s violent narrative.

²⁴ God, the “Almighty” (e.g. Rev.1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7,14; 21:22), whose power cannot be resisted, imposes the divine will on all creation throughout the book.

The followers of Christ are also not consistently lamblike in their witness in the ultimate war against the enemy, as was suggested above. After the tables are turned at the end, they are called to pay their opponents double for the harm done to them (Rev.18:2). Much has been done to tone down this pronouncement that seems to suggest harsh retaliation by the community, with suggestions that Babylon must be paid back with the equivalent of their deeds.²⁵ Such actions against enemies find support in the narrative about the two witnesses in Revelation 11:1-14 in which the witnesses also act against the nations. The picture of their actions is not clear: the passage relates how they torture and kill the nations in a way that obfuscates the border between non-violence and violence. Its language is ambiguous, allocating a symbolic meaning to this action when it speaks of their witness through the fire of their mouth,²⁶ but then tilting to the side of literal violence when the disastrous consequences of rejecting their fearsome prophecy are spelled out: “If anyone tries to harm them, fire comes from their mouths and devours their enemies. *This is how anyone who wants to harm them must die*” (Rev.11:5). The following remarks in Revelation 11:6 do not do much to support the suggestion that verse 5 speaks of the enemies’ spiritual death.²⁷ They are equally violent when they state that the witnesses “have power to shut up the heavens so that it will not rain during the time they are prophesying; and they have power to turn the waters into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they want.” One hears the echo of the ten plagues in Egypt in these words, opening space for some readers to read them as anything else but having to do with some form of literal violence.

It is, however, not only the harsh language, but also its ideological sub-text that questions Revelation’s non-violence. It is of special importance to uncover this deeper dimension of the language that is being used in the book. Here one has to attend carefully to its agonistic dynamics, which relates to its pronouncements on power and reflects a power struggle between the divine and evil characters or institutions. Power language is prominent in the episode of the two witnesses. Their actions speak clearly of their “power” (Rev.11:6) which is superhuman, since it was given to them by God, the “Almighty” (Rev.1:8) and by Jesus (to whom power is due; Rev.1:6). Their power is, therefore, unassailable and stronger than all other powers (cf. e.g. Rev.5:12; 4:11; 7:12; 9:3, 19, 11:6; 19:1).

This description of their power, has special implications. There is behind and in this seemingly “milder” and “good” power language for divine and human characters in Revelation to be found a divine hegemony with a coercive nature: it will ultimately assert itself completely over those who differ from or oppose it. The book is clear that those who are not part of the author’s community and adhere to his prophecy, are enemies who deserve to be annihilated. Such hostility and exclusion is evident when, in the seven letters, those who live upright lives are given special promises, whilst Jezebel and other heretics (e.g. Rev.2:20-24) are objects of divine punishment.

Such a hegemony can have devastating effects, as is spelled out by Juergensmeyer:

In purely religious battles, waged in divine time and with heaven’s rewards, there is no need to compromise one’s goals. There is no need, also, to contend with society’s laws and limitations when one is obeying a higher authority. In spiritualizing violence, therefore, religion gives the resources of violence a remarkable power.²⁸

Though Revelation appeals to its readers to be non-violent witnesses, it does so through harsh language and power claims. It is language that stands in serious tension with the pronouncement in the Sermon of the Mount that even a single word like “Raka” can be violently harmful (Matthew 5:22). Even more so, this is language that soaks the imagination of readers in violence. Such language, as contemporary socio-linguistics point out, potentially can be more destructive than physical violence, especially where it is sanctified by religion. It is language that draws its listeners into an atmosphere of bitter and agonistic opposition against others and that categorizes people in terms of either good or evil with dangerous consequences. Such language scarcely leaves one uninvolved: a reader could easily be tempted into sharing the book’s hate for

²⁵ Beale, “Book,” 901.

²⁶ Ibid., 580-81.

²⁷ Ibid., 581.

²⁸ Juergensmeyer, “Terror,” 4.

