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Roman victory propaganda – Revelation's response: A historical and theological study

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The believers of Christ in the 1st century AD find themselves in a difficult situation. On one hand, they receive the gospel about Jesus' victory over the world. On the other hand, they witnessed the power and dominance of the Roman Empire through its propaganda. The Book of Revelation comes with a message to comfort Christians torn between these two realities. It uses the Roman symbolism of victory and transforms it to answer the Roman propaganda. Thus, Revelation creates a powerful and vivid message to convince the reader that God is the supreme and only ruler of the world, and Christ triumphs over every power, even the invincible Roman Empire.

Contribution: The Roman influence on the Revelation is unquestionable and not elaborated exhaustingly enough to this date. This study aims to show how the Book of Revelation uses elements of Roman ideology to create a Christian response to the propaganda of the empire and to give its readers an important message about God's ultimate victory.

Keywords: Apocalypse; Revelation; victory; Roman Empire; propaganda; victory symbolism.

Introduction

The Apocalypse of John arises in a very special period of history, when there is a clash between the great culture of the Roman Empire, which then dominated the world, and the emerging new culture brought by Christianity, being at that time a small and seemingly irrelevant cult, although rapidly gaining new followers. Various studies allow us to conclude that the word 'victory' is one of the keywords for the whole ideology and propaganda of the great Roman Empire. Isaac (2008), for example, devotes an entire chapter of his extensive work on Roman ideology to explaining what victory means to the Romans and how it manifests itself in the cultural testimonies that have remained with us today. Hölscher (2003) describes various elements of architecture that, both in the past and present, are supposed to raise awareness and remind us of Rome's great victories. It is impossible not to mention McCormick's (1986) work, which is entirely devoted to the theme of victory in Rome and its connection with power. Beard (2007) offers an extensive study on the topic of victory and triumph in the empire, marking the importance and influence it had throughout the history of the world. The author of the Apocalypse also decided to make victory one of the central ideas in his theology. How, in fact, could the young Christian community reconcile faith in God's domination over the world and the universal liberation brought about by Christ with the fact of the omnipresent domination of Rome? In his work, the author of the Apocalypse, using the language of victory taken from Roman ideology, convinces about the authentic and definitive victory of Christ over the powers of this world and supernatural powers. Using symbolism well known to all the inhabitants of the empire, the Book of Revelation brings comfort to all the followers of Christ's suffering because of the situation in which they persist. In the end, only God wins and brings this victory to all who have followed his Son.

The purpose of this study is to show how the Book of Revelation, or its author, uses elements of Roman ideology to create a Christian response to the propaganda of the empire, as well as to give its readers an important message about the victory that belongs only to God.

To achieve this goal, this article follows a historical and theological method. First of all, using a historical study, with the assistance of existing works on the topic, I have isolated characteristic elements of the Roman ideology of victory – namely, symbolism, language, rituals and elements of social life. The results of this work are presented in the first part of this article. The next step is to study the Apocalypse in search of similarities to the obtained comparative material and attempt to point to fragments of the text where the author of the book could use the ideology of the empire known to him. Further, I have attempted to use the theological method to show how the Roman symbolics were used and redesigned to represent a clearly alternate idea of God's victory.

Victory in the Roman world

The Roman Empire maintained a vast territory and ruled over numerous nations over a prolonged period. Being probably the most successful and long-lasting empire in human history, it inspires even the modern political arena. What stands behind its unprecedented success? Undoubtedly, the empire owes its power and rulership to its strict organisation devoted to one superior idea – victory above all. The faith in Rome's eternal victory could be the most important myth among the Roman beliefs (McCormick 1986:3). Indeed, the ideology of victory attained religious status with the constitution of a myth of eternal victory.

Carter (2006:83) points out three main ideas of this belief: (1) Rome is chosen by the gods; (2) the Roman Empire and its ruler serve as agents of gods' power in this world; and (3) the empire distributes gods' blessings such as justice, peace, wealth, fertility and safety for anyone who accepts the Roman supremacy. The eternal victory of Rome holds the promise of everlasting peace (Hidalgo 2018:215). To ensure that these ideas accommodate themselves deeply in the hearts of the empire's inhabitants, it was actively promoted using various media such as coins, monuments, rituals and even the image of an emperor.

The emperor himself represents the victorious organisation of the society. A sole image of an emperor, placed on an item or structure, informs that this particular piece of art has to do something with a victorious event (Isaac 2008:575).

