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Reading Revelation in a Society Seeking Harmony

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Abstract: Despite the fact that Revelation is not a work intended for the promotion of a harmonious society, this book and its impact on history provide issues to ponder regarding the societal quest for harmony. The discussion will start with the political-critical nature of warfare imagery in Revelation. This political critique will then be analyzed in light of how the book of Daniel is used in the book of Revelation, the theme of the Lamb that was slain as the Lion of Judah in Revelation, the rhetorical situation of Revelation, and a comparison between the warfare in Ephesians and that in Revelation. The conclusion will be that the book of Revelation contributes (indirectly) to the construction of societal harmony.

Key words: Harmonious Society, the Book of Revelation, the Book of Daniel, Marzabon Literature, history of affects

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Warfare Imageries in the Book of Revelation

There is no need to argue that the aim of the Book of Revelation is probably not the promotion of societal harmony. A quick glance through the book will show that this book is full of depictions of conflicts and warfare. In Rev 6 when the first six of the seven seals were opened, the first, the second, and the fourth were to do with warfare and killing (6:2,4,8) while the fifth one was to do with those who were slain for the word of God and the witness they had borne (6:10). In Rev 9 when the fifth of the seven angels blew the trumpet, the locusts out of the smoke from the shaft of the bottomless pit were depicted as an army (9:7-10) and when the sixth angel blew the trumpet, it brought the troops of cavalry who would kill one third of mankind (9:15-16). In Rev 12-13, the defeat of dragon and his angels in heaven lead to their being thrown down to the earth (12:7-9) and this brought the conflict between the saints, i. e., the Christians, and the "evil trinity"⁽¹⁾ of the dragon, the beast rising out of the sea and the beast rising out of the earth (13:13-18). These evil forces would eventually be destroyed by the one who is the "Lord of the Lords and King of Kings" (17:14; 19:11-21 NRSV). To Richard Bauckham, this book can actually be seen as a Christian War Scroll.⁽²⁾ The vision of the 144,000 and the innumerable multitude in 7:2-14, he argues, is a vision of the messianic army,⁽³⁾ and the vocabulary of conquest ("to everyone who conquers" NRSV) at the end of each of the seven messages to the churches in Asia Minor (2:7,11,17,26; 3:5,12,21) is to invite the readers to participate in the eschatological holy war depicted in the latter part of the book.⁽⁴⁾

A closer look at the book could generate even more discomfort for those who want to pursue societal harmony. Several modern scholars have identified the beast rising from the sea in 13:1,

(1) See 罗伟 Peng Wei:《启示录注释》Qishilu zhushi | The Interpretation of Revelation |, Quan san ce 全三册, (Taipei 台北: Zhong hua fujin daobao yuan 中华福音神学院 | Chinese Evangelical Theological Seminary |, 2007), 2:1145.

(2) Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 210-37.

(3) Bauckham, *The Climax*, 215ff.

(4) Bauckham, *The Climax*, 213.

which alludes to the four beasts in Dan 7:3-7,^⑤ with Roman Empire,^⑥ or the Roman power and the imperial cult of that time.^⑦ The title "Babylon the great" in 14:8, which is another allusion to the book of Daniel (4:30), is used as a metaphor or symbol to represent Rome.^⑧ With these identifications, the book of Revelation was actually a political critique of the first-century Roman imperial power.^⑨ When reading this book in a contemporary context, it could become the basis for a critique of the political power that be and it could generate the fear that it might hinder the society's quest for harmony.

It is not necessary the case, though. The Book of Revelation may not be a book that bears the concern of promoting societal harmony, while this book and its effect in history do offer something to ponder in the construction of a harmonious society.

The Book of Revelation as Historical Effect of the Book of Daniel

Our exploration will start with the use of the book of Daniel in Revelation. Earlier we have mentioned two instances of the use of Daniel in Revelation; the use of Dan 7:3-7 in Rev 13:1 and the use of Dan 4:30 in Rev 14:8, but the use of Daniel in Revelation is more than that. Among the Old Testament books, Daniel and Ezekiel are the two most used in the book of Revelation^⑩ and it can therefore be said that the book of Revelation represents a historical effect of these books in their history of reception.

Here our interest lies more with the side of the book of Daniel. As far as extant documents are concerned, Revelation was only one of the several books being influenced by the book of Daniel and its tradition. In the Maccabean literature,^⑪ the influence of the book of Daniel can also be detected. Daniel and his friends are treated in these books as role models for those who want to be faithful to the Lord. In 1Macc 2:60; 3Macc 6:7; 4Macc 16:3,21; 18:13, the reference is to the account in Dan 6 that Daniel, being faithful to God, was thrown into the den of the lions but eventually came out unharmed. In 1Macc 2:59; 3Macc 6:6; 4Macc 16:3,21; 18:12, the reference is to the account in Dan 3 that the three friends of Daniel, Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael, being unwilling to worship the golden image installed by King Nebuchadnezzar, were thrown into the fiery furnace but they walked out unharmed.

