

# Why is John's Apocalypse so Bloody?

John's Use and Subversion of Combat

Myths in Revelation 19:11–20:10

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## Abstract

The question of violence in John's Apocalypse is a perennial issue producing numerous treatments with a variety of solutions. Nevertheless, very few of the many treatments seriously engage the combat myths of the ancient Near East and how they may relate to the issue of violence in the Apocalypse. This lack of engagement is surprising given that the Apocalypse seems to draw from the plot elements, characters, and overarching concerns common to combat myths. This essay aims to rectify this by situating the Apocalypse within the combat myth tradition. When one does this, I argue that John's use of the mythic pattern furnished by combat myths renders the violence of the Apocalypse intelligible while at the same time undermining the violent imagery with strategic departures and alterations.

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## 1. Introduction

The violence in the Apocalypse of John is disturbing. The sheer amount of bloodshed stains the imagination and unsettles modern moral sensibilities. While numerous scholars have attempted to deal with the violence in Revelation, each approaching the problem in their own unique way,<sup>1</sup> the sheer volume of

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1. There have been several who have taken the violence of Revelation at face value, either valorising it or deeming Revelation to be immoral because of it. For one such attempt at valorising the violence in Revelation, see Paul Middleton, *The Violence of the Lamb: Martyrs as Agents of Divine Judgement in the Book of Revelation*, LNTS 586 (London: T&T Clark, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780567661609>. For authors who deem Revelation to be immoral on account of the violence therein, see Harold Bloom, ed., *The Revelation of St. John the Divine, Modern Critical Interpretations* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988) and Tina Pippin, *Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John*,

treatments addressing this issue illustrates that to understand Revelation we need to answer the following question: why is John's Apocalypse so bloody? In pursuit of an answer to this question, it may be helpful to consider how John uses the combat myth in Revelation, as Revelation draws from the plot elements, characters, and overarching concerns common to combat myths of the ancient Near East (ANE) and Graeco-Roman world.<sup>2</sup> Combat myths recount the conflict between a deity and monstrous serpents or dragons who would challenge said deity and threaten the created order.<sup>3</sup> Given the significance of this tradition in Revelation, it is surprising that few scholars seriously engage it in pursuit of an answer to this question.<sup>4</sup> This essay aims to rectify this issue by examining the violence depicted in Revelation 19:11–20:10 within the combat myth tradition.<sup>5</sup> When one does this, I argue that John's use of

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Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992). Other scholars have attempted to justify or mitigate the violence in Revelation in various ways. For several representative attempts, see Loren L. Johns, *The Lamb Christology of the Apocalypse of John*, WUNT 2/167 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 171–202; Thomas W. Martin, 'The Silence of God: A Literary Study of Voice and Violence in the Book of Revelation', *JSOT* 41:2 (2018): 246–260, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0142064x18804435>; David L. Barr, 'The Lamb Who Looks Like a Dragon? Characterizing Jesus in John's Apocalypse', in *The Reality of Apocalypse: Rhetoric and Politics in the Book of Revelation*, ed. David L. Barr, *SymS* 39 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 205–220.

2. David L. Barr, *Tales of the End: A Narrative Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge, 1998), 101–122; Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation*, HDR 9 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1976); Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 174–198.

3. For this definition of combat myths see: Debra Scoggins Ballentine, *The Conflict Myth and the Biblical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199370252.001.0001>; Paul K.-K. Cho, *Myth, History, and Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 1, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108567992>; Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth*, 2; Joseph Fontenrose, *Python: A Study of Delphic Myth and Its Origins* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 1–11; Calvert Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 297–299.

4. Barr comes the closest to carrying out this kind of analysis, as he acknowledges the importance of the theme of holy war tradition in Revelation. However, he does not place the text of Revelation in sustained dialogue with primary texts. For a selection of Barr's work on the violence in Revelation, see Barr, *Tales of the End*, 101–149; Barr, 'Characterizing Jesus', 212–220; David L. Barr, 'Violence in the Apocalypse of John', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Book of Revelation*, ed. Craig R. Koester (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 291–305.

5. For the purposes of this essay, I will place Revelation in dialogue with the following combat myths: (1) The Babylonian Enuma Elish (English translation, Wilfred G. Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, Mesopotamian Civilizations 16 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 45–134, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781575068619>). (2) The Egyptian

the mythic pattern furnished by combat myths renders the violence of this passage intelligible while at the same time undermining the violent imagery with strategic departures and alterations.<sup>6</sup> If successful, the analysis of how John uses the combat myth in relation to the violent imagery in Revelation 19:11–20:10 suggests the usefulness of this approach for other violent passages in John's Apocalypse.

