

Revelation's Perspective on Persecution

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Normally, people fear, hate, and try to avoid suffering. One form of suffering is religious persecution which in some cases may even lead to martyrdom. However, believers that live in countries with strong legal protection and religious liberty tend to forget that suffering for Jesus' sake is part of the Christians' present destiny. Jesus predicted it (John 15:18-21; 16:2-3). All apostles suffered persecution and did not regard it "a strange thing" (1 Pet 4:12-13). Those of us who do not experience persecution by non-Christians or other Christians may overlook the pervasive theme of persecution in John's Apocalypse or reserve it for the last segment of earth's history only. Yet such shortsightedness may also prevent us from understanding and supporting suffering brothers and sisters today.

I. Persecution Language Permeating the Book of Revelation

The Book of Revelation contains many references to persecution and suffering. The theme permeates the book. Although the word "to persecute" (*diōkō*) is found just once in Revelation—the dragon persecutes the pure woman, the church (Rev 12:13)¹—the persecution motif is not limited to this term only. Specific words, phrases, and passages describe persecution and fierce opposition. The persecution of the woman by the dragon is graphically and symbolically described in Revelation 12. The dragon attempts to drown the woman and sweep her away (Rev 12:15).

The term "blood" (*haima*) is oftentimes found in contexts that highlight violent death. (Rev 1:5; 6:10; 17:6). In several places the words "dead" (*nekros*) and "death" (*thanatos*) point to martyrdom (Rev 1:5, 18; 14:13). John participates in the "tribulation" (*thlipsis*) that other Christians suffer (Rev 1:9). The church in Smyrna has a good share of it (Rev 2:9-10). The great multitude will come out of the great tribulation (Rev 7:14). The term "patience"/"perseverance" (*hupomonē*) is found in persecution contexts (Rev 1:9; 2:2, 3, 19; 13:10; 14:12). In Rev 2:10, a future persecution is described with the term "to suffer" (*paschō*).

"Killing" (*apokteinō*) points to persecution in some places (Rev 2:13; 13:15) as may the terms "murder" (*phonos*—Rev 9:21) and "murderer" (*phoneus*—Rev 21:8; 22:15) in others. In the church of Pergamum Antipas was killed as a "faithful witness" (Rev 2:13). Jesus is the supreme faithful witness (*martus*, Rev 1:5).

Jesus was slaughtered (*sphazō*; Rev 5:6, 9, 12) like a sacrificial animal. Some of his followers would also be slain/slaughtered (Rev 6:9). Believers are also beheaded (*pelekizō*, Rev 20:4). The holy city, representing the church,² is trampled underfoot (*pateō*, Rev 11:2).

Apart from being threatened with death, believers are exposed to economic boycott (Rev 13:17). While they have the seal of God (Rev 7:2-4), they do not possess the mark of the beast (Rev 13:16). This singles them out for persecution. They live in the vicinity of Satan's throne (Rev 2:13) and are harassed by Satan's synagogue (Rev 2:9; 3:9). They are confronted with and tempted by "the deep things of Satan." The dragon makes war (*poieō polemon*) against the remnant (Rev 12:17) through the sea beast (*poieō polemon*; Rev 13:7) and the beast from the earth (Rev 13:11-17) and overcomes them (Rev 13:7), at least temporarily. The battle of Armageddon (Rev 16:14, 16) will be the final showdown in historic time. The last threat of Satan and his resurrected army of earth dwellers against the New Jerusalem and the people of God, described in Rev 20:7-10, will prove ineffective and futile. So persecution occurs in all parts of the Apocalypse.

II. Further Information about Persecution in Revelation

Information on the issue of persecution in John's Apocalypse may be grouped under the following headings.

- (1) *Persecution Is Not Limited to One Period in History.* The Apocalypse mentions persecutions in the messages to the seven churches. Rev 12-14 present a view of the conflict between Satan and Jesus and Satan and the church beginning with the birth of the Messiah and ending with the second coming of Jesus. Persecution of the church through long periods of history, symbolically described as 1260 days, 42 months, or three and a half times,³ is clearly expressed. Rev 13 contains an extended prophecy of yet future universal worship of the dragon, the sea beast, and the image of the beast.
- (2) *Persecution Is Both Local and Universal.* There is some scholarly discussion as to what extent Christians in the first century suffered persecution. Normally it is admitted that local conflicts and persecutions occurred in early church history.⁴ With regard to the end time the apostle sees an apostate religious alliance, Babylon (Rev 17:1-7; see also Rev 12-14), supported by a political alliance (Rev 17:2, 12-13), making war against the people of God on a universal level.
- (3) *Persecution May Come from Different Sources.* The martyrdom of Jesus, the suffering of John, the persecution of the Christians in Smyrna, and the death of Antipas are not directly attributed to a specific power. However, the historic situation of the first centuries A.D. indicates that at times the Roman Empire had been instrumental in persecuting and killing Christians.

