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Term Paper:

The Divine Warrior in Revelation

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Even the most cursory reading of the book of the Revelation of Jesus Christ (hereafter “Revelation”) will show that it is about salvation and judgment, of bringing the final end to evil, both cosmic and spiritual. This purpose seems to be the prevailing popular opinion of the book, and this sentiment is shared by those who are and are not acquainted with its contents. Because of its sensational and apocalyptic imagery, Revelation has been a wildly popular and yet uniquely mysterious book. On the one hand, we identify with images that evoke epic battles between comic book-like superheroes and villains, but its status as Scripture elicits confusion when we try to make interpretive sense of it. The task of the Church is to let Revelation speak to our imaginations through its multi-faceted images, and to draw interpretive conclusions and applications by recognizing its apocalyptic-genre qualities and almost constant allusions to the OT.¹

This essay will attempt to unpack one particular Revelation theme: the Divine Warrior. Jesus Christ is portrayed from many angles in Revelation, one of which is as the Divine Warrior who saves his people by waging eschatological war against their (and his) enemies. Our scope will be limited to those passages in Revelation that contain the most explicit images of the Divine Warrior. Hence, the multitude of divine judgment passages and images found in Revelation, while organically and implicitly related to the theme of divine warfare, are passed over due to space constraints. Furthermore, because Revelation is a book thoroughly steeped in the theology and expectations of the OT, it cannot be fully appreciated without reference to its various OT antecedents. But since this study aims to unpack the Divine Warrior theme *in*

¹ Hans LaRondelle, “The Biblical Concept of Armageddon,” *JETS* 28, no. 1 (1985): 26-27, observes that “in the Apocalypse of John all the books of the OT seem to meet and end. Especially the exodus and holy war motifs are blended by John into a new, creative apocalyptic outlook that has its unifying and transforming center in Christ as the Lamb of God (28 times).”

Revelation, most OT references will be confined to footnotes.² The theme of Jesus as the Divine Warrior is important for the Church today for at least four reasons: (1) the growing fear of encroaching Islam into traditionally “Christian” territory (i.e., the global west), (2) the widely-held meek and mild caricature of Jesus, (3) covert (and sometimes overt) religious pluralism and relativism in the Church, and most importantly (4) all the same reasons Jesus rebukes the seven churches in Revelation 2-3, which continually prove to be relevant in every generation.³

I. JESUS CHRIST: THE DIVINE WARRIOR IN REVELATION 19:11-21

Certainly the clearest picture of Jesus Christ as Divine Warrior in Revelation (and perhaps the entire Biblical corpus) is found in Rev 19:11-21. It is here that we read of the Warrior Messiah who strikes the nations with the wrath of God and defeats the Beast and False Prophet. Much insight can be gleaned by just an isolated reading of this brief pericope. The elements of this passage may be arranged according to three categories.

1. The *names* of the Divine Warrior.
2. The *appearance* of the Divine Warrior.
3. The *actions* of the Divine Warrior.⁴

We learn that he is called “Faithful and True” (v. 11), “The Word of God” (v. 13), “King of kings and Lord of lords” (v. 16), and has a secret name that only he knows (v. 12). John sees this one who bursts forth from the opened heaven sitting on a white horse (v. 11). His eyes are

² The groundbreaking John-Revelation Project (still in its inception) at Knox Theological Seminary challenges the assumption of Revelation’s literary scope by introducing the thesis that the Gospel of John and Revelation are best read as mirror images of each other, as the literary structure of each book is arranged in a double (forward and reverse) chiasm. This chiasmic reading thus requires that each book be interpreted in light of its corresponding passage in the other. Time will tell whether the scholarly community adopts their conclusions. See Warren A. Gage, J. Randy Beck, and Steven P. Carpenter, “The John-Revelation Project,” n.p. [cited 20 November 2006]. Online: <http://www.knoxseminary.org/Faculty/FacultyForum/JohnRevelationProject/index.html>.

³ These sins include: loss of fervent love for Jesus (Rev 2:4); false teaching, idolatry, sexual immorality (Rev 2:14-15, 20); dead faith (Rev 3:1); spiritual apathy, pride, uselessness, and lukewarmness (Rev 3:15-17).