Satan and its followers²⁹ and, even worse, to view those who are different, as the enemy who deserves to be killed.³⁰ It is language that breeds exclusivity, that turns opponents into enemies with whom one cannot negotiate or dialogue - which is one reason why religion can become dangerous and violent.³¹ When this language is integrated in a fundamentalism that divinizes one's own truth at the cost of others and that is nurtured within a social group which strives for martyrdom within a context of uncertainty and oppression, violence is often its inevitable consequence.³²

The Two Trends Side By Side

There are, therefore, two trends in Revelation that stand in tension with each other: on the one hand it is a book that focuses impressively on non-violence, witness and conversion portrayed within an intimate, reciprocal relationship of God with humanity. The divine is, metaphorically speaking, standing at the door, signaling to those on the inside the divine desire to share communion and feast together (Rev.3:20³³). It is a book about divine invitation. This reflects divine waiting, longing and patience. The book ends with the coming of the Lord to the community of faith where, in the paradisiacal setting in which God's dwelling will be with the people (Rev.21:4). It is a story of God who acts righteously against unrighteousness of violent evil and who holds violent people accountable for their actions.

However, this softer, non-violent language threatens to become overshadowed by the harsh, dark imagery in which it is embedded and, on a deeper level, by the thought world from which it originates. It then could be perceived by some readers as a book of coercion. They will see Revelation as driven by a fundamental conviction of its author about God's power that will triumph violently over evil powers. The harsh, dark language opens the space to perceive this power as "coercive, all-controlling, and unilateral."³⁴ Such readers will experience this description as indicating a God who is the all-powerful Creator and Judge, who determines the course of events that no one or nothing can change or stop. It is then a book about a God who desires the ultimate apocalypse when evil will be destroyed and eliminated.

Some scholars try to reinterpret this tension between invitation and coercion in order to relativize the seemingly dominant position of the harsh language. Farmer,³⁵ for example, thus argued that Revelation's symbolic, mythopoetic language with its indeterminate and open character, creates space for contemporary readers to reinterpret and understand the tension imaginatively. An imaginative reinterpretation will see the deterministic, coercive language as an indication of the conviction that God will overcome evil, whilst the milder, relational language could mean that this will happen through redemptive love.

Such a reading that seeks to allocate an ethical character to the harsh language, is under pressure of contemporary perspectives on the role of language in creating realities. Harsh, violent language can create violent behavior.³⁶ This is confirmed by the reception history of Revelation which shows the many interpretations that used the book to motivate extreme acts of violence against opponents of Christianity. The possibility for such abuse is great where tension exists in the lives and situation of readers. The intensity of the external political situation contributed decisively to Revelation's harsh, violent language. Later faith communities that find themselves in a similar position, could easily resonate with Revelation's highly charged language, reinterpret the text accordingly and be driven to religious violence.³⁷ Where faith

²⁹ Neufeld, "Killing Enmity," 129.

³⁰ Cf. Kitts and Jerryson, "Introduction," 223-233, for perceptive comments and examples of how various extreme acts of violence are justified by the discursive power of religion and its hold on the imagination.

³¹ Cf. Huber, "Religion," 58.

³² *Ibid.*, 55; further: De Villiers, "Hermeutical Reflections," 261-262.

³³ Note the reciprocal relationship when the Son of Man will eat with those who respond to his knocking, and they with him.

³⁴ Farmer, "Beyond," 115-116, observes in this regard how Revelation 6-20, read without the other chapters, offers a gruesome portrait of coercive power. He does point out (156) another alternative, less dominant trend in Revelation that portrays divine power as "persuasive, all-influencing, and relational."

³⁵ Farmer, "Beyond," 118.

³⁶ Cf. Streett, "Here," 238ff., for perceptive insights in this regard.

³⁷ Kippenberg, "Violence," 38, provided valuable insights in religious violence that originated because of tension between faith communities and socio-political structures.

is threatened by outside sources, Revelation could provide the imagery to conceptualize a church that needs to be saved from the external threat. Revelation would then be used to legitimize a sacred battle against a hateful enemy in real, violent terms. It could (and has) overshadowed the softer language of non-violence in Revelation. The power of language to create such a situation is enormous, as will also become clear in the following section.