## 2. The Combat Myth in Revelation

To understand how John uses the combat myth in Revelation, it is first necessary to discuss the narrative structure and general concerns of the combat myth. While some scholars have developed detailed structures describing the various narrative elements of the combat myth, the basic plotline can be summarised as follows: a dragon or serpent challenges a pantheon, occasionally with the assistance of allies, and displaces the gods as rulers of the cosmos, after which a single deity, usually a storm god, rises up from within the pantheon and slays the dragon, at which point that deity is usually enthroned as the chief god of that pantheon, thus restoring order to the cosmos.<sup>7</sup> This particular narrative, with relatively minor variations reflecting the socio-political realities of the people who adapted the myth,<sup>8</sup> was a part of virtually every culture in the ANE and Graeco-Roman world.<sup>9</sup>

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myth of the combat between Horus and Seth–Typhon (see Plutarch, *De Iside et Osiride*, in *Moralia, Volume 5: Isis and Osiris; The E at Delphi; The Oracles of Delphi No Longer Given in Verse; The Obsolescence of Oracles*, trans. Frank C. Babbitt, LCL (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936)). (3) The story of Zeus's struggle with Typhon (see Hesiod, *Theogony*, in *Hesiod: Theogony, Works and Days, Testimonia*, trans. Glenn W. Most, LCL (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 820–868; Apollodorus, *The Library: Volume 1*, trans. James G. Frazer, LCL (London: Heinemann, 1921), 1.6.3). (4) The Ugaritic Baal cycle (see Mark S. Smith, 'The Baal Cycle', in *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, ed. Simon B. Parker, WAW 9 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 81–180).

6. For the language of 'mythic patterns', see Steven J. Friesen, 'Myth and Symbolic Resistance in Revelation 13', *JBL* 123:2 (2004): 285–286, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3267946>.

7. For a more extensive list of narrative elements, see Fontenrose, *Python*, 262–265; Barr, *Tales of the End*, 122; Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth*, 209–210. Watkins argues that the basic pattern can be reduced to the semantic formula HERO+SLAY+SERPENT (*How to Kill a Dragon*, 301–303).

8. Carolina Lopez-Ruis, 'Greek and Canaanite Mythologies: Zeus, Baal, and Their Rivals', *RC* 8:1 (2014): 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.1111/rec3.12095>.

9. Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth*, 2. For an analysis of several important iterations of this myth across the world, see Robert D. Miller, *The Dragon, the Mountain, and the Nations: An Old Testament Myth, Its Origins, and Its Afterlives*, EANEK (University Park, PA:

In addition to sharing a basic plotline, combat myths also usually share two major concerns. The first major concern of the combat myth is kingship among the gods. That is, by identifying one god as the dragon slayer and not another, the god who accomplished the dragon slaying is elevated above the others.<sup>10</sup> This is reflected in the enthronement of the conquering god as the head deity of the pantheon, often supplanting whichever deity previously held that position. Furthermore, it is striking how consistently rulers in the ANE styled themselves after the dragon-slaying deity, be it through the ritual reenactment of the dragon-slaying myth, taking theophoric names evocative of the dragon-slaying deity, or various other means.<sup>11</sup> Whatever the case, the connection between human kingship and the combat myth only serves to further the point that the myth was concerned with divine kingship.

The second major concern of the combat myth is the establishment of a stable and flourishing creation. Occasionally, this took the form of a full cosmogonic event, as in the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*, though this was admittedly rare.<sup>12</sup> More often, combat myths describe the disruption and re-establishment of order in creation.<sup>13</sup> When the dragon usurps the rightful rule of the gods, it either explicitly or implicitly has the consequence of jeopardising or entirely ruining the created order.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the defeat of the dragon was imperative for the establishment of order in the world. This is further represented by the fact

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Eisenbrauns, 2018), 11–143, 227–235; Fontenrose, *Python*; Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon*, 297–468.

10. Ballentine, *The Conflict Myth*, 64–70.

11. Ballentine, *The Conflict Myth*, 22–70; Miller, *The Dragon*, 11–143.

12. This is contrary to Cross, who argues that Baal's combat against Yam and Mot is cosmogonic by virtue of the fact that it deals with primordial events and the establishment of kingship among the gods. If this argument is to be accepted, then it would seem that all combat myths are cosmogonic. While I do not dispute that they deal with establishing a kind of order in the cosmos, most do not deal with the shaping of the world in any significant way. Thus, identifying the Baal epic and other myths like it as proper cosmogonies seems problematic (Frank M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 120, <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674030084>). Instead, as Walton says, 'it must be recognized that this [*Enuma Elish*] is nearly the only piece of ancient literature with this feature' (John H. Walton, 'Creation in Genesis 1:1–2:3 and the Ancient Near East: Order out of Disorder after Chaaskampf', *CTJ* 43:1 (2008): 50).