⁴ David E. Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, WBC 52C (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 1047, proposes the similar categories of *identity*, *description*, and *tasks* of the rider on the white horse.

aflame with fire and he wears many crowns (v. 12). His appearance becomes progressively more frightening as he is pictured wearing a robe dipped in blood (presumably from battle, v. 13), accompanied by the purified hosts of heaven in his train (v. 14), and a sharp sword protruding from his mouth (v. 15). As he rides forth in action he judges and makes war (v. 11) by striking down the nations, ruling them with an iron rod, and treading the winepress of the fury of God's wrath (v. 15). Although he is challenged to a great battle by the Beast and the kings of the earth with their armies, he (apparently without struggle) casts the Beast and the False Prophet into the lake of fire (v. 20) and slays the rest of his opponents with the sword of his mouth (v. 21).

Such a graphic scene is emotionally arresting and clearly understandable at a certain level. Jesus Christ, the returning King, comes to vanquish his demonic and human foes quickly and decisively. But this passage also raises several biblical-theological questions and difficulties in the context of Revelation. For instance, how are his names "Faithful and True" and "The Word of God" related to divine warfare? Why are the metaphors of the courtroom and the battlefield combined? Whose blood stains the Divine Warrior's battle garment? Is it his own, his enemies, or that of the martyrs? What is the significance of the Divine Warrior's secret name? Why is there seemingly no battle once the enemy troops amass? Is the victory the Divine Warrior wins one of suffering or glory (i.e., why use the metaphor of warrior if Christ's victory was won through his "defeat" on the cross)? Can the Divine Warrior forgive his enemies? These questions can only be answered by surveying how Revelation as a whole portrays the Divine Warrior.

1. *Historical and cultural insights.* The Bible and the people of God were born in the ancient Near East (ANE). Such a setting, with its myriad of religious faiths and unstable political landscape, was the perfect breeding ground for divine warrior imagery.

Israel and the entire ancient Near East knew almost constant warfare. Armies were always on the move, either in the interest of expanding imperial territories or defending against foreign encroachment. A warrior was a powerful person, either dangerous or comforting depending on whether he was attacking or defending. The biblical writers recognized God's sovereignty over their history, and as they witnessed victory or defeat in warfare, they envisioned God's presence in martial categories...God promised to protect Israel against their enemies as long as Israel remained loyal to him (Deut 28:7). When the need arose he revealed himself in the guise of a warrior.⁵

Furthermore, Revelation unambiguously identifies the Divine Warrior as a king. This link is also rooted in the ANE covenantal concept.⁶

The divine warrior theme is closely connected to the idea of covenant in the OT. God reveals himself as king through covenant-treaty and then promises to protect his subject people from danger threatened by their enemies. We can see this in the blessings that flow if the law of the covenant is obeyed. In Deuteronomy 28:7 God the king promises that if Israel obeys him, "The LORD will grant that the enemies who rise up against you will be defeated before you. They will come at you from one direction but flee from you in seven" (NIV). He does this many times in the history of Israel, appearing in a variety of forms and using different means to win the battle.⁷

One could even assert that Revelation as a whole is structured around the ANE combat myth. "It [Revelation] pictures the divine warrior, heavily armed and leading the heavenly armies against the Roman Empire, symbolized as a dragon."⁸ Longman and Reid's analysis of the ANE divine warfare pattern includes (1) warfare, (2) victory, (3) kingship, (4) housebuilding, and (5) celebration.⁹ This pattern prominently reoccurs throughout Revelation.¹⁰

⁵ Tremper Longman III, "Divine Warrior," *DBI* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 211.

⁶ Longman points out that the Divine Warrior theme is pervasive in Scripture because of its association with covenant. The blessing section of ANE covenants includes promises of protection as a reward for faithfulness while the curse section includes promises of retribution for unfaithfulness. See Tremper Longman III, "The Divine Warrior: The New Testament Use of an Old Testament Motif," *WTJ* 44, no. 2 (1982): 307 n. 37.

⁷ Longman, "Divine Warrior," *DBI*, 212.