Daniel and his friends are not the only examples of faithfulness to the Lord in the Maccabean literature. They are used normally with other examples in the Old Testaments and it is noteworthy that in 1Macc 2, they are listed with Phinehas (1Macc 2:54) and in 4Macc 18:12-13 the zeal of

⑤ See, e.g., G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 683; David E. Aune, *Revelation 6-16* (WBC 52B; Dallas: Word, 2002), 732-35; Luo Wei, *Qishilu zhushi*, 2:1150.

⑥ Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 74-35; Luo Wei, *Qishilu zhushi*, 2:1152.

⑦ Beale, *Revelation*, 684-85; Bauckham, *The Climax*, 193.

⑧ See, e.g., Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 829, 900-1; Beale, *Revelation*, 685, 754-55; Luo Wei, *Qishilu zhushi*, 2:1226.

⑨ See, e.g., Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, (*New Testament Theology*; Cambridge: CUP, 1993), 17-18.

⑩ G. K. Beale, "The Use of the Old Testament in Revelation," in *idem* (ed.), *The Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 258; see also Beale, *Revelation*, 77. For a fuller study of the use of Daniel in Revelation, see C. K. Beale, *The Use of Daniel in Jewish Apocalyptic Literature and in the Revelation of St. John* (New York: University Press of America, 1984). For a survey of the use of the OT in Revelation, see Luo Wei, *Qishilu zhushi*, 1:76-110.

⑪ These four works (1Macc, 2Macc, 3Macc and 4Macc) are works of different periods of time and by authors who were probably unrelated. However, as far as the use of Daniel is concerned, they bear certain similarity. Hence, we discuss them together under one rubric.

Phinehas, the fiery furnace of Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael, and the den of the lions of Daniel are the last three examples of faithfulness in the list. The juxtaposition of Phinehas, who used weapon to strike his fellow Israelite on behalf of the Lord (Num 25:6-13) and has become an example of zeal for the law (Psa 106:29-31; Sir 45:23; 1Macc 2:26), and Daniel and his friends, who were willing to surrender their lives to be faithful to the Lord, shows two distinctive ways to be faithful to the Lord, or two different facets of the same idea of being faithful to the Lord. Phinehas represents the model for armed engagement, while Daniel and his friends represent the model for martyrdom. Since these two come out of the same spring - i. e., for the sake of being faithful to the Lord, it is not surprising that they are listed together in the last words of Mattathias (1Macc 2:49-68) to his sons to encourage them to continue their armed resistance; and they are also listed together as the last words of the mother to her seven sons (4Macc 18:6-19) when they became martyrs under the tyrant Antiochus (cf. 4Macc 17:23).

In comparison with the use of Daniel in the Maccabean literature, there are differences and similarity in the use of Daniel in Revelation. Unlike the Maccabean literature, Revelation does not refer to Daniel and his friends' deeds as the model of faithfulness. It is the vision that Daniel saw in Dan 7 that plays an important role in the book of Revelation.¹⁰ The four beasts in Dan 7 are alluded to in the description of the beast rising from the sea in Rev 13, as we have already mentioned earlier. Both the beasts in Dan 7 and the beast rising from the sea in Rev 13 represent earthly imperial powers that oppress and wage war against those who are faithful to the Lord (Dan 7:17,25; Rev 13:2,7). Despite the different ways in using Daniel, the concern of the Maccabean literature and that of Revelation are very similar when they use the book of Daniel: both are concerned with the issue of political oppression that the faithful were facing.

In their dealing with this political concern, another difference between the Maccabean literature and Revelation should be noted. In the Maccabean literature, Daniel and his friends are listed among other Old Testament heroes and their examples are used to endorse armed resistance as well as to vindicate the value of martyrdom, whereas in Rev 13 armed resistance is never mentioned; what can be seen is only the martyrdom of the faithful (Rev 13:7,9,15). As a matter of fact, Revelation as a whole never promotes the idea of armed resistance in the face of political oppression; the only way to resist is through non-violent means and those who engage in such kind of resistance should prepare for the consequence of martyrdom. The historical effect of Revelation suggests that this message seems to be well taken by the early church. From the first persecution which Christians endured under Emperor Nero (starting from 64 CE) to the issue of the Edict of Milan in the names of Emperor Constantine and Emperor Licinius in 313 CE, there is no record that Christians ever engaged themselves in military rebellion against the Roman Empire due to the warfare imageries and language in the book of Revelation.