Gender violence

It has become an established insight that language as a social construct does not merely reflect, but also reinforces and even creates thought, consciousness and reality. This happens, however, not only where language soaks reader's imagination in violence, as suggested above, but also where it harbors and creates new, hidden forms of violence. Language itself can also, in a subtle, often unrecognized manner, violate the dignity and humanity of people, as is particularly clear when one studies Revelation's seemingly innocent depiction of women in terms of gender stereotypes.³⁸

A fitting description?

Revelation could be seen by some readers as presenting a positive image of women. It, for example, portrays the church rather strikingly in terms of the vulnerability of a woman who is giving birth to a child whilst assaulted by the dragon (Rev.12). The church is ultimately saved by divine intervention when the woman flees into the wilderness to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days (Rev. 12:6). The image may also be seen as illustrating unwavering faith in divine providence and care, especially for the weakest among weak.

Also pleasing to some could be the use of such images as bride of the Lamb and the New Jerusalem for the church (Rev.21) since they indicate the purity that it retained throughout the struggle against evil. Enlightened readers of the book may also be pleased to note that Jezebel, the main opponent of John, is a woman. Though an evil character, the remark at least that women had leading positions in John's communities. And it also may be regarded positively that she is not criticized as a woman who usurped the position of a prophet³⁹, but as leader who entices the faithful to commit sexual immorality and idolatry (Rev. 2:20). The female figure thus could indicate that already in Early Christianity women had the same status as men.

Some readers may also associate the prostitute in Revelation 17-18⁴⁰ primarily with the conventional metaphor in prophetic literature of Hebrew Scriptures for an idolatrous Israel that forsook its covenantal relationship with God. This religious reading, that approaches the female imagery from a theological perspective and warns against idolatry, keeps them from recognizing the gender stereotypes in this

³⁸ Jack, "Out of Wilderness," 151, links this insight with deconstruction that states that language does not refer to reality, but is the means by which reality becomes intelligible and meaningful. He does not engage with the insight that the allocation of meaning can be violent. Žižek, "Violence," 1, noted how one can be too easily lured into considering in acts of crime, conflict and terror as obvious signals of violence performed by visible agents. One needs to step back and look deeper into the causes of such obvious violence. "First, there is a 'symbolic' violence embodied in language and its forms, what Heidegger would call 'our house of being.' As we shall see later, this violence is not only at work in the obvious-and extensively studied-cases of incitement and of the relations of social domination reproduced in our habitual speech forms: there is a more fundamental form of violence still that pertains to language as such, to its imposition of a certain universe of meaning. Second, there is what I call "systemic" violence, or the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems."

³⁹ So also Schüssler-Fiorenza, "Revelation," 133. She notes that John's attack on Jezebel indicates that women were part of his audience and held leadership positions in the community.

⁴⁰ Cf. Goodfriend, "Prostitution"; Budin, "Prostitute"; Glancy & Moore, "How Typical," gives a discussion of the negative views of prostitution in Greece and Rome that help to illuminate the impact of naming the woman in Revelation 17-18 a whore. Previous interpretations neglected social realities and reflected a more bookish understanding of the motif in Revelation, drawing on literary texts and Jewish Scripture as sources of information. The new reading exposes the negative connotations in Rev.17-18 in more depth.

language. This may happen especially when readers understand the elaborate and violent depiction of the prostitute in Revelation 17-18 as the author's attempt to give expression to the murderous, dangerous nature of evil⁴¹ (Rev.17:1). They would argue that the symbols and language are so strong, because evil is so extremely dehumanizing.

Gendering evil and good

A plethora of new readings, influenced by feminist perspectives,⁴² began pointing out the implications and consequences of how the author of Revelation gendered his message to his readers.⁴³ A growing number of readers experience his gendering as a discriminatory sub-discourse in his text that undermines or even invalidates its controversial discourse of justice.

To understand this, it is necessary to reflect on the notion of doing gender. People who do gender, engage in "on-going interactional processes in which they invoke, construct, and enact polarized images of the two genders".⁴⁴ Whilst some forms of gendering may well be without negative consequences and not use polarized images, others are abusive of women and, on a deeper level, leave powerful positions of men and the hegemony of patriarchy untouched.