⁸ Theodore Hiebert, "Divine Warrior," *ABD* 6 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 879.

⁹ Tremper Longman III and Daniel G. Reid, *God is a Warrior* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 83-85. This pattern is repeated in Biblical history as first recorded in the Exodus (Exod 15:1-18), then Israel's early history up to the building of the Solomonic temple, and finally in the last major section of Revelation (Rev 20-22). Bruce A. Stevens offers a modified version of the ancient divine warrior pattern which makes allowance for the defeated Christ as Suffering Servant: (1) descent of a divine figure, (2) battle with chaos, (3) temporary defeat, (4) vindication and return to reign in the kingdom. See his "Jesus as the Divine Warrior," *ExpT* 94, no. 11 (August 1983): 328.

¹⁰ This lends additional literary support to the view that Revelation is structurally organized using parallel recapitulations rather than using a strict chronological framework. For more on the structure of Revelation, see William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1940; paperback, Baker Books, 1998), 16-23 (page citations are to the paperback edition).

Much more could be said about the ANE divine warrior motif. Suffice it to say that Revelation utilizes this well-attested theme, which appears throughout the Bible and its surrounding cultural context, to portray Jesus as the Divine Warrior making his final appearance to consummate his victory over Satan and all those who are aligned with him.¹¹

2. *Biblical-theological insights from the commentators.* Armed with an awareness of the historical background of divine warrior imagery, we are prepared to engage the commentators to discover further biblical-theological insight regarding the *names*, the *appearance*, and the *actions* of the Divine Warrior in Rev 19:11-21.

As a prefatory comment, to place the scene in redemptive-historical context, Aune notes, “the appearance of the rider on the white horse accompanied by an angelic cavalry is generally, and probably correctly, understood as a dramatization of the Parousia of Jesus.”¹² Proceeding with this majority interpretation, what should we think of the names of Jesus ascribed to him at his Second Coming?

a. *Names of the Divine Warrior.*¹³ *Faithful and True.* Sweet notes that Christ was earlier called “the Amen, the faithful and true witness” who addressed the Laodician church (Rev 3:14).¹⁴ Caird sees the name as a reference to “the wordy battle of the lawcourt” and Christ’s role as the witness-bearer.¹⁵

¹¹ According to the gospel testimonies, Jesus himself adopted the imagery of the divine warrior to describe his own ministry. See Matt 3:11-12; 11:1-19; 24; 26:64; Mark 13 (cf. Ps 68:4; Dan 7:13; Nah 1:3).

¹² Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1053.

¹³ Christ is the worthy recipient of these names, and they are certainly meant to contrast with the blasphemous and counterfeit names of the Beast (Rev 13:1) and the Harlot (Rev 17:3).

¹⁴ John Sweet, *Revelation*, TPINTC (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1979; reprint, Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 282 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

¹⁵ George Bradford Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, HNTC (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1966), 240.

The Word of God. Caird does not think the same author wrote the Gospel of John and Revelation, so he dismisses the obvious link to the eternal Logos of God.¹⁶ Rather, he connects Jesus' earthly testimony to the title: "the word to which Jesus bore testimony in his life and death is now recognized to be indistinguishable from the person of the witness: he is the Word of God."¹⁷ More likely, Mounce offers help with this name: "In Hebrew thought a word is not a lifeless sound but an active agent that achieves the intention of the one who speaks (Gen 1:3, 7, 9, etc). The Word of God is God fulfilling his divine purpose...The Messiah as avenging warrior is appropriately named 'the Word [the powerful and active utterance] of God.'"¹⁸

*King of kings and Lord of lords.*¹⁹ Caird rightly notes "the title is the ground, not the result, of the coming victory; he will conquer the monster and the kings because he is already King of kings and Lord of lords. The warrant for the title is the initial victory of the Cross."²⁰ Aune cites Skehan's interesting yet speculative proposal that the gematria equivalent in Aramaic is the number 777, thus corresponding to the Beast number of 666 (Rev 13:18).²¹ Boring reminds us that the Roman Caesars claimed this title, which rightfully belongs only to the divine warrior king.²²

The Secret Name. The unknown name receives by far the most ink. Most include as a possible explanation that in many ancient nations it was thought that to know a god's name was

¹⁶ True to his critical commitments, R. H. Charles also dismisses the reference to the Gospel of John, arguing that the Logos in Rev 19 is a warrior which would introduce a dissonance into the Johannine community's theology of the Gospel Logos. See his *The Revelation of St. John II*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1920; reprint, 1950), 134 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

¹⁷ Caird, *Revelation*, 244.

