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# Revealing Angel, Slain Lamb, Slaying Warrior: Christ in the Book of Revelation

by Nancy Claire Pittman

"My spirit cannot accommodate itself to this book," Martin Luther once remarked about the book of Revelation. "For me this is reason enough not to think highly of it: Christ is neither taught nor known in it."<sup>1</sup> Although in subsequent years Luther was to revise his opinion, his initial attitude regarding the absence of Christ has been reflected in the work of succeeding generations of biblical scholars.

However, the evidence within this text weighs heavily against such a dismissal of the christology found in Revelation. Although christological ideas are communicated less through propositional statements and more through evocative and mysterious imagery, they nonetheless form an integral part of the work. Indeed, in contrast to Luther, most recent scholars agree that Christ, presented in various forms and images, is central to the book. In fact, he serves both as the author or source of the revelation that John is commanded to write down and as the major character in the narrative that unfolds within it. Furthermore, as author and chief actor, Christ initiates the action at pivotal moments in the development of the plot of the book.

The centrality of Jesus for this book is announced in its opening words: "The revelation of Jesus Christ." Furthermore, this phrase implies the dual role of Christ as author and character through the use of the word *of*. On the one hand, the *of* may be replaced with *from* or *by*, indicating that Jesus Christ is the author, just as the *of* in "the book of James" signifies that someone named James is its author. On the other hand, the *of* may also be replaced with *about*, implying that the primary subject matter of the book is Jesus. Right away we are told that this revelation is authored by Jesus Christ, who received it from God,

and that it is about Jesus Christ and his continuing activity in the world both now and in God's future.

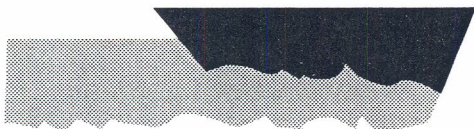
The significance of Christ as both author and character of the revelation is presented through three major images. The first, Christ as an angelic figure, introduces him primarily as the revealer who commands John to "write the things you see and the things that are and are about to be after this" (1:19; cf. 1:11).<sup>2</sup> The second, Christ as the slain Lamb, and the third, Christ as the slaying warrior, together constitute his role as major character or actor in the great drama that is revealed by the opening of the first seal (6:1). Yet let the reader be warned: because pieces of one image often modify meanings conveyed by the others, these figures cannot be completely isolated from each other. With that caveat in mind, let us examine each image as it appears within the development of the plot of Revelation.

## Christ the Angelic Revealer

The first epiphany of Christ is recounted in Rev 1:9–3:22. In this appearance Jesus inaugurates the action of the first part of the book—that of sending messages to the seven churches. He also guarantees the authenticity of the vision that John is about to have. And, like all of Revelation, this passage is full of echoes of and allusions to passages in the Old Testament, which often provide clues for understanding its meanings.

After speaking of his own situation on the island of Patmos, John describes the initial audition and vision of Christ in Rev 1:10–20. He first hears a "great voice like a trumpet" behind him (1:10), a phrase that alludes both to Ezek 3:12, in which Ezekiel hears the sound of the wings of the strange "living creatures" hovering around the

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throne of God, and to Exod 19:16, in which the Israelites hear a loud blast of a divine trumpet. These allusions prepare John and his audience for an encounter with the divine. Yet when John turns to see who is speaking with such authority to him, his expectations are only partially fulfilled—for the sound comes not from God but from the risen Christ.

The vision that follows comprises imagery taken primarily from Dan 7:9–14 and 10:5–6. In these two passages, Daniel sees or meets two angelic figures who are arrayed with distinctively angelic equipment and features. The first is the mysterious “one like a son of man,” who is probably understood by Daniel, and later by John, to be an angel, perhaps Michael, who will save the people of Israel and rule the nations.<sup>3</sup> The second, found in Dan 10:5–6, is another angel who appears to him in order to deliver a message.