13. In addition to the Baal cycle, the Hurrian Kumarbi cycle and the Hittite myth concerning Illuyanka are fascinating examples in this regard. Harry Hoffner, *Hittite Myths*, WAW 2 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 10–14 (the Illuyanka myth), 40–80 (the Kumarbi cycle).

14. Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon*, 299–300.

that the storm god was associated not only with divine and human kingship but also with fertility and flourishing.<sup>15</sup>

Herman Gunkel was the first major scholar to attempt to understand Revelation in light of the combat myth, arguing in *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit* that Revelation 12 drew substantially from the Babylonian Enuma Elish.<sup>16</sup> Gunkel's work, though dated and overly reliant on Enuma Elish, represents an important shift in the study of Revelation as it was the first to recognise that certain portions of Revelation bore a striking resemblance to the combat myth. While Gunkel's work may have been the first, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation* by Adela Yarbro Collins is the most significant work on the matter.<sup>17</sup> While some of the finer points of Yarbro Collins's argument have been called into question, such as her assertion that John patterned Revelation 12 after the Leto–Apollo–Python combat myth,<sup>18</sup> the central thesis that Revelation 12, and the rest of the book by extension, draws its major plot points and themes from the combat myth has been widely accepted. Since Yarbro Collins, there have been a number of studies that have further discerned the role of the combat myth in Revelation, most of which focus on the role of the combat myth in chapters 12–13.<sup>19</sup>

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15. For a sampling of storm gods that had this additional function, see Daniel Schwemer, 'The Storm-Gods of the Ancient Near East: Summary, Synthesis, Recent Studies Part I', *JANER* 7:2 (2007): 129–130, 133–135, 150–152, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156921207783876404>; Daniel Schwemer, 'The Storm-Gods of the Ancient Near East: Summary, Synthesis, Recent Studies: Part II', *JANER* 8:1 (2008): 12–13, 22–24, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156921208786182428>.

16. Hermann Gunkel, *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit: Eine religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung über Gen 1 und Ap Joh 12* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1895), 178–398.

17. Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth*.

18. For this particular point, see Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth*, 57–85. For critiques of this point, see David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, WBC 52b (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 669–675; Jan Willem van Henten, 'Dragon Myth and Imperial Ideology in Revelation 12–13', in *The Reality of Apocalypse: Rhetoric and Politics in the Book of Revelation*, ed. David L. Barr, *SymS* 39 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 183–191.

19. For a representative selection of such works, see Peter Busch, *Der gefallene Drache: Mythenexegese am Beispiel von Apokalypse 12*, Texte und Arbeiten zum neutestamentlichen Zeitalter 19 (Tübingen: Francke Verlag, 1996); Michael Koch, *Drachenkampf und Sonnenfrau: Zur Funktion des Mythischen in der Johannesapokalypse am Beispiel von Apk 12*, WUNT 184 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004); András D. Pataki, 'A Non-Combat Myth in Revelation 12', *NTS* 57:2 (2011): 258–272; Steven J. Friesen, 'Myth and Symbolic Resistance', 281–313; van Henten, 'Dragon Myth and Imperial Ideology'.

However, compared to the wealth of discussion of the combat myth in Revelation 12–13, the dearth of significant studies that examine the influence of the myth outside of chapters 12–13 is regrettable. This is because the main conflict in Revelation is deeply influenced by the combat myth, so much so that scholars argue that Revelation 12, which is the most complete narrative of the combat myth anywhere in scripture, functions as an interpretive key for the entire book by making the object of the repeated calls to conquer before chapter 12 explicit.<sup>20</sup> For example, while the object of the repeated calls to conquer (νικάω) in Revelation 2–3 is ambiguous, Revelation 12:11 reveals that it is the Dragon whom the church conquers by the blood of the lamb and the word of their testimony. Likewise, while the object of the Lamb's conquest is ambiguous in Revelation 5:5–6, where he is declared worthy because he has conquered, there is no doubt in Revelation 19:11–20:10 that the Lamb conquers the Dragon, the Beasts, and even death itself. The latter half of the Apocalypse also draws on the combat myth. After chapter 12, the influence of the combat myth can be demonstrated by the fact that the characters of the Dragon and his two monstrous allies permeate the narrative from chapter 12 until their ultimate demise in Revelation 20:10. In fact, the theme of God's conflict with these entities, all of whom derive from the combat myth traditions, is so dominant that some have termed this section of Revelation the 'Christian war scroll'.<sup>21</sup> As such, the narrative of Revelation demonstrates a dependence on the combat myth tradition.