When the book of Revelation is seen as a reading of the book of Daniel, from the point of view of history of effect, the historical effect of the book of Revelation can actually also be seen as a particular historical effect of the book of Daniel. With its non-violent stance in expressing the faithfulness to the Lord when the faithful people are confronted with challenges, this particular historical effect of the book of Daniel distinguishes itself from the historical effect revealed in the Maccabean literature.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Beale, *Revelation*, 77.

Slaughtered Lamb as the Lion of Judah in the Book of Revelation

A question, then, has to be asked; what would be the factor that contributes to this non-violent reading of the book of Daniel in Revelation? Bauckham rightly points out that in Rev 5:5-6 the juxtaposition of the image of the Lion of Judah, which is a symbol of destructiveness and conquest, and the image of the slaughtered Lamb, which is a symbol of sacrifice, is to forge "a symbol of conquest by sacrificial death"^⑮ and, in such a way, the book of Revelation reinterprets the Jewish messianic hopes in the first century and replaces the militaristic Messiah with a non-violent, and even a suffering, one.^⑯

Because of this replacement, the warfare imageries in Revelation need to be interpreted in the light of this symbol of slaughtered Lamb as the Lion of Judah. The messianic army depicted in Rev 7 (i. e., the 144,000 and the innumerable multitude) can only be "an army of martyrs who triumph through their martyrdoms, because they are followers of the Lamb who participate in his victory by following his path to death."^⑰ This holy war can only be won by sacrificial death.^⑱ Thus, Revelation uses the holy war language but transforms its meaning to non-military means of triumph over evil in terms of faithful witness to the point of death.^⑲

The Rhetorical Situation of the Book of Revelation

When the book of Revelation is situated in the New Testament canon in which we can find the message of a gospel of peace and reconciliation, not only for the relationship between humans and God but also for those among humans (e. g., Eph 2:11-18), an inevitable question must be raised; why was there a need to talk about holy war in the book of Revelation? From a rhetorical point of view, the question can be asked in another way; what was the "rhetorical situation" or "rhetorical exigence"^⑳ that lead to the composition of this message of holy war in Revelation?

The traditional answer to these questions is that it was because of actual or threatened persecution of Christians by the local Roman imperial power in Asia Minor in the latter part of the first century.^㉑ Surely persecution would be an important contributing factor to the writing of Revelation, but

⑮ Bauckham, *The Climax*, 183.

⑯ Bauckham, *The Climax*, 214.

⑰ Bauckham, *The Climax*, 229.

⑱ See Bauckham, *The Climax*, 230, 232.

⑲ Bauckham, *The Climax*, 233.

⑳ As defined by Lloyd F. Bitzer, a rhetorical situation is "a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence." Lloyd F. Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* (1968): 1-14 (4-6), quoted in George A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill: The Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1984), 34-35.

㉑ E. g., John M. Court, "Revelation of John," in R. J. Coggins and J. L. Houston (eds.), *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, (London: SCM, 1980), 593.

scholars have identified more factors that contributed to the rhetorical situation of this book.⁴⁹

To Schüssler Fiorenza, the rhetorical situation can be summed up by a single word: tribulation.⁵⁰ In the latter part of the first century for Christians this tribulation came out of the deep tensions between their belief in the ultimate power of God and Christ and the reality that most of them were not beneficiaries of the economic prosperity that Pax Romana brought about but victims of the colonial injustices of oppressive taxation, the widening gap between the rich and the poor, and Roman repression of disturbances, paranoid prohibition of private associates, and suspicious surveillance by neighbors and informants.⁵¹

Bauckham also sees Rome's economic exploitation as one of the major reasons in Revelation's critique of the Roman Empire.⁵² To him, this economic dimension interplayed with Rome's military and political might and they joined together to become the justification of Rome's self-deification in the Roman imperial cult; the subjects of the Emperor should worship him as a divine Savior because it was him who had the power to bring them the wealth and splendor of the Pax Romana.⁵³ For Christians, this imperial propaganda presented serious theological and ethical issues. Theologically, the absolutization of Rome's power and prosperity was seriously in conflict with Christians' belief of one True God,⁵⁴ and the expense of Rome's victims at which the pursuit and maintenance of this power and prosperity was achieved was in itself an serious ethical issue.⁵⁵