The Christ whom John turns to see in Rev 1:13–16 is “one like a son of man,” the phrase used to denote the figure in Dan 7:13. Like the angel in Dan 10:5–6, he is dressed in a robe that reaches to his feet and girdled by a golden belt; in addition, his eyes glow like a flame of fire, and his feet are like bronze that has been burnished in an oven. His voice is like the sound of many waters, similar to the angel’s voice of Dan 10:6, which is like the roar of a great crowd. The initial impression given through this imagery is that Christ is practically an angel, perhaps the leading angel among all the others that appear in Revelation.

Nonetheless, although John makes use of pieces of angelic portraits to draw this his first full depiction of Christ, he does not intend for the impression to linger. On closer look we see that Christ’s hair is as white as wool and snow; in Daniel only the “Ancient of Days,” a clear reference to God, has white hair (see Dan 7:9). And when Christ speaks directly to John, he identifies himself as the first and the last, the one who was dead but now lives

into eternity (Rev 1:17–18). No mere angel could ever make such an assertion. Thus Christ is not simply an angel in this passage or in the rest of the book.<sup>4</sup>

Christ appears as an angelic figure at one other point in the book. In Rev 14:14–20 John sees “one like a son of man” seated on a cloud and holding a sharp sickle. Since Christ has already been called “one like a son of man” in Rev 1:13, this phrase most likely refers to him. At the command of an angel, he uses his sickle to reap, or harvest, the earth (14:15–16). Clearly this image, drawn from Joel 3:13, implies a destructive judgment upon the earth brought about by Christ. Because he is surrounded by angels in this passage and because he responds to a command by an angel, scholars often note how angelic this figure appears. However, he is wearing a crown—a symbol that sets him apart from the other angels. Further, the angel who tells him to use the sickle does not do so as a leader to a subordinate but as a messenger coming straight from the presence of God (14:15). Thus again, Christ may at first look somewhat like an angel, but on closer examination it is clear that he is not.

The angelic features given to Christ in these two passages do, however, serve at least two purposes. First, they underscore the portrayal of Christ as a messenger or guide from God, a function that angels often fulfill in the Old Testament (e.g., Gen 16:9–12; Num 22:35; Dan 10:5–6), apocalyptic literature (4 Ezra 4:1; 5:31), and other books of the New Testament (e.g., Matt 1:20; Luke 2:26–33). Second, they give to Christ features that are often used in depicting angels as great warrior-princes who protect and save the true people of Israel or judge the faithless nations (e.g., Exod 23:20–23; 2 Sam 24:15–16; Ps 35:5–6; Isa 37:36).

### Christ the Slain Lamb

After the dictation of the letters, John is caught up into a heavenly throne-room scene, richly depicted in Revelation 4. In Rev 5:1 John sees a scroll in the hand of the One seated on the throne. No one is worthy to open the scroll that contains the destiny of the world, John is told, and so he begins to weep.<sup>5</sup> After all, if the scroll cannot be opened, then the fulfillment of the world’s destiny is thwarted.

But an elder soothes John with the words, “Look, the Lion from the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals” (5:5). Two Old Testament metaphors, the lion from Gen 49:9 and Hos 5:14 and the root from Isa 11:1–5 and 10, are here combined to evoke Jewish conceptions of the Messiah, the conquering offspring of David.<sup>6</sup> They also suggest strength, fierceness, and indomitability—qualities of

a mighty messianic king. So John and his readers expect to see a massive, powerful lion who can fight on behalf of the faithful and reduce their enemies to nothing.

However, when John looks, what he actually sees is a Lamb “standing as though he had been slain.” We should note here that no signal of transition or explanation is given about this abrupt reversal of expectation on the part of John or his audience. Yet far from being an example of incoherence in the text, the reversal draws greater attention to the slaughtered Lamb that contrasts so sharply with the expectation of a ferocious lion. Further, this is no ordinary lamb, for it has seven horns and seven eyes.