¹⁸ Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, NICNT (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 354.

¹⁹ See Deut 10:17; Ezra 7:12; Ps 136:3; Ezek 26:7; Dan 2:37, 47.

²⁰ Caird, *Revelation*, 246.

²¹ Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1063. Aune points out that the number 777 can only be achieved by omitting "and" from the name "King of kings and Lord of lords" and by translating into Aramaic, instead of the more likely Hebrew language. Unfortunately, he does not address whether Aramaic gematria may be employed to calculate the number 666 for the Beast, which would undoubtedly help his argument.

to have certain powers over him, thus a concealed name may suggest that no one has power over Christ. This may have an element of truth, but Beale argues convincingly that “Christ’s ‘name’ will be known to his people when they experience the fulfillment of prophecy in a new, consummated covenantal marriage relationship with Christ.”²³

Dennis Johnson aptly summarizes, “Jesus’ appearance, names, and companions call believers to rest our hope confidently and completely in his almighty power to vindicate his saints and eradicate his enemies.”²⁴ In other words, he is the Conqueror.

b. *Appearance of the Divine Warrior. Bursts from the opened heaven riding a white horse.* Poythress writes, “Heaven stands open. God reveals his presence not merely to John, as in 4:1, but to the whole world of humanity. The appearance of the divine warrior in his majesty must mean the end of the battle and the destruction of all enemies before him.”²⁵ Kistemaker adds “the color white symbolizes victory, for this rider goes forth to be the victorious conqueror (compare 6:2). He rides on a white horse as a symbol of warfare.”²⁶ Another writes, “we do not commonly think of Jesus returning on a horse, accompanied by multitudes of angels on horses, not should we do so. It is a representation of Jesus the almighty Conqueror, ‘Field Marshal’ of the armies of heaven, coming to subdue the rebellious of earth, which are led by the powers of hell.”²⁷

²² M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation*, IBC (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989), 196.

²³ Gregory K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 953. Beale ties the unknown name to Isa 62:2-3 and 65:15. “Therefore, that no one knows the name mentioned here except Christ means that the prophecy of Isaiah 62 and 65 has not yet been consummately fulfilled.” Thus the Lord’s secret name, certain to be the most glorious of all, will be revealed to his bride, the Church, at the consummation of redemptive history.

²⁴ Dennis E. Johnson, *The Triumph of the Lamb* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing Company, 2001), 270.

²⁵ Vern S. Poythress, *The Returning King: A Guide to the Book of Revelation* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing Company, 2000), 174.

²⁶ Simon J. Kistemaker, *Revelation*, NTC (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001), 519.

²⁷ George R. Beasley-Murray, “Revelation,” *NBC* (4th ed.; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 1450.

Eyes are a flame of fire. “This may signify that his judgment is incapable of deception or fraud, i.e. it penetrates all things, even the secrets of the heart, and consumes his enemies.”²⁸

Wears many crowns. Caird finds a deliberate comparison: “There is a contrast intended between the seven diadems of the dragon and the ten diadems of the monster on the one hand and the many diadems of the Rider on the other. Here is royalty far surpassing any earthly sovereignty.”²⁹ On a historical note, Ptolemy apparently “wore two diadems on entering Antioch—one for Egypt and one for Asia.”³⁰ This suggests that the number of crowns corresponds to kingdoms ruled. Seven and ten are representative complete numbers in Scripture, thus the dragon and the monster (improperly) claim to rule over all the nations. But Christ’s many crowns far surpass these. He is the true sovereign.