One recognizes such an abusive gendering in the discursive portrayal of both good and evil women in Revelation.⁴⁵ The wedding imagery for the church describes a righteous woman as "bride" and "wife" of the Lamb (Rev. 21:2,9). It is telling that, among all those non-gendered images for faith communities that are found in Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, the author selects this particular female symbol. The church is portrayed as a woman who, in terms of ancient social relationships, finds her identity in her marital, submissive relationship with the bridegroom. Her description fits the societal stereotype of a morally pure woman and housewife within the hegemony of a patriarchal, hierarchical social system.⁴⁶ Though the description of her clothing wishes to symbolize her righteous acts (Rev.19:8) and thus emphasizes the need for an ethical lifestyle, the female imagery in itself had the potential to reinforce abusive gender roles from antiquity. Such gendering harbors and kindles submissive and moralistic expectations for women that expected women to be decent, modest and reputable, fulfilling their role in society as the object of male desire and companionship. (Rev.21:2). Through this imagery, the bridegroom is portrayed as the dominant figure that leads, controls and steers events, whilst the bride is a passive, even forlorn character whose fate is under control and power of the male.

⁴¹ Schüssler-Fiorenza, "Revelation," 9, notes that the question of power and justice constitutes the central problem in Revelation.

⁴² Cf. for feminist readings of the Bible and particularly Revelation, Jack, "Out of Wilderness," 149-162, and the debate in Huber, "Like a Bride," 32-40. The later, more critical readings of Revelation and its women characters, tend to interpret the symbols no longer as open-ended, non-generic or gender specific, but as part of a social discourse that signifies a reality that is discriminatory towards women. Huber points out how several hermeneutical considerations determine whether the images of the women can be interpreted as gender specific: the use of prophetic discourse of harlotry, the ancient context of the book, the role of women in the structure of the book and the relationship between the images of women and the cities (Babylon/Jerusalem). Cf. for more information on this, Huber, "Like a Bride," 1-43.

⁴³ Jack, "Out of Wilderness," 153, points out that Stanton already in 1895 critiqued Revelation for its abusive language about women, so that the apprehension about Revelation's gendering is not only a contemporary phenomenon. It is, however, only in recent times, especially within contextual approaches like liberationist, feminist and post-colonial readings that this critique was developed systematically.

⁴⁴ Gilgun & McLeod, "Gendering Violence," 173, stress that not all gender discourses are hegemonic. Some, for example, can be playful and egalitarian. The nature of doing gender depends on the "values, images, myths, stories, expectations, and rules that are available to men to guide them in defining their rights, privileges, and roles as men."

⁴⁵ Note, for example, that evil characters are presented mostly as women (Jezebel and the prostitute of Revelation 18) or as wild animals (the dragon and two beasts). On religious activists who frame this-worldly foes as cosmic foes (in the case of Revelation as a dragon and two beasts who subject the world), cf. Juergensmeyer, "Terror." He considers this a technique to rationalize their killing of others.

⁴⁶ Sebesta, "Women's Costume," offers an extensive discussion of the traditional role and qualities of women in Augustan Rome that included care for her children, devotion to her home and chastity.

Similar gendering is to be seen in the portrait of the evil women in Revelation. The prophetess in Thyatira (Rev.2:20), a member of the seven churches, is named in a bitterly hostile and polarized description, as Jezebel, one of the most infamous opponents of the people of God in Hebrew Scriptures. She is described as a lustful and powerful woman who seduces men in the community to immorality (Rev.2:20).

This happens also with the prostitute in Revelation 17-18. Though she is initially described as Babylon,⁴⁷ the author soon genders the evil city as a prostitute who represents depraved civil society and political leadership. As the counter-image of the bride, she is a function of John's intense and dramatic ideology critique of the powerful status quo and political hegemony as evil and unjust. His gendering of this non-violent critique ironically overlaps with and reifies seminal convictions of the hegemony: he associates his violent opponents with a despicable female character. The evil city of his times is a woman, dressed up in excessively luxurious attire, a power-hungry drunk who holds a golden cup full of abominations and impurities (Rev.17:4), and who makes all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication (Rev.14:8). As a prostitute⁴⁸ she is a woman of the worst kind, an evil temptress who seduces the mighty men of her times to participate in her base immorality (Rev.18:3, 2319:2). What is worse, is that she is portrayed as drunk with the blood of the witnesses to Jesus (Rev.17:6; cf. 18:24; 19:2). The whore embodies impropriety and impurity, but this is done in terms of women's terrifying, deadly female power over men.⁴⁹ She seduces ten kings who are conceptualized in stereotypical format as victims of her guiles and seductive power. She manipulates their sexual desires, it is indirectly suggested by the narrative, in order to attain wealth and luxury and to attack the people of God. The gendering is absolute and polarized: men are exculpated, women gendered disparagingly.