The Greek word for lamb that John uses has occasioned much scholarly discussion because it is not the more customary Greek usage that appear elsewhere in the New Testament. Recently, however, scholars agree that little significance can be attached to what appears to be a simple preference without theological import.<sup>7</sup> More significant are the facts that he was slain, a reference to the crucifixion, and that he is now standing, a sign of his resurrection.

The seven horns on the Lamb refer to fullness of power and strength, in keeping with the principle of interpretation articulated by the ancient commentator Victorinus that the number seven in Revelation is a symbol of completeness and fullness. The seven eyes as the seven spirits of God sent to all the world are probably the same as those that appear in Rev 1:4, 3:1, and 4:5. Here, as in 3:1, they are closely associated with Christ and strengthen his connection to God. At the same time, their place as the Lamb’s eyes gives them a new guise, suggesting a fullness of vision that complements the fullness of power symbolized by the horns. Together they transform the Lamb from a mild creature into a more powerful figure.

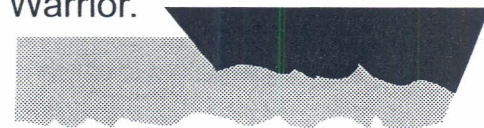
At least three Jewish traditions about lambs or sheep are woven together in this single new image. The Passover lamb from the exodus tradition is perhaps the most obvious in that its blood, like the blood of Jesus, is effective in saving the people. But it is effective in a different way: it only protects the people from the angel of death; it does not redeem them or make them holy. The suffering servant of Second Isaiah (chapters 40–55), who is “like a lamb that is led to the slaughter” (Isa 53:7 NRSV), is also evoked. After all, his wounds, unlike those of the Passover lamb, actually heal the people and make them whole. Yet nowhere in Revelation is Isaiah 53 or the suffering servant directly mentioned. The horned ram (1 En 90:37–38) and horned cow (1 En 90:9–13) of 1 Enoch, an ancient Jewish apocalypse, also come to mind, because both have messianic qualities. Moreover, like these two allegorical

animals, the Lamb in Revelation is powerful, becomes a leader of armies, and is involved in judgment.<sup>8</sup> But again these animals do not die on behalf of the people. Thus none of the traditions serves by itself as the major image upon which the Lamb is modeled; rather, all three contribute something to this new symbol for Christ.

The Lamb, who is clearly a sacrificial victim as well as a figure of some power, is worthy to take the scroll from the hand of God and to be honored by the “new song” of victory sung by the heavenly crowds. And he alone can inaugurate the subsequent action of the opening of the scrolls. At this point in Revelation, Christ becomes more than author or source of the vision: he is now a major character in the drama. Without his appearance at this point the plot could not move forward.

After the first manifestation of the Lamb in Revelation 5, the symbol is used twenty-seven other times to designate Christ. In fact, he is more frequently denoted as the Lamb than as any other single phrase, leading some to claim that the Lamb is the most theologically significant image. Such arguments are usually accompanied by the claim that the death of Jesus is the single most important christological affirmation in the book. However, I would argue that the image of the slain Lamb is balanced by another, equally powerful image—that of the slaying Warrior.

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### Christ the Slaying Warrior

Throughout Rev 6:1–19:10 Christ as the Lamb (or in other, less prominent forms) is sighted on occasion as if from afar. Then in Rev 19:1–8 John hears a great hymn in which it is announced that now is the time for the marriage supper of the Lamb. Afterward John suddenly sees not just a door, as in Rev 4:1, but all heaven itself opened. And although he has just heard of the Lamb and of the testimony of Jesus with its sacrificial inflections (19:7, 10), he now sees a mighty Warrior seated on a white horse, prepared for battle and followed by a great army. This pattern again highlights the significance of the new appearance, just as it did in Rev 5:5–6. At last the conquer-

ing hero has arrived.

The climactic depiction of Christ as a Warrior is described in Rev 19:11–21. Four names are ascribed to him: “Faithful and True” (19:11); a secret name unknown to anyone (19:12; cf. 17:5); “the Word of God” (19:13); and “King of kings and Lord of lords” (19:16). He comes prepared for battle with fiery eyes (as in Rev 1:14), a sharp sword that protrudes from his mouth, an iron rod, and a host of followers. He is wearing a robe dipped in blood, an important detail to which we will return. And he rides forth to judge, to make war, to tread the winepress of God’s wrath, and ultimately to destroy the beast and the false prophet of Revelation 13 and their minions.