The emperor had to personify Rome's sacred right for victory. His personal military successes revealed his properness and right to rule the empire (McCormick 1986:4,13). Roman sovereigns took several victorious titles – usually attached to a given event. The idea of victory is superior in the imperial culture and narrative, to the point of being divine – the emperor's image was sacred. The imagery shows Roman rulers with such attributes as a laurel wreath, palm tree, white horse or a sword (McCormick 1986:21).

The cultural legacy of the Roman Empire abounds in visual presentations of victorious events. The landscape of old imperial territories is marked with numerous architectural structures such as triumphal arches, columns and ornaments at official buildings which serve as a testimony of dominance and victory over the empire's enemies. These structures make a deep impression on their spectators even today. We can imagine how more powerful it was in the days of their grandeur, in the time of the empire (Isaac 2008:585).

The arches and columns are usually decorated with depictions of specific victorious events in the form of reliefs. They possess an extensive rhetorical potential and have a significant impact on the empire's citizens (Beard 2007:46). Symbolics used in these depictions are very straightforward, so even the simple-minded citizens of the empire could comprehend them (Isaac 2008:588). Usually, the centre of the portrayed scene is occupied by a presentation of the victorious general or emperor, sometimes accompanied by the goddess Victoria. An interesting representation of such a monument would be the Arch of Titus – portraying Titus in his victorious chariot alongside his father Vespasian, celebrating their triumph over the Jewish rebellion (Beard 2007:43).

Coins serve as another relay of propaganda. They may be very inconspicuous, but one should not underestimate the powerful effect they have on their users. The coins are closely related to the image of Caesar. It is the most accessible sign of Roman domination both today and during the empire period. Coins reached the farthest corners of the Roman world, proclaiming the power of Rome and Caesar. On one of the sides, the coins showed the emperor's image, and on the other side, they depicted an important victorious event with his participation. In this way, they strengthened the image and position of the undefeated ruler in the consciousness of subordinate peoples (McCormick 1986:26–27). Coins minted for Vespasian's time often referred to his triumph over Judea, when he was the leader of the army that suppressed the Jewish uprising in Jerusalem, leading to the destruction of the temple in 70 AD (Carter 2006:85; McCormick 1986:26–27).

A lot of representations of victory portray the image of an eagle. This is a significant symbol for the Roman people. The eagle is the animal of Jupiter – the king of gods. It often appears on victory monuments, flying over the scene of glory. In the mentioned Arch of Titus, observers can recognise Titus himself riding on the back of the eagle. This scene connects the element of victory with the deification of the victor (Beard 2007:237–238; Van Henten 2006:282). The eagle is associated with victory also because it is the most important standard of the Roman legions (Isaac 2008:581). It represents the blessing of the gods (Voegtle 2017:117).

The Roman state religion was another powerful medium for conveying this message. The gods are given victorious titles. Altars would be risen to celebrate a victorious event – especially when it comes to the triumph of an emperor himself (McCormick 1986:28).

Triumphant events had religious value. Trophies taken in war were treated as sacrifices to gods. The palm tree is not coincidentally taken as a symbol of victory. Palm branches were treated as an alternative for trophies. Depictions of trophies and palm trees seen lavishly on ancient relics are not just mere signs of the military superiority of the Roman Empire, but are sacred symbols used in the state religion of Rome (Isaac 2008:60–61).

The most outstanding religious ritual concerning victory is the triumphal procession. Josephus left a lavish description of Titus' triumphal parade (*B.J.* 7.5.3–7). The victorious parade would be typically preceded by days of supplications. Citizens of the empire would perform sacrifices of thanksgiving in local temples. Following the supplication days, the central ritual of victory consists of a triumphant parade (McCormick 1986:13–14). It began outside of the pomerium and then headed through the city walls to Capitol

Hill, where took place the rituals of thanksgiving. During the procession, the captives, leaders of the defeated army, often would be put on view and led in chains; trophies of war would be exhibited and then given as sacrifices; and spectacles recreating the victorious battles would be performed. Occasionally, the captives would be ceremonially executed. The victorious general ascended to Capitol Hill and offered his laurel wreath or palm to the statue of Jupiter (Beard 2007:249–250). The parade was followed by days of festivities – games and feasts (Wood 2016:200–208).

The symbolism of the Roman religion refers abundantly to the theme of struggle and victory. As a symbol of victory confirmed with personal military successes, the emperor himself was the primary recipient of religious worship. 'Proskynesis' was a sign of the highest humility towards the ruler and an act of divine cult. This act also corresponds with victory – the triumphator humiliates the defeated by making them to lay face down before him, putting a foot on their back (Isaac 2008:597). The imperial ceremonial provided for the singing of many choirs, proclaiming hymns before the ruler. The senate presents the emperor with golden crowns on occasions of victory (Aune 1983:12). Rulers emphasise their divine status and victorious domination. Gaius Caligula described himself as the incarnation of Apollo (Borgen 1996:157).