The description of both the prostitute and the bride is stereotypical in its focus on sensuality and sexuality. As is to be expected in such a context of stereotyping, their clothing is described in detail. They are dressed with gold, jewels and pearls (Rev 17:4; 18:16; 21:11, 18, 19, 21) and they wear fine linen (Rev.18:16; 19:7) to attract the attention of men (the bridegroom and clients).⁵⁰ They are thus objectified in terms of their sexuality.⁵¹ The prostitute is equated with a body that is sold for anonymous sexual gratification to many sexual partners in the most sordid and squalid street conditions. A striking examples of such negative sexualizing is found in Revelation 14:3-4 where followers of the Lamb are said to inherit the New Jerusalem because they are not defiled with women. Though this pronouncement symbolically indicates that such people did not compromise with evil, the remark assumes a conventional belief that sexual relationships do not belong to the most elevated forms of social behavior. Such objectifying language reflects and re-inscribes gender and social relations characterized by inequality and discrimination.⁵²

Though, as was stated above, one could have some appreciation for the symbolism of this gendering, it is more difficult to overlook the abusive manner in which it is expressed. It becomes even more challenging when the contemporary reader decodes the discourse behind such abusive symbolism. On a deeper level, one recognizes in the gendering, the hegemony of powerful males who see women from the perspective of their own maleness and who dictate what roles they will fulfil in societal structures. It is a hegemony in which the powerful parties use the gender of those who have been relegated to the margins of society, to insult and denigrate their opponents. This happens in Revelation: Babylon is a willing collaborator of an evil system and, in a dismissive manner, is then depicted as a woman.

⁴⁷ Evil is initially presented as a city, exploiting a long tradition that regarded cities as places of degeneration. In Revelation 11:8 one finds some attention to this when the city in which the witnesses die, is described as Egypt and Sodom.

⁴⁸ Glancy & Moore, "How Typical," wrote an illuminating article on the connotation of the word used for the prostitute within Revelation's first century world, indicating that it does not refer to the upper-class courtesan, but to women who sold themselves on the streets in most filthy and dangerous conditions.

⁴⁹ Cf. also Huber, "Like a Bride," 34, "For instance, the bride of the Lamb, a feminine-defined symbol, is read as signifying a positive view of male control over the passive and sexually powerless female."

⁵⁰ For the gendering of violence, cf. Gilgun & McLeod, "Gendering Violence," 167-193.

⁵¹ For the general trend to sexualize words for women, cf. Saul, "Feminist Philosophy," 3, who notes, "The sexualisation of words for women is considered especially significant by the many feminists who take sexual objectification to be a crucial element, if not the root, of inequalities between women and men."

⁵² Gilgun & McLeod, "Gendering Violence," 171.

One could argue that such language were conventional, and, furthermore, that it needs to be relativized by John's intentions to express spiritual realities, virtues and attitudes through them. John is, however, not merely taking over conventional attitudes about women. He consciously uses female imagery to denigrate his opponents: they are nothing but women.⁵³

Paradoxically, then, John's protest against an abusive political hegemony is expressed in language that reflects and reifies abusive realities in the very society that he otherwise critiques so harshly.