As in the case of the Lamb, this image of Christ also alludes to several Jewish traditions. The most obvious is that of Yahweh the Divine Warrior who judges the unrighteous and defeats the wicked. Isaiah 63:1–6, in which Yahweh strides forth in anger to judge and to conquer, clearly stands behind the Revelation image, but other Old Testament texts (e.g., Exod 15:3, Ps 2:9, Zech 9:1–17) also come to mind. The personified “Word” in the apocryphal book *The Wisdom of Solomon* and principal angel motifs may also give shape to the Revelation vision. Of course, the early Christian claim that Jesus will one day return to judge and to save animates the entire image.

Just as the Lamb in Revelation 5 has signs of power and strength that might more appropriately belong to a Warrior, so the Warrior in chapter 19 has a mediating sign that evokes the sacrifice of the Lamb—the robe dipped in blood. Although the text does not state whose blood stains his robe, I would suggest that it is the blood of the Warrior himself. After all, the battle in which the blood of his enemies is shed has not yet begun when he appears in his crimson dress. And the significance of his sacrificial blood permeates the entire book. So just as the Lamb is not simply a helpless victim, so the Warrior is not an unscathed warmonger.

When the Warrior makes his dramatic appearance, the action proceeds quickly through a series of scenes of judgment, destruction, and, ultimately, renewal. Once again Christ is the catalyst for subsequent events. He makes things happen until at last he, once again as Lamb, dwells with God as the light that illuminates the new Jerusalem.

This very brief survey touches upon only the most prominent christological images found in Revelation. Through their use John imaginatively and vividly offers a vision of a Christ who is both source of inspiration and primary actor in a great drama of judgment and ultimate salvation. He is the one who sacrificed himself on the cross

and is thus worthy to open the scroll of human destiny. He is also the one who rides forth in victory to destroy evil and to vindicate and save the faithful. But his power to destroy comes only through his willingness to be the one to die on behalf of humanity.

The christological themes found in Revelation are thus not so different from reflections about Christ in other books of the New Testament. Yet the bold, intense, almost garish depictions of a Savior who is steeped in blood and sacrifice and who participates in warfare and disaster continue to puzzle, if not repel, many Christians, as they have through the centuries since the book was first written. At the same time, Christians who have suffered for their faith or who have experienced evil in its many disguises have taken great comfort in the revelation that they follow one who has also suffered and yet emerged victorious and who will one day defeat and destroy the source and inflictor of pain and oppression.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 35, Word and Sacrament I, ed. E. Theodore Bachman; gen. ed., Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960), 399.

<sup>2</sup> All translations not otherwise noted are those of the author.

<sup>3</sup> I should acknowledge that scholars have not universally accepted this identification of the “one like a son of man” with Michael or an unnamed angel. However, the theory is supported by strong exegetical evidence, leading a growing number of scholars to concur. See John J. Collins, “The Son of Man and the Saints of the Most High in the Book of Daniel,” *JBL* 93, no. 1 (1974): 50–66; and Adela Yarbro Collins, “The ‘Son of Man’ Tradition and the Book of Revelation,” in *The Messiah*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 536–68.

<sup>4</sup> See Loren T. Stuckenbruck, *Angel Veneration and Christology: A Study in Early Judaism and in the Christology of the Apocalypse of John* (Tubingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1995), 209–40.

<sup>5</sup> G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1966), 72.

<sup>6</sup> Leonard L. Thompson, *Revelation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 94–95.

<sup>7</sup> Sophie Laws, *In the Light of the Lamb: Imagery, Parody, and Theology in the Apocalypse of John* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1988), 29.

<sup>8</sup> See David Aune, *Revelation* (Dallas: Word, 1997), 368–71.