The letters to Smyrna and Philadelphia mention people who call themselves Jews but are not (Rev 2:9; 3:9). “. . . these two churches were in some way in conflict with the Jewish communities in Smyrna and Philadelphia.”⁵

Rev 12 describes the persecution of the true people of God by the dragon in the medieval and post-medieval periods. However, he uses as human power the sea beast, the great and powerful medieval church.⁶ The remnant of the woman (Rev 12:17) will be attacked by the sea beast and the beast that comes out of the earth, Protestant America.⁷

Thus Revelation sees Satan, the opponent of the Lamb, as the major player behind all persecutions. He uses various political powers such as the Roman Empire and political powers of the last days as well as religious entities such as Jews, non-Christian religions, and even Christian churches to persecute God’s people.

- (4) *Persecution May Come in Different Forms.* Revelation mentions blasphemy (Rev 2:9; 13:6), persecution (Rev 12:13), tribulation and suffering (Rev 1:9; 2:9-10), economical boycott (Rev 13:17), and martyrdom (Rev 1:18; 2:10; 6:9, 10; 20:4). One wonders if the conflict with false teachers and deceptive doctrines, the exploration of the deep things of Satan (Rev 2:24), may also border on persecution.
- (5) *Persecution May Be Triggered by the Witness of God’s People.* John uses the word family *martu-* “to bear witness,” “testimony,” and “witness” (as a person) quite frequently. A martyr is one who testifies to the truth with his life. *Martus* (witness) refers to Jesus and his followers (Rev 2:13; 17:6). Jesus is the role model for the church to follow.

“The ‘witness’ of the believers is first a lifestyle of faithfulness to Christ and second a verbal witness during the period of their suffering.”⁸ Persecution and testifying are oftentimes related in the sense that faithful witnesses have to suffer.

- (6) *Persecution and Following Jesus Go Together.* Rev 14:4 mentions that the 144,000 follow (akoloutheō) the Lamb “wherever he goes.” The context refers to an extremely difficult situation of persecution. In John’s Gospel Jesus is portrayed as the good shepherd. His sheep follow him (John 10:4, 27). But the Gospel of John places following also in the context of suffering and even martyrdom (John 12:23-26; 13:36-37; 21:9).

Persecution is a normal and not a “strange thing” (1 Pet 4:12) for Christians that follow the Lamb and must be expected. So should Christians avoid persecution, if they can? Yes. Should they avoid it at all cost? No.

- (7) *Persecution Will Be Triggered by the Rejection of Loyalty to Human Institutions.* Revelation predicts a conflict between those who have the seal of God on their foreheads (Rev 7:2-4) and those who accept the mark of the beast on their forehead or right hand (Rev 13:16), leading to persecution of loyal followers of Christ at the end of time. These events are still future and will surpass whatever has happened before in church history.
- (8) *Persecution Is Oftentimes Portrayed in Connection with the War Motif.* For instance, the 144,000 under the sixth seal who obviously have to go through the time when the winds will be released (Rev 7:1-4) are depicted as the Messianic army.⁹ Their counterpart is the demonic army of 200 million beings under the sixth trumpet (Rev 9:16). The conflict between Michael and the dragon is pictured as war in heaven (Rev 12:7). The persecution of the remnant/saints by the dragon/sea beast is described as a war waged against them (Rev 12:17; 13:7). The last battle in conjunction with Christ's second coming is the battle of Armageddon (Rev 16:16; 17:14; 19:11-21). However, these battles are spiritual in nature, rather than military.

The war motif is part of the Great Controversy theme which in Scripture is probably most clearly developed in John's Apocalypse. Conflict and war happen on the personal level, the group level, and also the cosmic level. In other words, conflict and war are not limited to planet Earth but are also found in the universe. God's plan of salvation deals with all these levels of conflict. The turning point in the Great Controversy is the death of Jesus on the cross, portrayed in Revelation as the slaughtering of the Lamb. The death of the Messiah emphasizes how the victory is won. As the Lamb triumphs through suffering, so do his followers. They are not involved in acts of violence.

- (9) *Revelation Points to the Christians' Reaction to Persecution.* When persecution and distress happen the question is: How can and how do Christians cope with such a situation? There may be two interrelated forms of reaction. One is an intrapersonal reaction. The other is an external reaction which has to do with observable actions. Typically, the exterior action is fight or flight. Physical fight on the part of the people of God is not an option in the Apocalypse. This leaves them with the other possibility, namely flight. Flight may be understood as moving to another geographical area or going underground.