In addition to the various narrative elements in Revelation that depend on the combat myth, Revelation also shares the two central concerns of the combat myth. For example, like the combat myth tradition, Revelation is deeply concerned with divine kingship. The concern for divine kingship is depicted in the sharpest relief by the prominence of the throne imagery of Revelation.<sup>22</sup>

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20. Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth*, 157–234; G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 191; Steven Grabiner, *Revelation's Hymns: Commentary on The Cosmic Conflict*, LNTS 511 (London: T&T Clark, 2015), 35–68; Pataki, 'A Non-Combat Myth'; William H. Shea, 'The Parallel Literary Structure of Revelation 12 and 20', *AUSS* 23:1 (1985): 37–54; Sigve K. Tonstad, *Saving God's Reputation: The Theological Function of Pistis Iesou in the Cosmic Narratives of Revelation*, LNTS 337 (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 23–24.

21. Barr, *Tales of the End*, 101–149; Bauckham actually argues that all of Revelation should be understood as a 'Christian War Scroll' (*The Climax of Prophecy*, 210–237).

22. For the most thorough examination of the throne motif to date, see László Gallusz, *The Throne Motif in the Book of Revelation*, LNTS 487 (London: T&T Clark, 2014); see also Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, Proclamation Commentaries (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 31; Richard Bauckham, *The Theology*

The throne scene in chapters 4–5 forms the theological centre of the book, with the most important title for God in Revelation being ‘the one seated on the throne’. Furthermore, both God’s allies and adversaries are depicted as occupying thrones. While God’s allies occupy thrones that represent both their subservience to God and their derivative nature as agents of God’s rule, his enemies occupy thrones that embody their rival claims to dominion and worship.<sup>23</sup> Revelation is thus deeply concerned with the contest between God with his allies and Satan with his, affirming that God and his allies will inevitably prevail and God’s rule will be established over the cosmos.<sup>24</sup>

However, that rule is not universally manifest in the present, hence Revelation is equally concerned with the re-establishment of the created order. Though God is depicted as the sovereign of all creation, the Dragon and his allies are pretenders to the divine throne.<sup>25</sup> They seduce the nations to the idolatrous worship of the Beast from the Sea in Revelation 13, resulting in a world characterised by licentiousness, oppression, and the wilful slaughter of the innocents and the saints, as is clear in the description and judgement of the Harlot of Babylon in chapters 17–18. In other words, the world is presently subject to the ‘reign of the Dragon’, and thrown into chaos as a result. Nevertheless, Revelation declares that the Lamb will eventually conquer the

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*of the Book of Revelation*, New Testament Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 31.

23. Gallusz, *The Throne Motif*, 176–222.

24. Craig R. Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Yale Bible 38A (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 267, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780300262148>.

25. Contrast with Cato Gulaker, *Satan, the Heavenly Adversary of Man: A Narrative Analysis of the Function of Satan in the Book of Revelation*, LNTS 638 (London: T&T Clark, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780567696526>. While Gulaker’s work is helpful in so far as it highlights God’s ultimate sovereignty even over Satan’s activity, it would seem that he goes too far in claiming that ‘nowhere in Revelation do we find an explicit characterization of Satan as the enemy of God’ (16). Such a claim is difficult to reconcile with passages such as Revelation 12:4–5, where Satan attempts to devour the woman’s child, who most agree represents the Messiah, or Revelation 20:7–9, where Satan gathers an army and marches on the city of God. While Gulaker does address these passages on pp. 137–137 and pp. 223–225 respectively, I find his explanations less than convincing. For two excellent reviews of Gulaker’s work, see Timothy Rucker, review *Satan: The Heavenly Adversary of Man, A Narrative Analysis of the Function of Satan in the Book of Revelation*, by Cato Gulaker, *Themelios* 47:3 (2022): 598–600; Alexander E. Stewart, review of *Satan, The Heavenly Adversary of Man: A Narrative Analysis of the Function of Satan in the Book of Revelation*, by Cato Gulaker, *JETS* 65:1 (2022): 189–191.