We can see that victory and triumph played a significant role in Roman propaganda, establishing a myth of eternal victory. This strengthened the empire's rule among the hearts of its inhabitants by creating a vision in which the emperor and his dominion are overwhelming and everlasting.

Victory in the Revelation – Roman influences

Thanks to the propaganda about an invincible empire, the Romans could maintain their power in a vast territory and domination over numerous nations. Unsurprisingly, not every habitant of the empire, especially in the provinces, would be so susceptible to the mainstream message and take it so lightly. Specifically, Christians and Jews would contest the vision of an almighty, infinite human dominion, which stands in direct opposition to God's dominion over the world.

Readers of the Apocalypse, past and present, cannot help noticing scenes and elements taken from the Roman triumphant festivities and customs. The whole text is filled with a mixture of victorious symbols referring to the Roman myth. Various figures are dressed in white garments and have diadems or wreaths on their heads. In moments of triumphant acclamations, they throw their wreaths under the feet of God (Rv 4:10). This resembles Roman games, where the victors would make the same gesture towards the emperor.

For the Romans, one of the most important signs of victory is the figure of the emperor himself, who personifies the power of Rome and its domination over the world. Caesar demanded divine worship for himself, which was clearly at odds with the Jewish and Christian vision of reality. The Apocalypse repeatedly refers to the ritual elements of the imperial court, showing simultaneously that the true ruler of everything, who triumphs over the kings of the earth, is God himself.

Thus, the vision in Revelation 4–5 leads the reader to God's court. The throne is surrounded by elders (a reference to the Roman Senate) dressed in triumphant symbols (white robes, wreaths on heads). They sing hymns of praise to the One seated on the throne, which corresponds with the Roman court ceremonial (Naylor 2010:223). Some would argue that this scene corresponds to the preparation of the Roman triumphal parade (Pate 2019:72).

Unlike the emperor, who usurps divine qualities, the one sitting on the throne shows a truly divine status. His beauty and majesty are ineptly compared to precious gemstones. The person sitting on the throne receives 'proskynesis' – a symbol of the highest worship due only to God himself. The Lamb receives equal honour in Revelation 5. Of him, it is said that he is worthy to receive power and glory because he was killed and brought men to God with his blood (Borgen 1996:157).

The scene in Revelation 6 depicts the image of a victorious commander – so crucial in Roman propaganda – a rider on a white horse who sets out for victory (see Beasley-Murray 1994:1434). This reference is even more evident in Revelation 19. The person sitting on a horse is depicted as the king of kings. This is a dignity reserved by the Roman emperors. The commander is accompanied by the victorious troops, also on white horses. When you look carefully at the scene described here, you can see the transformation of Roman symbolism. In Roman visualisations of battles, the commander towers over the entire scene. He looks dangerous and dignified, but does not actively participate in the fight. Here, we have a complete reversal of the role. He is a ruler with robes dipped in the blood of enemies (cf. Beasley-Murray 1994:1449). His companions, on the other hand, have shining and clean robes. This suggests who is in the fight in this vision.

Most of the references where the Apocalypse speaks of the victor, describe them wearing white garments. It is the symbol of purity and steadfastness (Rv 3:4–5). It also corresponds to Christ's attire, who also is presented as the One in white, as the First Victor. Other figures given by the Apocalypse are also dressed in white robes, including twenty-four elders (Rv 4:4); the crowd before the throne of God (7:9) and heavenly armies accompanying the Rider on the white horse (Rv 19:14). White robes are, therefore, one of the characteristics of the victorious characters. Of course, they refer to the Roman tradition, as a national clothing (Martial XIV.124) – the emperor, high officials and Roman dignitaries wore pure white. Other people did not use pure white robes – as today it was a rather festive colour – for practical reasons. Daily duties rather made it difficult to keep such a robe clean. So, if someone could afford to wear a white

robe every day – it showed that he did not have to worry about ordinary everyday life (Aubert 2014:175–176). This symbolised the 'victory' in the social hierarchy. In the Apocalypse, the overcomers are also freed from ordinary everyday life (Rv 21:4) and toil.

