

Trajectories on Violence, Slavery and Misogyny in the Bible

Section 03: A Trajectory on Violence: Jesus in The Book of Revelation

After Crossan published his book on the Historical Jesus he found himself, surprisingly, invited to give talks at many churches on his nonviolent vision of Jesus. Several issues always came up: the cleansing of the Temple and the book of Revelation. Crossan considers the Temple cleansing the easier of the objections against a nonviolent Jesus to answer. The book of Revelation with its gory details is another matter.

A part of Crossan's book (*Jesus and Violence of Scripture*) I found fascinating was how the violent vision of Jesus in Revelation was heightened in his audiences by the *Left Behind* and the *Narnia* series. Crossan writes, "The *Left Behind* "books and their subsequent movies and games, arranged multiple and discreet Biblical images of cosmic consummation into a more or less coherent scenario. But in doing so they made one egregious expansion beyond even Revelation's divine violence. The great final battle was to involve not just Christ and the angels, as in Revelation, hut humans as well."

In the second to last book of the *Left Behind* series, the protagonist Mac who had been converted to Christ sprays his uzi outside Jerusalem's Damascus gate at over a dozen GC from behind. "He felt no remorse. *All's fair . . .* It was only fitting, he decided, that the devil's crew were dressed in black. *Live by the sword, die by the sword .*" Crossan writes, "Notice how the authors (ab)use the warning of Jesus that "all who take the sword shall perish by the sword" (Matt. 26:52). Jesus said "all," but Mac lacks any sense of self-criticism—or even the grace of irony. "

In *Narnia*, four children also partake in the final battle. For those familiar with the tale, Peter kills the wolf-monster and Aslan, the Lion who represents Christ, tells hm "You have forgotten to clean your sword . . . whatever happens, never forget to wipe your sword." Crossan's response to this is, "I have to recall a different admonition to another sword-yielding Peter: "Put your sword back into its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword" (Matthew 26:52)." Crossan in giving talks in churches about the nonviolence of Jesus writes of *Left Behind* and *Narnia*, "Both of those series generated questions and objections from my lecture audiences when I spoke of Jesus's nonviolent resistance to Rome's control of his first-century Jewish homeland. If I wanted to speak, as I did, about the historical Jesus, my audience asked, as they should, about Revelation and its divine violence now at least fictionally supported by human violence."

Those who think Divine violence is really just a problem in the Old Testament clearly haven't read the entire Christian corpus. A very strong argument could be made that Revelation is the worst of the worst in this regard. Crossan tells us the good-cop New Testament and bad-cop Old Testament doesn't work for those of us who have read all of the Bible and that is just an anti-Judaism, Christian stereotype that Ananias and Sapphira might be able to tell us more about if they were still with us.

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Rev 14:19-20: 19 So the angel swung his sickle over the earth and gathered the vintage of the earth, and he threw it into the great wine press of the wrath of God. **20** And the wine press was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the wine press, as high as a horse's bridle, for a distance of about two hundred miles.

The book of Revelation is violent and if taken literally, on a scale far outweighing all the violence in the Old Testament combined. The biggest concern is the same Jesus who tells us the parable of the good Samaritan, that God sends his rain on the just and unjust, that we should turn the other cheek, to love our enemies, that whoever lives by the sword shall die by it and for Peter to put his sword away, is going to bring forth epic violence, death and destruction in the end. He unleashes the four horsemen. In Revelation 19 the nonviolent and sacrificial lamb of God becomes Christ the Conqueror. Fortunately, none of these metaphors appear to be truthful. Revelation is largely concerned with Rome and gets much of it wrong if we read it concordantly. Crossan considers it "profoundly wrong" about Rome for the following reasons:

1. Rome's destruction was said to happen soon and climax with the second coming (Rev 1:1, 2:16, 3:11, 11:14, 22:6-7, 22:20), but as Crossan writes "the Western Roman Empire continued until the 400s and the Eastern until the mid-1400s."
2. Rome was converted to Christ after Constantine's conversion in the 300s, not *destroyed* by him. Crossan notes, "Only Luke-Acts imagined the future correctly as Roman Christianity."
3. Clearly the destruction of Rome was not a "consummation of the world, the establishment of a new heaven and a new Earth in that wedding feast of divinity and humanity (21:1-5). That heavenly vision is still a consummation devoutly to be wished and very far from clearly imminent."

We also have good historical arguments that Jesus was non-violent. Aside from the passages mentioned above, we know that his followers were not crucified alongside him. If he were any threat whatsoever, Pilate would have rounded up his closest associates and put them next to the two unknown individuals crucified alongside him. The Jesus behind the material in the sermon on the mount, the sacrificial lamb who laid down his life is turned into a conquering, blood soaked warrior in the book of Revelation. A non-violent Jesus is not to say Jesus never got angry or Jesus thought that if a man were raping your daughter you should sit idly by and just peacefully lament what was happening and offer him your other daughter as well. Just as C.S. Lewis thought of people who took heaven's streets being made out of gold literally, people who interpret "nonviolent" in such a fashion are probably not yet ready to be reading books intended for grown-ups."