Dragon one final time and establish God's total rule over the cosmos, restoring order and allowing creation to flourish once more.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, because the combat myth 'provides a controlling effect on the narrative' of Revelation, influencing both significant portions of the surface narrative and its overall concerns, more work should be done to identify the role of the combat myth in passages outside of chapters 12–13.<sup>27</sup> This is particularly pertinent in terms of how such an analysis would help one understand important themes and topics in the Apocalypse, including the issue of violence in Revelation. And while a full analysis of the combat myth in Revelation is beyond the scope of this essay, a targeted study of the violence in 19:11–20:10 in light of the combat myth is not. Even so, such a study would have significant ramifications for how one contextualises all the violent imagery in Revelation, given the prevalence of the combat myth.

### 3. The Combat Myth and Violence in Revelation 19:11–20:10

In the case of Revelation 19:11–20:10, the influence of the combat myth is identifiable because Revelation 19:11–20:10 incorporates several narrative elements, including characters, shared with the combat myth, and addresses concerns that are central to the myth. This will be demonstrated in what follows, with special attention given to the myth informing how violence is utilised and mitigated.

Revelation 19:11–21 relates the long-awaited conflict between the divine warrior and the Dragon and the two Beasts that the narrative has anticipated since Revelation 14. The Dragon is identifiable as the main antagonist and the primary challenger to God's throne, with John's description of the Dragon in Revelation 12 consistent with the description of various dragons from combat myths in the ANE.<sup>28</sup> Likewise, the pair of beasts evoke the traditional imagery of Leviathan and Behemoth, two ancient enemies of God, and represent Roman power and the imperial cult.<sup>29</sup> However, these beasts are not autonomous

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26. Yarbrow Collins, *The Combat Myth*, 224–231. As Miller says, the dragon is always slain. Miller, *The Dragon*, 292–294. For an intriguing theological reading of the dragon-slaying, see Robert D. Miller, 'Dragon Myths and Biblical Theology', *TS* 80:1 (2019): 37–56.

27. Grabiner, *Revelation's Hymns*, 224.

28. Barr, *Tales of the End*, 106–107; Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, 185–198; Yarbrow Collins, *The Combat Myth*, 76–79; Michael J. Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly: Uncivil Worship and Witness, Following the Lamb into the New Creation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), 117, 123–126.

29. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, 731–734; Barr, *Tales of the End*, 106–109; Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, 188–193; Yarbrow Collins, *The Combat Myth*, 170–190.



enemies of God but receive their power, authority, and dominion from the Dragon in chapter 13.<sup>30</sup> These two beasts play a central role in the Dragon's war against the people of God, with the Beast from the Sea instigating the murder of the two witnesses in Revelation 11:7, and both beasts being responsible for the martyrdom of those who would not receive the mark of the Beast in Revelation 13.<sup>31</sup> Thus, by identifying both beasts with the Dragon, along with the institutions they represent, John depicts them as demonic forces of chaos and disorder in the world.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, the nations, through the deception of the beast, have joined in this final battle on the side of the Dragon and the Beast, identifying themselves as enemies of God and participants in the Dragon's rebellion. Because the Dragon and his allies are usurpers who would challenge the divine rule, the mythic pattern John utilises necessitates that these enemies of God be vanquished for his kingdom to be made manifest and for order to be restored.

The conflict in which the beasts are vanquished begins with the return of Jesus in 19:11-16. The appearance of Jesus after the reign of the Dragon to confront the chaos monsters is evocative of the appearance of the divine warrior in combat myths, as it is usually after the Dragon has reigned that the divine champion arises to strike him down. While, in many myths, the Dragon is initially victorious, leading to the champion's second attempt at slaying it, in Revelation this element of the myth is entirely subverted.<sup>33</sup> Thus, while Zeus originally suffered defeat at the hand of Typhon and needed his ligaments

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30. Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly*, 123–126.

31. On the shared identity of the beast in Revelation 11:7 and 13, see Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth*, 161–186. See also Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, 586–587; Barr, *Tales of the End*, 94. For the latter claim, see G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 587–590; G. B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 137; Craig R. Koester, *Revelation*, 499–500.

32. For the strategic reversal of Roman propaganda supporting the Emperor's continuity with the divine, see Friesen, 'Myth and Symbolic Resistance', 287–313; van Henten, 'Dragon Myth', 191–203. For a thorough study of the imperial cult, including its incorporation of traditional mythology, see Steven J. Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 23–131, <https://doi.org/10.1093/0195131533.001.0001>.