Like white robes, wreaths often appear as characteristics of victors. In the Roman tradition, they were a symbol given to the winners – both in sports competitions and in armed struggle. They also were a sign of power wielded by the emperor. Receiving a wreath is one of the promises made to the Seven Churches (2:10). The elders also have wreaths on their heads and throw them under the throne of God (4:4). The champion sitting on a white horse (6:2) receives a wreath before he even goes into battle. Usually, a wreath is given after achieving victory. In this case, however, the rider is the winner in advance – he has already won and moves to increase his victory. Interestingly, God's servants are not the only ones wearing wreaths. These correspond to the diadems worn by the Dragon (12:3) and the Beast coming out of the sea (13:1). This presents that God's opposition is sometimes given a little victory, but only temporary (11:10–11; 13:5–7). The world worships both the devil and the pseudo-Christ. The latter was given 'a mouth to utter proud words and blasphemies' (already apparent in the claims of the Roman emperors to divinity) 'and to exercise his authority for forty-two months' (Beasley-Murray 1994:1441). Who gave him that authority, including 'power to make war against the saints and to conquer them'? In Revelation 13:7, it is the dragon who gave the authority; but the limit of 'forty-two months' was set by God. Accordingly, it is the divine permission that ultimately controls the actions of the antichrist (cf. Dn. 8:9–14; 11:36). The sovereignty of God is never more apparent than when wickedness reaches its limit – as is evident in the crucifixion of Jesus.

Coins in the Roman Empire were a tool of propaganda, a testimony to the power. In a sense, they were a sign of belonging. The possession and use of coins was a sign of belonging and subordination to the empire. Coins, as such, do not appear in the apocalyptic vision, but we can find motifs that betray similar functions to Roman coins. In Revelation 13, people make an image of the Beast and receive a mark with which they can make transactions and exchange goods. This vision corresponds to Revelation 7, where we deal with marking God's servants. Anyone who receives the seal on their forehead is marked as belonging to God.

Religion was an essential element in the propagation of the Roman myth of victory. Apocalyptic descriptions also abound in rituals. The description of the heavenly court in Revelation 5 combines courtly and ritual elements. Each Elder holds a harp and incense in his hand – priestly attributions that refer to the liturgy in the Temple of Jerusalem. Under the divine throne, there is an altar (Rv 9:13). Here, the tradition of the Apocalypse meets the Roman tradition, where court elements were also combined with worship. The throne and the altar are a sign of power and worship. This scene may be a criticism of the emperor who usurped divine attributes and adoration.

Another important ritual element referring to Roman customs is the presence of references to victorious parades. The crowds of the saved hold palm trees in their hands (Rv 7:9), a well-known Roman substitute for war trophies. They sing hymns of praise to their victorious ruler and offer sacrifices (Rv 8:3–4). Supplications are also made for the imminent administration of justice (Rv 6:10). The climax of this heavenly victory parade is the show fight and execution of the commanders of the enemy army (Rv 20:7–15). Then, they proceed into the interior of the City (Rv 21) to celebrate and rejoice in the victory.

The mingled figure of a Lion, who is the Slaughtered Lamb (Rv 5), produces a very unprecedented symbol in terms of victory. The former is easily understandable. Lions relate to power, strength and triumph, but lambs do not. A lamb would typically implicate weakness and submissiveness. Lambs are prey, not victors. There are not any symbols in the Roman world that would combine victory and a lamb (Yates 1875:1044–1045). With this interconnection, the author of the Apocalypse creates a new symbol and a new type of victory (Gamel 2023:1155).

In Revelation 8:13, the vision shows a great eagle soaring over a cataclysmic earth. This eagle cries out over the ground a triple 'woe'. Why did the author put such a scene at all? It gives the impression of not being significantly related to the rest of the book's descriptions. In the Roman tradition, the eagle is a very important symbol. The Roman king of the gods, the lord of heaven, Jupiter, was often depicted in the company of an eagle. It is a sign of power and domination over the world. The Romans placed it on the banners of their most elite military formation – the legions. It was, therefore, an important symbol of victory. When we see an eagle, we should see triumph and power (Van Henten 2006:279). Here, however, the eagle pronounces woe over the ground. We are dealing with an inversion of the symbol – instead of declaring victory, it declares a great defeat. This must have been a really strong message for the first recipients of the Apocalypse, who may have already lost hope for a genuine transformation of the reality in which they found themselves (Isaac 2008:581; Yates 1875:1044–1045).