Wears a robe dipped in blood. This graphic image of the bloodied warrior has confused many commentators. The difficulty is the uncertainty of whose blood stains his robe, since the battle has yet to begin in this passage. Charles, who interprets Revelation on the whole sequentially and chronologically, argues, “since, therefore, the redness of the vesture in 13 is not due to the warfare in 11-21, there remains only one other possible explanation, and this is that *the blood on His vesture is that of the Parthian kings and their armies*, whom He had already destroyed, and whose destruction had already been proleptically prophesied in xvii. 14” [emphasis original].³¹ Aune understands the blood symbolically: “[it] is a literal reference to the heavenly warrior whose garment is stained with the blood of those he has slain.”³² Beale

²⁸ Josephine M. Ford, *Revelation: Introduction, Translation and Commentary*, AB 38 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, 1975), 313. Most commentators agree. See Rev 1:14 and Christ’s omniscient analysis of his churches in Rev 2-3; Heb 4:13; Dan 10:6. Beale, *Revelation*, 951-52 shows that Jesus omnisciently and righteously judges all (those inside and outside the covenant community).

²⁹ Caird, *Revelation*, 241. Compare Rev 12:3 and 13:1 with 19:12.

³⁰ Charles, *Revelation*, 132.

³¹ Charles, *Revelation*, 133.

³² Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1057.

elaborates by connecting this image to Isa 63:1-4 and concludes “the stained garments symbolize God’s attribute of justice, which he will exercise in the coming judgment.”³³

Purified armies of heaven in his train. Caird notices the contrast between the blood-stained red robe of the Divine Warrior and the pure white linen worn by the armies of heaven, whom he interprets not as angels but as the Conquerors/Martyrs. “His blood has made their robes white, and theirs has made his red. In this respect, as in the secret name he bears, he remains unique, even when surrounded by those who have won the same victory as he.”³⁴ Aune is agnostic regarding the nature of the armies, whether “the holy ones” in the text are angels or saints.³⁵ For those who see cycles of recapitulation in Revelation, the armies are paralleled in Rev 17:14 where they are clearly martyrs (“those with him are called and chosen and faithful”).

Sharp sword from his mouth. Some interpret the sword as a symbol of the word of God, or more specifically, the gospel.³⁶ Hendriksen disagrees, “this sword is not the comforting story of the gospel. It is symbolical of destruction, as is clearly indicated by the entire context. He comes to ‘smite the nations’, and to ‘shepherd them with a rod of iron’ (2:27; 12:5). He treads the winepress of the fierceness of the wrath of God, the Almighty.”³⁷ There is probably truth in both interpretations, for surely the good news of the gospel is foolishness and a stumbling block to those who refuse to believe. The gospel of the kingdom will be bad news for the unrepentant and the enemies of God’s people.

³³ Beale, *Revelation*, 957.

³⁴ Caird, *Revelation*, 244. Interestingly (yet in the end unconvincingly), Caird constructs a case that the blood on Christ’s robe is that of the saints whom he sovereignly (lovingly?) crushes in the divine winepress, mixes as wine, and finally serves to the Harlot Babylon of chapter 18. See pp. 242-46.

³⁵ Aune, *Revelation*, 1059.

³⁶ Somewhat representative of this view is Caird, *Revelation*, 245, although he limits the gospel story to its soothing aspects.

³⁷ Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors*, 182.

c. *Actions of the Divine Warrior. Judges righteously and makes war.* This action is both positive and negative. “By waging war against his enemies, he administers justice that results in the total defeat of his opponents. God has ordained that divine judgment precedes victory with the assurance that justice will inevitably triumph.”³⁸ Also possible is a tangential contrast of true justice and “the corrupt practices of the eastern courts and the injustice often found at the proconsul’s tribunal.”³⁹ Caird sees a close parallel to “the war in heaven between Michael and Satan, which turned out to be a legal battle between defending and accusing counsel (xiii. 7-12).”⁴⁰

Strikes down the nations, rules them with an iron rod, and treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God. These are terrible actions to ponder. Mounce comments on each:

The sharp sword [used to strike down the nations] symbolizes the lethal power of his word of judgment. We are not to envision a literal sword by a death-dealing pronouncement that goes forth like a sharp blade from the lips of Christ...To rule with an iron scepter means to destroy rather than to govern in a stern fashion. The shepherd not only leads his flock to pasture but defends the sheep from marauding beasts. His rod is a weapon of retaliation. The Messiah’s rod is a scepter of iron; that is, it is strong and unyielding in its mission of judgment...Any view of God that eliminates judgment and his hatred of sin in the interest of an emasculated doctrine of sentimental affection finds no support in the strong and virile realism of the Apocalypse.⁴¹

Casts the beast and false prophet (apparently without struggle) into the lake of fire. What is immediately striking is the brevity of the battle. “One moment John sees the beast, the kings allied with it, and their armies gathered to make ‘the war’ against Christ and his armies (19:19). The next, the beast and false prophet are seized and cast, still living, into the lake of fire.”⁴² Mounce does not see a quick battle per se, but rather interprets this detail as a feature of

³⁸ Kistemaker, *Revelation*, 519. He also references many OT passages where judging the nations with justice has a positive aspect to it (see Ps 9:8; 72:2; 96:13; 98:9; Isa 11:3-4).

³⁹ Ford, *Revelation*, 313.

⁴⁰ Caird, *Revelation*, 240, also sees a reference to Joel 3:1-16 where all the nations gather in the valley of decision. This text Caird calls the “[OT] *locus classicus* for this mixture of legal and military metaphor [emphasis original].”

⁴¹ Mounce, *Revelation*, 355-56.

⁴² Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb*, 277. Kistemaker, *Revelation*, 527, sees an allusion to Dan 7:10-11.

apocalyptic literature. “There is no description of the actual warfare. This should remind the reader that the Apocalypse is dominated by metaphor and symbol. While the events portrayed in apocalyptic language are to be taken with all seriousness, they are not to be taken literalistically.”⁴³ Even so, these images are meant to convey something striking, and if we do not pay attention to their details we risk “losing the trees for the forest.”

Slays the rest of his opponents with the sword of his mouth. The only new detail introduced here is the slaying of the Divine Warrior’s human opponents. He metes out judgment by slaying “all who have in the final alignment of loyalties arrayed themselves against God and the forces of righteousness.”⁴⁴ Aune reminds us that “‘the rest’ refers to the kings of the earth and the armies they led mentioned in v 19a. To be slain by the sword that projected from the mouth of the warrior on the white steed certainly invites metaphorical interpretation; i.e., the ‘sword’ must be the words spoken by the warrior.”⁴⁵ Whether the death of “the rest” is symbolical or not, the reader is forced to confront the disgusting fate of their exposed bodies, given over to the scavenger birds for a gory feast (Rev 19:17, 18, 21).⁴⁶

II. OTHER DIVINE WARRIOR PASSAGES IN REVELATION

A Vision of Christ, Rev 1:9-20. Verse 16 in particular has implications for our study of Christ as the Divine Warrior. John sees a vision of the glorified, radiant Christ who has a sharp two-edged sword coming from his mouth. This sword is meant to strike down the nations in chapter 19, but its mention here previews the righteous judgment that the Divine Warrior will exercise on the seven churches of Rev 2-3. Again, Hendriksen offers a timely reminder to

⁴³ Mounce, *Revelation*, 358.

⁴⁴ Mounce, *Revelation*, 359.

⁴⁵ Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1067.

⁴⁶ Sweet, *Revelation*, 285, sees an ironic reversal of the traditional theme of the great supper of God. While believers are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb, the birds are invited to “the great supper of God” to feast

not interpret the sharp two-edged sword that proceeds out of Christ's mouth as indicating the sweet and tender influences of the gospel in its mission of conversion. Notice that in 2:16 we read: 'and I will do battle against them with the great sword of my mouth'. This is addressed to those who refuse to repent. The entire description must be taken as one whole and interpreted as such.⁴⁷

Mounce also argues that "the sword in these vignettes [2:16; 9:15, 21] symbolizes the irresistible power of divine judgment. The authoritative word of Christ is to be understood over against the fraudulent demands of the imperial cult. It is the word of Christ that will ultimately prevail."⁴⁸