33. Pataki argues persuasively that Jesus being 'snatched up' to the throne of God in 12:5 is not a defeat and does not result from the Dragon's attempts to harm him. Rather, the action in 12:5 actually subverts the Dragon's attempt to harm him, thus negating the Dragon's ability to even wage war against the child, let alone defeat him. Pataki, 'A Non-Combat Myth', 258–272. This is contra Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth*, 60, 83.

reattached before he could face him,<sup>34</sup> Baal needed specially crafted weapons before he could face Yam and had to be freed by his consort before he could overcome Mot,<sup>35</sup> and Horus originally fled with his mother before overcoming Seth–Typhon,<sup>36</sup> Jesus never suffered defeat at the hands of the Dragon and thus his appearance at the battle is not one of recovery.

The Lamb's appearance precipitates a final confrontation between himself and those who would challenge God's rightful rule. In various other combat myths, this final conflict is related in cataclysmic terms. For example, in Hesiod's account, the battle between Zeus and Typhon caused the earth to groan and seethe under the weight of their struggle, resulting in Hades and the Titans in Tartarus trembling in fear.<sup>37</sup> Likewise, Apollodorus depicts Typhon and Zeus hurling mountains at each other during their battle.<sup>38</sup> While the nature of the battle itself is not described in the Seth–Typhon versus Horus myth, it was said to rage for days on end.<sup>39</sup> Likewise, the contest between Marduk and Tiamat is retold in epic terms, with Tiamat being so large that the cosmos was fashioned from her corpse.<sup>40</sup> From these representative examples, one can see that the battle itself was an important aspect of the combat myth, an aspect that John conspicuously omits. As soon as the Dragon, the Beast, and their army gather against the Lamb and his army, their defeat is immediately narrated (Rev 19:19–21), effectively undercutting the idea of any kind of physical battle.

John deviates from the expectations of the combat myth in at least two other important ways. First, while Jesus does use a sword to vanquish his enemies (Rev 19:21), it is a sword that comes from his mouth (Rev 19:15). While the precise nature of what this symbolises is equivocal, most agree that it has to do with the word of God, which is emphatically not a typical weapon.<sup>41</sup> While there is likely a judicial aspect to the imagery of a sword coming out of the mouth of Christ, especially given the Old Testament background that informs

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34. Apollodorus, *Library*, 1.6.3; Hesiod's account of the combat between Typhon and Zeus omits this detail, though Fontenrose argues convincingly that Hesiod omitted this detail intentionally. As such, the version by Apollodorus likely represents an older telling. Hesiod, *Theog.*, 820–868; Fontenrose, *Python*, 74–76.

35. CAT 1.2 IV 11–27 (Smith, 'Baal Cycle', 103–104).

36. Plutarch, *Is. Os.* 18–19 (358A–E).

37. Hesiod, *Theog.* 820–868.

38. Apollodorus, *Library*, 1.6.3.

39. Plutarch, *Is. Os.* 18–19 (358C–E).

40. Enuma Elish IV 1–146 (Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, 87–95).

41. David E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, WBC 52c (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 1060–1061; Barr, *Tales of the End*, 137; M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1989), 196.

this imagery,<sup>42</sup> it seems best to interpret the sword as the proclamation of Christ's victory through the shedding of his blood.<sup>43</sup> This is in stark contrast to other combat myths, in which deities armed with deadly weapons engage in actual physical combat with their adversaries.<sup>44</sup> Thus, while the Lamb slays his enemies in Revelation 19:21, he does so in a radically different way than one would expect. Second, Jesus arrives at the battle in a bloody robe. While this is unprecedented in the combat myths, it does find its antecedent in the Old Testament, specifically in Isaiah 63:1-6, which describes God as a divine warrior who tramples his enemies under his feet, spattering their blood all over his garments.<sup>45</sup> Though it is possible that John intends his readers to understand this image as depicting Jesus covered in his enemy's blood, Revelation consistently attributes Jesus's victory to the shedding of his own blood.<sup>46</sup> This coupled with the fact that the Lamb is bloody before the battle begins would suggest that the blood on Jesus's robe is his own.<sup>47</sup> Thus, when Jesus appears, he is depicted as coming in the power of his blood and defeating his enemies by the power of his word, which subverts the violence of the images in at least two ways. First, it undercuts any notion of actual combat, demonstrating the utter ease with which the Lamb conquers. There is no battle, only the victory

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42. Cf. Isa 11:4, 49:2; Hos 6:5. See also Bandy, 'Vengeance, Wrath, and Warfare', 127; Beale, *Revelation*, 661-663.