To Bauckham, the rhetorical situation of the book of Revelation was more than tribulation, as Schüssler Fiorenza sees it. It was also to do with temptation. Many of Rome's subjects, Christians included, who were actually exploited by the Pax Romana yet failed to see its true nature; on the contrary, they were dazzled by Rome's glory and seduced by the promised benefits of the Pax Romana.⁵⁶ Therefore, Revelation has a two-fold purpose; for those who believed in the ultimate power of God and Christ but endured injustice and hardship as the result of the Roman system in their daily life, Revelation brought the vindication of their faithfulness and perseverance, while for those who started to be seduced by the propaganda of the Pax Romana and began to compromise their faith, Revelation brought the warning.⁵⁷

Comparison between the Warfare in Ephesians and that in Revelation

The above analysis of the rhetorical situation of Revelation has yet fully answered the questions we posed earlier on the relationship between the book of Revelation and the gospel of peace and reconciliation. A comparison between the warfare in Eph 6:10–20 and the warfare in Revelation

⁴⁹ The major objection to viewing persecution as the determining factor for the writing of Revelation is that during the reign of Emperor Domitian, which is the time that many scholars believe this book was written, there is short of evidence that Christians were persecuted more severely by him than by the emperors before or after him. See, e. g., David E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, (WBC 52A; Dallas: Word, 2002), lxxv–lxxv.

⁵⁰ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 124.

⁵¹ Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation*, 124, 127.

⁵² Bauckham, *The Climax*, 338–83.

⁵³ See Bauckham, *The Climax*, 348, 349.

⁵⁴ See Bauckham, *The Theology*, 39.

⁵⁵ See Bauckham, *The Theology*, 38–39.

⁵⁶ Bauckham, *The Climax*, 347.

⁵⁷ Both elements can be found in the messages to the seven churches in Rev 2:1–3:22; for the former, e. g., Rev 2:2–3, 9–10, 13, 19; 3:10–11; and for the latter, e. g., Rev 2:20; 3:17–18.

could shed some light on the relationship between Revelation and the gospel of peace and reconciliation.

For readers of Ephesians, after having read the reconciliation of humans to God and the reconciliation of humans to one another in 2:11-18, the unity coming out of this reconciliation in 2:19-22 and 3:6, as well as the calling for the formation of a community that is to be based upon this unity in 4:1-16, the military metaphors and warfare language in 6:10-20 could take them by surprise because in this passage they are not called to continue their pursuit of peace and reconciliation but to put on the whole armor of God to engage in the battle against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. This unexpectedness raises at least one practical question: if the gospel is about peacemaking between humans and God and among people, would the use of these militant descriptions eventually defeat the purpose?

Eph 6:12 may have the key to the answer of this question. Eph 6:12 states that this "struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh" (NRSV); in other words, this battle should not be waged against any human being. This is because the gospel of peace (Eph 2:17) should be made known to "everyone" (Eph 3:9). Waging war against any human being will practically exclude that person from knowing the good news of reconciliation as it is unthinkable that we can make peace with someone against whom we have been waging a war at the same time. On the other hand, the existence of evil in its various forms in everyday life is still a reality. It can hinder the reconciliation that the Christians are called to achieve. It can also damage the reconciliation that has been achieved. Therefore, reconciliation is not incompatible with the military metaphors used in Eph 6. The battle here is not a battle against some other humans but a spiritual warfare that is waged against those supernatural powers which are "of this present darkness" and "evil" (Eph 6:12).

The warfare in Revelation seems to bear a similar characteristic. Although for the Christians in the latter part of the first century their hardships and temptations came from the visible administration of the Roman Empire, the power that brought these on earth was not merely human. It was the invisible spiritual power behind the visible political domination of the imperial power; and it was the great dragon of Rev 12:9 that worked behind the two beasts of Rev 13.⁸⁸ Therefore, it would miss the target by treating humans or human institutions as the ultimate enemies because they are only the agents of the spiritual powers of evil, against whom Christian should wage the war. The decisive battle, therefore, has to be won, and has been won, in the heaven, the spiritual sphere (Rev 12:7-9).

Not only does the warfare in Revelation share similar characteristic to the warfare in Eph 6, their causes, or concerns, are also not unrelated. At first appearance, the cause of the warfare in Revelation seems to be a different one from that in Eph 6. In Revelation, the concern behind the warfare imageries is very much with the social injustice caused by economic exploitation as well as the oppression caused by absolutization of political power, whereas in Eph 6 the battle is more to do with the prevention of hindrance to the pursuit of reconciliation or of damage done to the reconciliation already achieved. The relation between these two causes or concerns probably can be appreciated in the light of the role of Christians in God's purpose. Bauckham has argued at length that Revelation has the expectation that the church will eventually play the role in God's purpose of establishing his rule on earth.⁸⁹ To establish this rule, it has to start with the reconciliation of humans to God and of humans to one another, as described in Eph 2:11-18. However, as long as the social, economic, political systemic evils continue to exist, they will hinder and damage the reconciliation

⁸⁸ See Schlatter, *Revelation*, 170.