Kistemaker emphasizes the sharpness of the sword: "The image of the sword symbolically represents Christ's spoken word. That word is sharper than a two-edged sword and is able to discern the thoughts and intentions of the heart. The sharpest weapon in the Roman arsenal was a double-edged sword."⁴⁹ Beale comments on the cultural and redemptive-historical significance of this sword: "The Christians in Asia are to understand that Jesus will do battle in this manner not only against the evil nations (19:15) but also against all those among the churches who compromise their faith (2:16). The consensus is that this sword alludes to that of the Roman soldier, used in battle, further enhancing this idea."⁵⁰

Reaping the Earth's Harvest, Rev 14:14-20. This is the other major passage in Revelation that portrays the Divine Warrior, and it shares the image of the winepress with Rev 19:15. Aune, who interprets the grain and grape harvests as a single asymmetrical event, summarizes: "Both the grain harvest depicted in vv 14-16 and the grape harvest in vv 17-20...are metaphors representing eschatological judgment carried out by angelic emissaries of God. The explicit mention of the treading of the grapes in the great winepress of God's wrath (v 19), with

on the flesh of the unbelievers. It is "a grisly parody of religious observances in which animals are slaughtered to keep God quiet and let men feast." Christ effectively bids the reader to eat or be eaten!

⁴⁷ Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors*, 56.

⁴⁸ Mounce, *Revelation*, 60.

⁴⁹ Kistemaker, *Revelation*, 97.

its reference to the blood high as a horse's bridle, refers to God's climactic victory in the final eschatological battle (see 19:17-21 and 20:7-10)."⁵¹

Interpreting the harvests in this passage is difficult. Other commentators see a separation of the righteous and wicked corresponding to the grain and the grapes.

The motif of this double harvesting is sculptured in high relief in Rev 14:14-20. The two divisions of mankind contrasted in this passage are referred to in the immediately preceding context. Those who are gathered in the grain harvest (vv. 14-16) are the hundred forty-four thousand described in vv. 1-5, followers of the Lamb, redeemed from mankind as firstfruits for God...Those who are gathered in the grape harvest (Rev 14:17-20) are the worshippers of the beast described in vv. 9-11. They drink the wine of God's unmitigated wrath and the smoke of their fiery torment goes up for ever and ever.⁵²

Bauckham gives three reasons why Christ only acts as the Divine Warrior against the grapes: (1) The two images (grain and grapes) each refer back to antecedent images in the same chapter: the winepress to Babylon's wine (14:8) and the firstfruits of the grain to the 144,000 (14:4). (2) Despite the parallels, there are significant differences between the harvest images. The grapes are harvested and subsequently furiously crushed; the grain is only reaped, not subsequently threshed and winnowed (which would naturally extend the metaphor and clarify the intent to judge). (3) The two images of Christ are different. One is the Son of Man coming for his kingdom; the other is of the Divine Warrior and judge.⁵³

Regardless, all understand the imagery of the grape harvest that is trodden in the great winepress of God as a symbol of divine judgment and explicitly an action of the Divine Warrior.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Beale, *Revelation*, 212. As is his strength, Beale connects this imagery to the OT: "[it] is based on the prophecies of Isa 11:4 and 49:2, which adds further to his depiction as an eschatological judge and as the one beginning to fulfill this messianic expectation...The use of Isa 11:2-3 in Rev 1:4 and 5:5-6 confirms this." See pp. 211-12.

⁵¹ Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, WBC 52B (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 849.

⁵² Meredith G. Kline, *God, Heaven, and Har Magedon* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2006), 201.

⁵³ Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 94-98. Summarizing, "in 14:14-20 John depicts the outcome of history in two contrasting images—the positive 'harvest of the earth' and the negative 'vintage of the earth.' See p. 98.