43. Caird, *Revelation*, 245; Koester, *Revelation*, 765-766. This is not to deny God's judgement of his enemies. Instead, it is simply to insist that God's judgement is accomplished through Jesus's self-sacrifice.

44. For a general description of the typical weapons of the deity in the combat myth, see M. L. West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 251-255; Zeus is armed with lightning bolts in his combat with Typhon: Hesiod, *Theog.* 853; Apollodorus, *Library*, 1.6.3; Baal is armed with clubs to defeat Yam (*CAT* 1.2 IV 11-27 (Smith, 'Baal Cycle', 103-104)) and Anat defeats Mot with a sword (*KTU* 1.6 II 30-33 (Smith, 'Baal Cycle', 156)).

45. Alan S. Bandy, *The Prophetic Lawsuit in the Book of Revelation*, New Testament Monographs 29 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2010), 248-249; Beale, *Revelation*, 957.

46. Carol J. Rotz, 'The Remedy for Vengeance: Blood in the Apocalypse', in *Listening Again to the Text: New Testament Studies in Honor of George Lyons*, ed. Richard P. Thompson, Claremont Studies in New Testament and Christian Origins 4 (Claremont, CA: Claremont Press, 2020), 163-164, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv138wrtq.12>. In addition to connecting the blood on the robe of the lamb in Revelation 19:13 to his own shed blood, Pataki makes a case that it ought to also be connected to purity. See Pataki, 'A Non-Combat Myth', 264-65..

47. For this view, see Koester, *Revelation*, 755-756; Johns, *Lamb Christology*, 184; Rotz, 'The Remedy for Vengeance', 153-170. For the opposite view, see Bandy, *Prophetic Lawsuit*, 248; Beale, *Revelation*, 780-784; Paul B. Decock, 'The Symbol of Blood in the Apocalypse of John', *Neot* 38:2 (2004): 157-182.

of the Lamb. By this, I do not mean that the effects of Christ's judgement are not significant. Rather, I simply mean to point out that no battle is actually narrated. There appears to be no substantive resistance to the returned Christ. Rather, he simply slays his enemies with his powerful word. As András D. Pataki states, 'Christ does not need to fight the source of every chaos, he is the Lord of every creature, he is the only Lord even above the dragon.'<sup>48</sup> Secondly, it highlights the self-sacrificial nature of the Lamb's conquest. That is, while the enemies of the Lamb are dealt with decisively, it is a result of their response to the Lamb's self-sacrifice rather than the Lamb's violent actions.

While the great supper of God in Revelation 19:17-18,21, in which the birds of the air are invited to feast on the corpses of those slain by Christ, does not derive from the combat myth, even here the combat myth might help clarify this imagery.<sup>49</sup> That is, by paying attention to how Revelation identifies the Beast's army, and by understanding the mythic pattern employed by John, one can make sense of this gruesome scene. First and foremost, the army of the Beast is composed of individuals who have allied themselves with the Beast over and against God by waging war against the newly returned Christ (Rev 19:19). Furthermore, because the Beast is an agent of the Dragon, the chief challenger to God's throne, those who identify themselves with the Beast by receiving his mark likewise become agents of the Dragon.<sup>50</sup> Thus, according to the mythic pattern used by John, in which the re-establishment of order and manifestation of God's universal reign is contingent upon his defeat of those who oppose his rule, they must be dealt with.

However, in contrast to other combat myths, which never offer antagonistic forces an opportunity to repent, Revelation is written in such a way that repentance is not only a possibility for the nations, but it may also be one of

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48. Pataki, 'A Non-Combat Myth', 272.

49. This is contrary to the claims of Yarbro Collins, who makes two mistakes in her assessment of this passage. First, she conflates the wedding supper of the Lamb in 19:9 with the great supper of God depicted here. Admittedly, the two do run parallel to each other, but this appears to highlight the contrast between the fate of the two groups in question: those who follow the Lamb and those who follow the Beast. For this line of argumentation, see Beale, *Revelation*, 965-66. The second mistake Yarbro Collins appears to make is in identifying this imagery as deriving from the combat myth. While she is likely correct in identifying Ezek 39:70 and Isa 34:1-7 as the closest biblical parallels, the connection between this imagery and the imagery of Anat bathing in the blood of her enemies appears to be tenuous. That said, even if Yarbro Collins is correct in identifying this imagery with Anat, this imagery does not derive from the combat myth itself, but instead appears to be a separate ANE trope. For Yarbro Collins's argument, see *The Combat Myth*, 225.