The woman of Revelation 12 is a very complex, multi-layered symbol. Christian tradition sees this figure as the personification of the Church. In Catholic theology, the connection with the person of Mary, the Mother of Christ, is also pointed out. The picture consists of elements of Old Testament and Greek symbolism (Eno 1920:681). On the other hand, certain Roman sources cannot be entirely excluded. The woman is dressed in the sun. The dazzling brilliance recalls the incomparable whiteness of divine qualities (Lk 9:29; Mk 9:3; Mt 17:2). At the same time, the white robe is one of the inherent characteristics of the victors. Under her feet is placed the moon. In many Roman depictions, putting someone or something at someone's feet is a sign of dominance. Then, we

see that the woman has a wreath on her head. Another quality of a woman we learn in 12:14 is the wings of an eagle. The symbol of a winged woman dressed in white robes and a wreath on her head should remind us of the depictions of the goddess Victoria that we can find on Roman coins and monuments (Hölscher 2003:17). This is an interesting use of the symbol of divine favour for the benefit of Christians.

With respect to the Great Rider and the Punishment of the Dragon (Rv 19–20), Shane J. Wood suggests that this could be a reference to the Roman triumphant celebrations, where the citizens of Rome could observe theatrical presentations of battles and spectate the ostentatious executions of the captivated enemy commanders. First of all, we see armies gathering for a final battle. Here we have probably one of the most victorious figures – bearing Roman symbols, but transforming them into a heavenly victory – the Great Rider (I use this term to discern this figure from the rider of Rv 6), wearing white robes, sitting on a white horse, with diadems on his head, great swords and titles – God's Word and Lord of lords. The battle is over with a single word of the Rider – this usually relates to judgement, but also represents the military prowess of the Rider. Then we see a great feast – the birds are devouring the flesh of the defeated enemies (Pate 2019:75). Next, we can observe another battle – the unleashed Dragon stands against God one more time – but this is only a parade, a show battle. After that, the enemies are executed (Wood 2016:200–208).

We can see that Revelation abounds in symbols of victory transferred from Roman imperial propaganda. Some of them wear symbols of transformation and adjustments to better suit a new message.

Theological implications

Being a faithful Christian and living in the Roman Empire with its overwhelming propaganda was not a mere challenge. The author of Apocalypse was aware of this and used the elements of Roman victory symbolics to create a new, powerful message to encourage the believers of Christ.

The Roman court ceremonial and state religious customs promoted the idea of an eternal empire and its victorious ruler. The passage of Revelation 5 presents the real victor, the Lamb, who has conquered, and through his victory, he earned his right to rule. He also receives honour and worship equally with God. The message here is that the Roman emperor is the actual usurper, who only caricatures the absolute rulership of God (Aune 1983:5). The real power stands alongside God (Gamel 2023:1150). Christ is the real victor, who fought and won the great battle. His victory is not achieved by violence, but by faithfulness to the death (Gamel 2023:1153).

The empire promised eternal peace, but it is a promise which lies only in God's power (Hidalgo 2018:215). The empire, instead, must face its inevitable fall. The mighty eagle (Rv 8:13) pronouncing woes over the world prognoses the great defeat of the once invincible empire. More evident precognitions of this fall can be found in Revelation 18:1–3. Christ as the Great Rider (Rv 19:11–21) will come and defeat every enemy and give their bodies to birds to feast on.

What can the readers do? They are granted victory by their faithful witness (Rv 2:10). They cannot do anything to achieve the triumph, but can participate in Christ's victory (Gamel 2023:1156).

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, the 1st century CE Christians found themselves in a predicament. The apostles and their successors convinced them of Christ's victory. However, everyday life under the Roman Empire seemed to contradict this belief. The author of the Apocalypse knew this very well. To strengthen the faith of his brethren, he created a work that, on the one hand, is steeped in Roman symbolism of victory, but, on the other hand, uses it in his way to convince believers that God is greater than any power in the world, even, it would seem, the invincible Roman Empire:

- The author of the Apocalypse used well-known symbols familiar to the inhabitants of the empire, overlaying them with the truths of the Judeo-Christian world. It is God and his Son Jesus Christ, who proved his right to power by his victory on the cross, who is the Lord of rulers and King of kings – not the emperor who usurps these titles.
- It is God who has the final victory.
- This kingdom of God is the only salvation and source of peace. Rome is only a substitute that the devil uses to counterfeit God's works.

These elements also determine the timelessness of the apocalyptic work. In place of the Roman Empire, any power in the history of the world can be erected here. The message of the book remains unchanged for all its readers, both original and contemporary – God will conquer all evil and wipe every tear from the faces of those who followed him and joined his procession.

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Author's contributions

Ł.B. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available on Zenodo.org at https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13330320.

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