⁵⁴ Although as we saw earlier, Caird's peculiar view places the saints in the winepress to experience the wrath of God in what he called a Christian "rebirth of images." Caird has an obvious aversion to allowing eschatological

III. CONTEXTUAL READING OF REVELATION 19:11-21

Due to the clarity of the passage, no corrections need be made to the insights gained from our isolated reading. In a beautifully simple way, John profoundly captures the essence of the Divine Warrior in language even a child can comprehend. But including other relevant portions of Revelation into our analysis sheds important light on the significance of the *names*, *appearance*, and *actions* of the Divine Warrior in Rev 19. The regal warrior Christ, the King and Lord, who comes from heaven to wage eschatological war on his enemies, will certainly win the battle against his foes, both those who persecute his beloved bride from the outside and those who insidiously seduce her from the inside to commit idolatry/adultery against her betrothed husband, who is Christ. He who is Faithful and True promises to gather his Church to save her from the onslaught of the lying world, the flesh, and the Devil, and to reap the harvest of the grapes of his furious wrath. He who is called the Word of God will strike them down with the (s)word of his mouth, as the gospel of the kingdom is finally proclaimed in its consummate form (when the day of salvation arrives in the “not yet” and passes from the “now”) to the vindication of his elect and to the dread of those who refused to worship the Christ and chose instead to take the mark of Beast-allegiance. All will look on his coming as heaven itself opens wide to reveal the supremely crowned Lord with all-seeing fiery eyes, sweeping down to earth in battle array with his holy hosts, to righteously judge the hidden and revealed sins of the nations and the unholy trinity of the Dragon, the Beast, and the False Prophet. This great antitype warrior will fight the great battle of righteousness alone on behalf of his holy ones, and will take no prisoners (as his enemy’s blood, which will flow like rivers, stained on his garments ensures). What comfort the Divine Warrior brings to those he defends (in the court of justification and in the

progression from suffering to glory; he reinterprets all images through the lens of the pre-exalted Christ. See Caird,

battle of sanctification)! What unimaginable horror to those he judges and slays! Jesus Christ, the Suffering Servant who first set his face toward Jerusalem and the shame of the cross, will return as the Divine Warrior to remove all obstacles of sin and death for the arrival of his glorious house, the New Jerusalem. The war is finished, his enemies are vanquished, and the celebration begins with a marriage feast and consummates with God finally bringing to fruition the eternal blessed hope of dwelling with his people in perfect Sabbath rest.

IV. DOES THE CHURCH NEED A DIVINE WARRIOR?

Such a glorious picture of Christ has been largely lost in the fat and happy Western Church, and this is certainly a great loss. A suffering and persecuted Church tends not to lose sight of the ultimate victory of Jesus and his blood-purified saints. This eschatological hope is ever in their sight by faith. But the tide may be shifting, especially in Europe and North America, where the Church finds herself drowning in a postmodern, truthless, purposeless malaise. The events of 9-11, aimed squarely at our cultures, have birthed a newfound fear of encroaching militant Islam. This clash of cultures, religions, and gods should not cause us disproportional fear. The threat is real, yet the Church triumphs through suffering, persecution, and defeat, and will finally be rescued and vindicated at the last judgment by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who is a warrior mighty in battle.⁵⁵ Recovery of the understanding of Christ as Divine Warrior would also do much to reform the common caricature of Jesus as the one who is always and evermore shall be meek and mild. Part of the reason for this incomplete picture of Christ is that the Church has neglected Revelation (or turned it into a timetable for unbridled last-days prognostication) and has thus forgotten the glorious and victorious Christ. Furthermore, a full dimensional view of the Biblical Jesus will surely be offensive in our relativistic and

Revelation, 194.

pluralistic culture. Yet that very culture now infiltrates doctrine and popular teaching in the Church. Instead of adding the offenses of partisan politics, moralistic legalism, or subcultural idolatry to the gospel, our culture (which many argue resembles that of the first century when the gospel was first taking root) could be challenged head-on by the gospel-proclaiming Christ, who has demonstratively proven himself to be the Divine Warrior for his people again and again throughout history. And finally, for the sake of the Church, seeing Jesus once again as the Divine Warrior could renew the relevancy of the message to the seven churches in Revelation. Jesus warned that if they did not obey his word, he would visit judgment on them as their covenant Lord. He promised to be a Divine Warrior not for them, but against them if they broke covenant. The messages to the churches must cause us to examine ourselves and our corporate bodies whether we are guilty of those same sins and need to repent and return to our first love. We should be encouraged and take heart, because the Divine Warrior has promised he will fight, and certainly win the battle, for those who repent and trust in him alone.

⁵⁵ See Exod 15:3; Ps 24.

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