50. Barr, *Tales of the End*, 127; Caird, *Revelation*, 173; Koester, *Revelation*, 594-595.

its goals.<sup>51</sup> As such, those who are the victims of the great supper of God are not there because they were not offered a chance to repent, but because they persisted in their rebellion against God's rule and continued in their wilful corruption of the divine order.<sup>52</sup> Thus, they are dealt with in the way that one must deal with agents of chaos in a combat myth.

Likewise, the later relegation of the beasts from the land and sea to the lake of fire, as well as the subsequent addition of the Dragon, people who died in their rebellion, and even Death itself to this realm can be understood in a similar light. After the Beast and his armies are defeated, the Dragon is bound for a thousand years, only to be let loose and seduce the nations to join in his rebellion once more (Rev 20:7-10). This act proves that the Dragon is too disruptive a force to be allowed to be a part of creation. As such, the Dragon and his allies are once more soundly defeated, and he is excluded from the New Heaven and New Earth along with the Beast and the False Prophet, as are all who persist in their rebellion against God (Rev 20:10,1-15).<sup>53</sup> Thus, at its core, the lake of fire seems to represent a place of everlasting judgement where the Dragon and all those who join him are consigned for eternity, eliminating the possibility that they could ever challenge the divine order again.<sup>54</sup> This is hugely significant, as deities in most combat myths, while successful in defeating their foe, could not entirely erase their influence on the world.<sup>55</sup> Thus, John's establishment of an order that entirely excludes the agents of chaos from creation symbolises the perpetual, unchallenged, and unbreakable nature of the order that the Lamb will establish. The exclusion of chaotic forces from creation is finalised by the casting of Death and Hades into the lake of fire, thus ridding the new creation of every conceivable force that could challenge the divine order.<sup>56</sup>

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51. Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, 239-337; Bauckham, *Theology*, 99-104; Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly*, 131-132.

52. Boring, *Revelation*, 200; Koester, *Revelation*, 767-768.

53. Koester, *Revelation*, 768; Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly*, 152-153.

54. J. David Woodington, 'Crafting the Eschaton: The Second Death and the Lake of Fire in Revelation', *JSOT* 41:4 (2019): 501-518, <https://doi.org/10.1177/01420664X19832204>.

55. For a general account of this phenomenon, see Marjo Korpel and Johannes de Moor, 'Leviathan in the Ancient Near East', in *Playing with Leviathan: Interpretation and Reception of Monsters from the Biblical World*, ed. Koert van Bekkum et al., TBN 21 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 3-18. For more specific accounts, see Hesiod, *Theog.* 868-880; Plutarch, *Is. Os.* 18-19 (358C-E); *CAT* 1.2 IV 28-31 (Smith, 'Baal Cycle', 104-105), 141; *Enuma Elish* IV 1-146 (Lambert, *Babylonian Creation Myths*, 187-195).

56. Woodington, 'Crafting the Eschaton', 511-513.

#### 4. Conclusion: The Use and Mitigation of Violence in Revelation 19:11–20:10

So, why is John's Apocalypse so bloody? First, it should be stated that the violent imagery of Revelation remains violent, and it will always be violent. No interpretive technique will entirely mitigate the images of bloodshed and judgement that populate the pages of John's Apocalypse. However, this essay has argued that when these violent scenes are read alongside combat myths, they are at once rendered intelligible by virtue of the mythic pattern utilised by John, and qualified by his deviations from the same.

This essay explored this hypothesis by applying it to one of the most violent texts in the Apocalypse, Revelation 19:11–20:10. In this text, those who persist in rebellion against the rule of God and continue to disrupt the created order wage war against the Lamb. Thus, in order for God's reign to be manifest and for the created order to be restored, the mythic pattern used by John dictates that they must be defeated in combat by the Lamb. As such, the bloody conflict between the Lamb and those who oppose God's rule is intelligible. Even their consignment to the lake of fire makes sense in light of the combat myth, as it is an aspect of creating a steadfast order. However, though John used a mythic tradition that was necessarily violent to tell this story, John qualified nearly every scene of violence in some way or another, either by undercutting the violence through some intentional deviation from the mythic pattern or through the book's general offer of salvation. As already noted, this does not do away with the violence of the book, but it does help one understand its purpose. Thus, those who suffer the violence of the Lamb in this passage do so on their own accord and because of their own response. Given the findings from this essay, it seems that the mythic pattern of the combat myth can be used as a helpful tool for understanding the violence in this passage. Furthermore, because the book of Revelation as a whole draws heavily from the combat myth, this interpretive strategy may be applied more broadly to other troubling visions of violence in Revelation, helping us understand why John's Apocalypse is so bloody.

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