We may want to take a cue from John Walton's playbook in regards to the primeval history in Genesis and extend it to the other bookend of scripture. Revelation was written *for* us but not *to* us. Any purpose or meaning we glean from Revelation should be tied into whatever issues its audience was facing at the time of its composition. In all likelihood, the destruction of the Temple was part of that backdrop. In other words, to us its less about the *future* and more about *past*. To its original audience it was about the *present*.

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From Alexander the Great to the Conquering Christ: Crossan writes, “In the late 330s BCE, Alexander the Great lunged down the Levantine coast of the eastern Mediterranean and, after savage sieges, rode through the shattered gates of Tyre and Gaza on his famous warhorse, the battle charger Bucephalus. In direct and deliberate contrast . . . Zechariah described the Messiah entering the gates of Jerusalem as follows:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
 Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
 Lo, your king comes to you,
 triumphant and victorious is he,
 humble and riding on a donkey,
 on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
¹⁰ He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim
 and the war-horse from Jerusalem;
 and the battle bow shall be cut off,
 and he shall command peace to the nations;
 his dominion shall be from sea to sea,
 and from the River to the ends of the earth.” (9:9-10)

Crossan calls this a “direct and deliberate contrast” to the story of Alexander the Great. We have a peace donkey and a warhorse. Not only does it say donkey but a colt and the foal of a donkey. It is well known that Jesus made a triumphal entry into Jerusalem, not on a warhorse, but on a donkey enacting this prophecy. Crossan asks us to “Imagine Jesus coming into Jerusalem on a donkey from Bethany in the east and Pilate coming in on a warhorse from Caesarea in the west” and notes that “Matthew . . . intensified the demonstration—and the lampoon—by having Jesus ride a nursing female donkey, a jenny with her little colt trotting along beside her.”

In the Gospels Jesus is seen riding into Jerusalem on a peace donkey yet In the book of Revelation we are given Jesus more in line with Alexander the great—except a lot more deadly. We are given Jesus the conqueror on his white horse ready to unleash death upon the entire earth.

Alexander the Great	Jeremiah’s Messiah	The Triumphal Entry	A Conquering Christ
Alexander the Great rides through gates a conqueror, on a great war horse.	Jeremiah contrasts the messiah riding through the gates of Jerusalem on a donkey, a colt, the foal of a donkey.	Jesus has his disciples bring him a colt and he rides into Jerusalem on a peaceful donkey.	Jesus rides with a bloodstained cloak on white horse with a sharp sword to “strike down the nations “ and rule them with a “rod of iron” as the birds feast on the remains.

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How do we know which vision of Jesus is correct?

It seems from these trajectories and many others that could probably be delineated, we have competing images or theologies in the Bible. How do we choose? Crossan writes, “The first and fundamental question . . . is this: how do we Christians know which is our true God—our Bible’s violent God, or our Bible’s nonviolent God? The answer is actually obvious. The norm and criterion of the Christian Bible is the biblical Christ. Christ is the standard by which we measure everything else in the Bible. Since Christianity claims Christ as the image and revelation of God, then God is violent if Christ is violent, and God is nonviolent if Christ is nonviolent.

This is even given in what we are called. We are called *Christ*-ians not *Bible*-ians, so our very name asserts the ascendancy of Christ over the Bible. But this only raises a second question. Which Christ do we mean? The nonviolent Christ riding on the peace donkey in the Gospel, or the violent Christ riding on the white warhorse in Revelation. . . .

If, for Christians, the biblical Christ is the criterion of the biblical God, then, for Christians, the historical Jesus is the criterion of the Biblical Christ. This, is, once again, rather obvious. Christianity counts time down to the birth of the historical Jesus and up from that nativity. His historical birth is the hinge of time, breaking Christian history into a before and after rather than running it all towards its apocalyptic consummation. And that, of course, is why certain Christians ask, “WWJD,” that is, “What would Jesus do?” rather than “WWBS,” or “What would the Bible say? . . . Therefore, and with all due respect to Islamic tradition, we are not “the People of the Book.” We are “the People *with* the Book,” but even more importantly, we are “the People *of* the Person.” This is why a favorite Christian quotation from John’s Gospel does not say that “God so loved the world that he gave his only Book,” but “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (3.6).”

Crossan chooses the “Jesus of the Incarnation over the violent Jesus of the Apocalypse as the true Jesus of Scripture.” He writes, “Christianity’s godsend is not a book but a person, and that person is the historical Jesus. It is precisely that historical Jesus who Christians proclaim as “the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor. 4:4). Succinctly put, for Christians, Incarnation trumps Apocalypse.”