Contempt

Of further concern is how the author of Revelation assumes discursive practices that reflected contemptuous violence against women, specifically prostitutes. The contempt of the author for his opponents is mirrored in his gruesome narration of vile actions against the prostitute by the ten kings, her evil collaborators. They hate her, finally turning on and eliminating her. They make her desolate and naked, devour her flesh and burn her up with fire (Rev. 18:26-19; 19:3⁵⁴). In a graphic description, the prostitute is stripped of her luxurious clothing in an act that suggests to some readers that she is raped (Rev. 17:16).⁵⁵

It gets even worse when the woman is said to have a tattoo on her forehead (Rev.17:5). This was how slaves were marked. The prostitute's low status is emphasized: it equals that of a slave, someone who was owned by another, to be used as they wish.⁵⁶ She is nothing more than an object and a commodity that can be discarded and eliminated.⁵⁷

There is double contempt here: she is a street-wise woman who sells her body, and she is of lowest status. Nothing stands in the way for her to be killed.

Once again John's non-violent witness about just punishment of an evil system is presented in abusive language of the worst kind. Evil will be given its due, John suggests to his readers, just like one would (and should) treat an immoral prostitute.⁵⁸ John's non-violent critique of the status quo incorporates language that reflects ruthless abuse of women. Revelation's language implements and defends ideals and standards of its society that existed at the cost of the most vulnerable of society.⁵⁹ It is language that appropriates without a hint of restraint, male "degradations to which enslaved brothel workers were subjected, including tattooed foreheads and perpetual vulnerability to violence".⁶⁰ John reifies these discursive practices about women and leaves them unchallenged, reinforcing gender relations and shaping perceptions of reality on a systemic level.

Revelation's non-violent discourse of justice, salvation and judgment challenges his abusive political context and aims at liberating people, but it is also embedded, paradoxically, in a violent narrative and contaminated by a violent discourse. It is a violent non-violence: the violent discourse undermines the notion of justice that inspired such a strong protest of the believing community against evil. John's language about justice is undermined by violent attitudes towards the most vulnerable on the margins of society.

⁵³ A hidden function of this gendering language is that it acted as a weapon of attack against opponents of the author. Vander Stichele, "Just a Whore," 114, for example, offered the interesting insight that the use of female language for Babylon is not accidental. To compare enemies with a woman is a way of ridiculing and denigrating them. At the same time it functions to ascertain one's own male superiority.

⁵⁴ Some intertextual links for this action are to be found in the excessively violent pronouncement of Ezekiel 16:35-41; 23, Isaiah 23:15-17, 25; 49:26, and Hosea 2:5.

⁵⁵ Cf. Huber, "Thinking," 43.

⁵⁶ Glancy & Moore, "How typical," 558-559.

⁵⁷ It reminds one of the lamentation of the merchants in Revelation 18:11-17. They mourn the fact that no one is left after the fall of Babylon to buy their wares - which includes slaves.

⁵⁸ Gilgun & McLeod, "Gendering Violence," 194.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁶⁰ Glance & Moore, "How Typical," 569.

Divine violence

At the beginning of this essay it was stated that the non-violent character of Revelation is evident in the reassurance to its readers that God will ultimately hold their enemies accountable for their evil works and judge them accordingly. They need not retaliate or take matters in own hands. This divine punishment has often been legitimized or accepted because it is presented as moral, since it is meted out against evil, unrighteous opponents.⁶¹ The intensity of the language is also explained by the author's indignation and anger about the extreme forms of evil violence to which he and his community have been subjected.⁶²

A closer reading of the text reveals certain abusive and immoral aspects of the divine judgement. This is especially evident in the excessive ways in which the judgment is executed. The evil triad is punished by being thrown into a fiery lake of burning sulphur (Rev.19:20; 20:14) where they will be tormented day and night, for ever and ever. Revelation 18:6-8 creates the impression that it is a divine call for the prostitute to be punished with a double measure of retaliation. That punishment exceeds *lex talionis*, which originally intended to ensure that punishment befits the crime.⁶³ God is even portrayed as striking children dead and decreeing rape as divine punishment (Rev.2:23). Even the righteous will be punished violently if they fail the divine scrutiny of their works.⁶⁴

The destructive potential of such a description of the divine character and identity, is evident from a remark by Childs, who notes that ethics have to do with the human response to God's character. God's holy character was a norm for Israel, as is stated in Leviticus 19:2: "be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." Matthew's Gospel, for example, reflects a similar understanding in the Sermon on the Mount when it reports Jesus' call to his disciples to be as perfect as their heavenly Father is perfect (Matt. 6:48). A God who punishes so harshly, who hates and kills enemies, may seem not only to be contradicting the love commandment (Mat 5; Luke 10; Rom.13), but could also evoke cruel behavior by those who claim to serve God. One hesitates to think how some imaginative minds may have relished the idea that they will one day observe the terrible ordeal of their opponents and who may have decided to take up their role as participants in the final judgment (Rev.20:4; 3:9; 15:4; 20:4) before the designated time.

