



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

- 📖 Is Apocalyptic Imagination Killing Us?  
(*Apocalyptic Vision*,  
pp. 37-45)

### Suggested Article:

- 📖 The End of It All  
(*Apocalyptic Vision*,  
pp. 73-77)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to [Christian\\_Reflection@baylor.edu](mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu).

### Christian Reflection

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# Is Apocalyptic Imagination Killing Us?

Much religious violence draws on apocalyptic theology for its inspiration. Dangerous misinterpretations of the apocalyptic paradigm of cosmic warfare are often linked with political, economic, and social agendas that are not explicitly religious.

## Prayer

Scripture Reading: Revelation 19

## Reflection

The depictions of cosmic warfare in biblical apocalyptic writings must be “handled with care,” Scott Lewis warns, because they portray “the world as a vast battlefield on which a war of cosmic dimensions between good and evil is being waged and the committed believer as a divine warrior on the side of light and good. This cosmic dualism of good versus evil, light versus darkness, and truth versus falsehood etches a deep imprint on the religious imagination, and encourages the idealization of one’s own group and demonization of the other.”

Over the centuries, extremists of all varieties have misinterpreted the imagery of passages like Revelation 19:11-21, projecting themselves into the cosmic battlefield as holy warriors for their own worldly causes. Hatred of their enemies “was perfected by leading a normal and righteous life, avoiding violence, and even practicing kindness, but with a growing and eager anticipation of the approach of God’s vengeance and the settling of accounts.” As these extremists engage in psychological “splitting” – idealizing their group as all good and denigrating opposing groups as completely evil – the “rhetoric becomes so unbelievably shrill and the opposition is painted in such negative and almost demonic terms that dialogue, civility, respect, or reconciliation become almost impossible. And how can it? If it is simply a battle between good and evil, compromise is impossible.”

Drawing on the work of Charles Kimball, Lewis notes three warning signs of the careless misuse of apocalyptic theology.

- ▶ *One contrasts an idealized version of one’s own religion with the worst flaws of the religion of others.* The sharp contrast between ‘saved’ and ‘unsaved’ in apocalyptic writings may be misused to reinforce “group identity against outsiders, whether they are non-believers, partial or ‘defective’ believers, or those who are different in any way,” Lewis writes. “This tendency has fed into anti-Semitism, sectarianism, religious bigotry, as well as pogroms and crusades of all varieties.”
- ▶ *One blindly obeys a charismatic authority figure.* Biblical apocalyptic visionaries enjoyed special communications from God. Narcissistic religious leaders today may demand unquestioning loyalty by claiming that they too are apocalyptic visionaries or have a unique ability to interpret apocalyptic symbols. This is opposed, Kimball notes, to “authentic religion [which] engages the intellect as people wrestle with the mystery of existence and the challenges of living in an imperfect world.”



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► *One manipulates the interpretation of apocalyptic writings to establish an ideal era. One may be tempted to “[rush] headlong to a time in the future in which God’s intervention has destroyed evil and ushered in God’s kingdom of peace and prosperity. The problem is that often eschatological patience is seriously lacking and some decide that God needs a helping hand – that is, they attempt to speed things along and force God’s hand,”* writes Lewis. *“The real danger is that violent conflict is then seen as inevitable, even preordained, and it can easily become a self-fulfilling prophecy.”*

Only when the cosmic drama in biblical apocalyptic writings is handled with care can it “demythologize our own institutions and deflate human pretensions and arrogance,” Lewis notes. “As a theology of hope it counsels patient endurance and encourages us lest we be overwhelmed by the magnitude of the evil, injustice, and suffering in the world. The bar is raised very high for human justice and ethical behavior, and all human structures, institutions, and aspirations are measured by God’s standards rather than ours and eventually it is God who is victorious. Even the dualism of apocalyptic is overcome after the process is complete: the earth is unified and reconciled, and the polarities of the former age – Greek and Jew, slave and free, male and female – are transcended.”

### Study Questions

1. Discuss the three warning signs of the careless misuse of the biblical apocalyptic motif of cosmic warfare. Are they manifested by individuals or groups today?
2. Are apocalyptic descriptions of cosmic warfare (as in Revelation 19) too dangerous to be read in congregations today?
3. Why, to Brett Younger, are biblical apocalyptic writings “hard for those who enjoy religious freedom and material prosperity to understand”? How should we interpret Revelation 19?
4. How does Matthew Bridges’ hymn “Crown Him with Many Crowns,” use the image in Revelation 19:12 to develop an alternate interpretation to the chapter?

### Departing Hymn: “Crown Him with Many Crowns” (vv. 1, 3, and 6)

Crown him with many crowns, the Lamb upon his throne.  
Hark! How the heav’nly anthem drowns all music but its own.  
Awake, my soul, and sing of him who died for thee,  
and hail him as thy matchless King through all eternity.

Crown Him the Lord of love, behold his hands and side,  
those wounds, yet visible above, in beauty glorified.  
No angel in the sky can fully bear that sight,  
but downward bends his burning eye at mysteries so bright.

Crown him the Lord of Heav’n, one with the Father known,  
and the blest Spirit through him giv’n, from yonder triune throne.  
All hail, Redeemer hail! For thou hast died for me:  
thy praise shall never, never fail, throughout eternity.

*Matthew Bridges* (1852)  
Tune: DIADEMATA

# Is Apocalyptic Imagination Killing Us?

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

### Teaching Goals

1. To consider how the apocalyptic paradigm of cosmic warfare has been linked dangerously with political, economic, and social agendas that are not explicitly religious.
2. To discuss three warning signs of the careless misuse of biblical apocalyptic writings.
3. To interpret the cosmic warfare described in Revelation 19.

### Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Apocalyptic Vision (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus and suggested articles before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Crown Him with Many Crowns” locate the familiar tune DIADEMATA in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ ([www.hymntime.com/tch/](http://www.hymntime.com/tch/)).

### Begin with a Story

Brett Younger bemoans the silliness in some popular interpretations of cosmic warfare in the Book of Revelation—like the *Rapture Index Web* site, which bills itself as the “Dow Jones of end times, a prophetic speedometer. The higher the number the faster we’re moving towards the rapture.”

However, “Before we pitch the Second Coming entirely, we need to remember that while many of the answers we have come up with are foolish, the questions that started it all are not.” Younger writes, “The biggest questions for all of us remain: ‘Is the future still in God’s hands? To what are we heading? Who will have the final word? What’s going to happen?’”

“...If we believe that God will win, then sorrow is finally less permanent. The minister and scholar James Stewart describes a painting hanging in a museum in Scotland—a picture of a man playing chess with the devil in order to secure his soul. The man, who has only a few pieces on the board, looks dejected. Satan is smiling; he will soon checkmate the man. For years people came to the gallery and saw only hopelessness. Then one day a chess champion stood for hours looking at the chessboard. Finally he announced: ‘It’s a lie. The king still has moves left.’” (*Apocalyptic Vision*, 76)

### Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God for discernment as you study the violent images of cosmic warfare in the biblical apocalyptic writings.

### Scripture Reading

Ask three people to read the visions in Revelation 19:1-10, 19:11-16, and 19:17-21 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

The first study in this series, “The Church as a Company of Nomads,” addressed the proper interpretation of the biblical apocalyptic writings and warned against their abuse. This discussion focuses on one form of misuse – the claim that apocalyptic cosmic battle imagery justifies violence. Scott Lewis, S.J., warns against linking the apocalyptic dualism of good versus evil to our own political, economic, and social agendas by idealizing our group as all good and denigrating another group as irredeemably evil. The next study in this series, “Islam in Apocalyptic Perspective,” applies this warning to American Christian views of Islam over the centuries.

You may enrich this discussion (or extend it to a second session) by studying the insightful interpretation of Revelation’s cosmic war imagery found in Harry Maier’s essay “The War of the Lamb” in the *Peace and War* issue of *Christian Reflection*. Maier writes, “The War of the Lamb is a call to arms, to wage war with what at first glance seems to be no weapons at all – the words of faithful testimony – but to those with eyes of faith are mightier than bullets and bombs, because their power resides in the promise and faithfulness of God.” Download the entire *Peace and War* issue, Maier’s article, or a study guide from [www.ChristianEthics.ws](http://www.ChristianEthics.ws).

## Study Questions

1. Scott Lewis identifies three warning signs: idealizing one’s religion or group as wholly good and denigrating another one as evil; blindly obeying a leader who claims to have (or be able to interpret with unique insight) apocalyptic visions; and misusing apocalyptic writings to justify violent actions to establish a perfect era. These are symptoms of uncritically identifying oneself with the biblical apocalyptic visionaries or the good characters in their visions in order to advance one’s favored political, economic, or religious cause.

Invite members to mention individuals or groups that have misused apocalyptic writings in recent years. Encourage them to discuss not only their opponents, but also some individuals or groups whose causes they sympathize with.

2. Lewis gives two suggestions on interpreting these passages with care. First, they should not be central to worship and teaching. “The Book of Revelation was not viewed as the core of Christian faith in the very early church,” he notes. “In fact, it was viewed with distrust and suspicion, for it was so obtuse that the diverse interpretations were disruptive to church life and unity.” Second, Jesus’ teachings against violence in the Sermon on the Mount should be the “interpretive key” for apocalyptic passages. While Jesus accepted “the apocalyptic worldview of Second Temple Judaism,” Lewis writes, “he reached out with compassion, respect, and mercy to the most despised and hated members of his culture regardless of their group identity, lifestyle, or their religion, and he forbade his followers to even think or speak evil of others. The values of the kingdom taught in the Sermon on the Mount were manifested perfectly in the life and person of Jesus.”

It is even more dangerous to read apocalyptic writings outside the interpretive community of faithful disciples. Members will find careless interpretations of apocalyptic theology in popular books, films, and on the Internet. How does your congregation respond to a popular misreading of apocalyptic writings – through its worship and teaching of adults and young people – without drawing undue and dangerous attention to it?

3. Brett Younger writes that Revelation reflects the theology of persecuted Christians, while “The call for most of us is to follow Jesus while living in a seductive culture” of prosperity. Material wealth can lead to spiritual captivity, and “Christians can be victims of the Stockholm syndrome, the psychological response of starting to cooperate with one’s captors. We too easily come to terms with evil winning the day. We have trouble believing the culture will ever be overthrown. We are used to the lies, but God’s truth will win.”

In “The War of the Lamb” (available [here](#)), Harry Maier notes that the Laodicean church, one of the seven churches for which Revelation was written, is warned about the spiritual danger of its self-reliant prosperity (3:14-22). Maier suggests helpful ways of understanding the apocalyptic message from the Laodicean’s perspective.

4. The hymn – from Matthew Bridges’ “Song of the Seraphs: Revelation 19:12” in his book of devotional poetry *The Passion of Jesus* (1852) – calls on one to crown the risen Christ, “the Lamb,” as the “Virgin’s Son,” “Lord of Love” (verse 3), “Lord of Peace,” “Lord of Years,” and “Lord of Heaven” (verse 6). Christ’s love is evident in his “rich wounds” from the cross (verse 3) where he died to redeem us (verse 6). In verse 4, which is not printed here, Christ’s love causes “wars to cease” as combatants become “absorb’d in prayer and praise.”

## Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.