Revelation does not dwell much on communal support of persecuted fellow believers; and yet care for fellow Christians may be reflected in various places. The church in Ephesus is challenged to recover its first love which includes brotherly love (Rev 2:2; see also 2:19). The term "service" (*diakonia*; Rev 2:19) includes service to fellow believers. Church members carry responsibility for each other (Rev 3:2). They are also called to assist each other in times of distress.

This brings us to the intrapersonal reaction to persecution. Some of those that are suffering persecution undoubtedly have asked the question why God would allow for such cruelty. However, the question, Why? is not directly raised in Revelation. Therefore, it is more profitable to ask: How can followers of the Lamb react to persecution? Revelation shows:

- (a) They turn to God in prayer (Rev 6:10).
- (b) They realize and acknowledge that God's thoughts are not their thoughts and that God's plan of salvation surpasses their understanding. While they rest and other martyrs will be added to their number (Rev 6:11), time is provided for "God's people" that is still in end-time Babylon to leave this counterfeit system (Rev 18:4).
- (c) They hold on to what they have and do not allow for their crowns to slip away (Rev 2:25; 3:11). This attitude is also described as perseverance, patience, endurance (*hupomonē*), an important concept in Revelation.¹⁰
- (d) They accept suffering as a natural ingredient of discipleship (Rev 14:4).

- (e) They seek the good of their enemies by being faithful witnesses through life and word and serving as priests (Rev 12:11; 1:6).
- (f) They rely on the loving care of Jesus (Rev 1:5-7) and the many divine promises contained in Revelation. Jesus has the keys to death and Hades (Rev 1:18). He helps his people to persevere (Rev 2:10) and does not allow them to be touched by the second death (Rev 2:11). He limits burdens so that they become bearable (Rev 2:24; 3:10). He even influences their enemies to acknowledge that these Christians are loved by God (Rev 3:9).

(10) *Persecution and Death Are Not Considered to Be Defeat.* In the Gospel of John Jesus' death is not understood as his defeat but as his glorification (John *doxazō*; 7:39; 12:16, 23; 13:31) and exaltation (*hupsoō*; John 3:14; 8:28; 12:32-34). The Book of Revelation takes the same approach. As Jesus' apparent defeat was in reality his victory, so the faithful suffering of his followers, even if it includes martyrdom, is not to be understood as defeat. Revelation turns the common understanding upside down and makes the apparent winners losers and the apparent losers winners. This reversal alerts people to the fact that God evaluates situations differently and that they are indeed other than what they appear to be. Ironically, it was the satanic victory of killing Jesus that defeated Satan.

III. Persecution Is Not the End

The pervasiveness of the persecution theme in Revelation could be very discouraging, especially for Christians that are actually suffering persecution. But the Apocalypse is not a gloomy book. It is a very positive book dealing with Jesus' love for his disciples, salvation, a new status of Christians as a kingdom, and priests, constant support, and a wonderful hope.

In light of persecution we should keep in mind that about half of the book is dedicated to divine judgment, that is, vindication of God's people and God himself. Christians are also encouraged through the constantly repeated promise of the imminence of Jesus' second coming. Resurrection is the realization of the hope of eternal life for suffering believers. At the same time, it is God's terror for their enemies, because they recognize that their only power, the power of death, is gone. Thus Revelation is not so much a book about death; it is a book about life through Christ and with Christ. Persecution is not the last word. God speaks the last word. In the meantime, we love, care for, and support those that are suffering.

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¹See Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, revised edition. New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 231-232.

²See Stephen Smalley, *The Revelation of John: A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 274.

³The 1260 days must be symbolic days since the entire vision is symbolic. Three and a half literal years in the sweep of the history of the Christian Church cannot be located and make no sense. 1260 years do. Adventists have placed them in the period from A.D. 538 to A.D. 1798. See Nichol, 4:833-834 and 7:809.

⁴See J. Nelson Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance: Worship, Politics, and Devotion in the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010), 131, and Maier, 34.

⁵Mayo, 51, and Alan S. Bandy, *The Prophetic Lawsuit in the Book of Revelation*, New Testament Monographs, 29 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2010), 65.

⁶See Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids Baker Book House, 2001), 377.

⁷Angel M. Rodríguez, *Future Glory: The 8 Great End-Time Prophecies in the Bible* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2002), 117-118.

⁸See Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2002), 476; Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, New Testament Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 153.

⁹See Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), 216.

¹⁰The term is found in Rev 1:9; 2:2-3, 19; 3:10; 13:10; and 14:12 and is characteristic of the remnant.

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