⁸⁹ See Bauckham, *The Climax*, 238-237.

that is required for the establishment of God's just rule on earth. The battle against these systemic evils, from this perspective, is actually one of the very first steps in Christians' pursuit of reconciliation and the establishment of God's just rule on earth.

The Book of Revelation and Harmonious Society

The aspiration to the construction of a harmonious society is a desirable and noble ideal but this aspiration also reflects the reality that we actually live in a world where there are things undesirable. In order to fulfill this aspiration, the challenge will always be with the charting of a roadmap by which we can move away from those which are undesirable and construct the harmonious society that we aspire to live in. This task requires a proper understanding of the issues that cause the undesirable state of our society today and it needs the critical assessment of the society that we are in. For this purpose, the issues exposed in the book of Revelation and its effect in history, which we have briefly discussed above, become relevant to us and they offer us something to ponder.

The issue of social injustice caused by economic exploitation exposed in Revelation does not happen only in the first century. It repeats again and again throughout the history. The economic exploitation of the developing world by the developed world and the economic exploitation of the rural societies by the urban societies are two obvious examples happening today globally. However, the social injustices that the exploitation causes are easily ignored by those who benefit from them and those who are dazzled by the wealth and splendor of the societies benefit from them; but these social injustices often sow hatred that would eventually hinder, or even undermine, the quest for social harmony.

The issue of oppression caused by absolutization of political power also happens throughout the history. One of the difficulties that this issue produces for those who are under the domination is that absolutization of political power creates intolerance which is more than often realized by the prohibition and oppression of believes or thoughts that are not in line with the political agenda. That was exactly the situation that Christians in the latter part of the first century were facing. Because of the absolutization of Rome's power in a religious form, early Christians experienced an irony that, although they were called to be peacemakers for the reconciliation of humans to God and humans to one another, their belief of one True God was in deep conflict with Rome's self-deification and their refusal to surrender their own belief to the worship of the Roman Emperor as a divine Savior eventually brought about persecution and caused their martyrdoms. This particular case should make us to ponder in what way a harmonious society should be constructed; should it be constructed by oppressing all unwanted voices and persecute all those whose believes are not sanctioned by the political power? Or, should it be constructed by tolerance and encouragement of diversity in providing each group within the society adequate rooms for their own belief and practice and, at the same time, in promoting mutual respect to one another between different groups? Even for some of the so-called democratic societies in the developed world today, this is still an urgent question that requires response.

Being convinced of their role in God's purpose of establishing his just rule and the genuine peace on earth, Christians inevitably have to engage themselves in social, economic, and political critiques for the benefit of the society that they are in. However, their voices should not become a worry for a society seeking harmony. Christians, who are followers of the slaughtered Lamb as the Lion of Judah, would see their cause being undermined if their engagement in the critiques eventually leads to the use of violent means or ends up in violent conflict. They have the long tradition of non-violent engagement which encourages them to overcome systemic evils by suffering, even to

the point of death, for the benefit of the society. They believe that their blood and sacrificial death, just like the blood and death of their Master, will witness the urgent need of eliminating the systemic evils in a society.

The contribution of Revelation and its effect in history to the construction of a harmonious society is an indirect, but crucial, one. Revelation and its effect in history do not tell us much about what concepts or methods would be useful to achieve the noble ideal of a harmonious society; but rather, they expose the dangers of the systemic evils that stand in our path to the fulfillment of that aspiration. Without attention to and serious treatment for these systemic evils exposed by Revelation, the aspiration of a harmonious society would be an ideal difficult to fulfill.

中文题目:

在一个追求和谐的社会里来阅读《启示录》

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提要:虽然《启示录》的写作目的并非是要促成和谐的社会,但对于追求社会和谐,本书及其在历史中的效应,确提供值得深思的议题。本文的探讨将始于启示录中战争意象的政治批判本质,进而根据《启示录》使用《但以理书》的方式、《启示录》中被杀羔羊为犹太之狮的主题、启示录的惨酷处境、并以弗所书与启示录中战争意象的比较,来理解该政治批判的本质。本文最后将以启示录在建构社会和谐方面的(间接)贡献作结。

关键词:和谐社会,启示录,但以理书,马略比文献,效应史