Conclusion

The above analysis raises several hermeneutical questions, especially about the relevance of this material for contemporary reflection on violence. On the one hand, there is much to be appreciated in the text as still relevant to contemporary readers: The author of Revelation understood in a profound manner that unrestrained political hegemony is totally evil when it fails to recognize the humanity of others, replaces words with swords, ignores righteousness and pursues wrong. Revelation rightly rejected physical violence, insisted on brutal honesty and debate, discouraged retaliation and sought justice. This represents a revolutionary, radical lifestyle.

On the other hand, the text of Revelation perpetrates violence in a way that seems to make its own message irrelevant. This violence is visible in its theology that by times portrays God as a proto-male who is angry and thirsty for vengeance, who hates opposition and is bent on destroying enemies. It is a text that is permeated by an agonistic spirit aiming at excluding, othering and demonising those who do not share its ideology. And it is visible in its often unrestrained violent speech with its threats of gruesome punishments.

⁶¹ The elimination of the prostitute is motivated in Revelation 19:1-2 as the divine vengeance for the blood of God's servants by her hand, and, therefore, also as answer to the question of the martyrs in Revelation 6:9-11 for divine intervention to avenge their blood.

⁶² De Villiers, "Hermeneutical Reflections," 265.

⁶³ Cf. Kensky, "Trying Man," 247, for a discussion of the many attempts to tone down the extreme nature of this remark. Kensky argues that the punishment of Babylon is an attempt to justify God's judgments. This argument does not solve the problem of the extreme nature of the punishment.

⁶⁴ Kensky, "Trying Man," 254, drew attention to the coldness of the final, terrifying judgment scene in Revelation 21-22, where the image portray God as a faceless, implacable monolith who is involved in hard, procedural justice. Even believers who do not live righteously, face extreme punishment (De Villiers, "Hermeneutical Reflections," 249).

Some readers of the book rationalize these dimensions by describing them as typical of ancient social discourses, and thus obviously no longer relevant in contemporary times. This approach serves to downplay the violence and by implication wishes to draw attention away from the book's violence to its supposedly more relevant non-violent message. The above analysis shows that one cannot separate Revelation's (seemingly relevant) non-violence from its (ostensibly irrelevant) violence. The violence of Revelation is not a malignant growth that can be neatly excised from an otherwise healthy body.

An ethical approach to the study of the Bible requires for such violence, including his understanding of God's violent character, to be acknowledged as an integral, even cherished part of the author's religious discourse rather than merely as an unfortunate corollary of shared discourses or a relic from the ancient past. Only then can the next step of dealing with and accounting for this violence in Christianity's foundational text be taken in an adequate and ethical manner.

An ethical approach also, for example, would interpret the text in terms of previously ignored forms of violence (as they were recognised and developed in recent research). This complex understanding of violence plays an inevitable role in interpretation of biblical texts. The nature of the interpretative enterprise – in which the horizon of earlier and later readers are fused to construct meaning – requires from a reader not only an awareness of historical studies, but also of the relevance of his or her own complex horizon. This would include reading Revelation in terms of new understandings of the complex nature of violence. The reader enters the world of the text from his or her own world, the world in front of the text, fully aware that interpretation is about an interaction between the two. Interpretation requires that one accounts both for the overlap of and for the conflict between these horizons and, therefore, that one investigates the way in which contemporary insights in violence illuminate and address deficiencies, limitations and challenges in biblical texts.

All this also requires empathy for readers who struggle to resonate with the Revelation as violent text, and, secondly, an openness to the fact that for them Revelation's text may be liberating only to a limited degree, if at all. Those who interact with Revelation's darker side from their own world, find that their reading often eclipses insights that others may regard as self-evidently profound.

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