

Atonement in Revelation—Part I: Love, Substitution, Liberation, Doxology

Larry L. Lichtenwalter
Middle East University
Beirut, Lebanon

The Lamb Motif

The death of Jesus Christ plays a pivotal role in John's Apocalypse.¹ It's vision of "a "Lamb standing, as if slain" (5:6) sits at the book's theological/ethical heart² and introduces the central motif and vehicle for atonement theology in Revelation³—"the Lamb."⁴ There is a far-reaching theology of atonement (and Christology)⁵ in the imagery of Jesus as "the

¹ See Loren L. Johns, "Atonement and Sacrifice in the Book of Revelation," in *The Work of Jesus Christ in Anabaptist Perspective: Essays in Honor of J. Denny Weaver* (ed. Alain Epp Weaver and Gerald J. Mast; Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2008).

² Loren L. Johns, "The Origins and Rhetorical Force of the Lamb Christology of the Apocalypse of John" (Princeton Theological Seminary, 1998) 197, 198; Loren L. Johns, *The Lamb Christology of the Apocalypse of John: An Investigation Into Its Origins & Rhetorical Force* (vol. Reihe 167; Tübingen: Paul Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 159.

³ Charles E. Hill, "Atonement in the Apocalypse of John," in *The Glory of Atonement: Biblical Historical and Practical Perspectives* (ed. Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 190.

⁴ The phrase "the Lamb" (*arnion*) occurs twenty-nine times in reference to Christ (5:6, 8, 12, 13; 6:1, 16; 7:9, 10, 14, 17; 12:11; 13:8; 14:1, 4(2x), 10; 15:3; 17:14; 19:7, 9; 21:9, 14, 22, 23, 27; 22:1, 3) only in the apocalyptic section of Revelation (Rev 4-22a) although not in all chapters (i.e., 9-11, 16, 18, 20) or in either the prologue or epilogue. See discussion Ekkehardt Mueller, "Christological Concepts in the Book of Revelation—Part 1: Jesus in the Apocalypse," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 21, no. 1-2 (2010): 292, 293.

⁵ See *ibid.*, 276-305; Ekkehardt Mueller, "Christological Concepts in the Book of Revelation—Part 2: Christ's Divinity," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 22, no. 1 (2011): 66-83; Ekkehardt Mueller, "Christological Concepts in the Book of Revelation—Part 3: The Lamb Christology," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 22, no. 2 (2011): 42-66.

LICHTENWALTER: ATONEMENT IN REVELATION

Lamb”: lending to both his title and his work a vicarious and sacrificial capacity that cannot be successfully denied.⁶ The designation stresses the redeeming work of the Lamb, uniting vicarious suffering and victorious power, sovereign kingship and redemption—and in the process theodicy.⁷ It underscores the holistic nature, cosmic dimension, historicity, and universal application of Christ’s death. The sufferings of Christ are portrayed as an act in time, which has eternal significance.⁸ His death is both a historic fact,⁹ and an eternal fact (13:8). It is permanent: never needing repeating (5:6; cf., Heb 9:28).¹⁰ It is unique, efficacious, a mystery that challenges our reflection (cf. Heb 2:9; 5:11). Within the book’s cosmic conflict narrative, it is *THE* unequivocal turning point of salvation history.¹¹ Because of his death, Christ is not only the Lord of history and human destiny but also the exalted focus of celebratory worship (5:9-14; 6:1-8:1).

Thus, a remarkable theology of atonement unfolds in Revelation—expressed in apocalyptic visions, explained in angelic interpretations, wrapped in a collage of evocative biblical allusions, set against a tapestry of both cosmic and existential realities, nuanced by Old Testament sacrificial cultic imagery, sung in praises of heavenly choirs, and contemplated in John’s own reflections of the revelations he received.¹²

But what is meant by “atonement”? How does John’s apocalypse unfold its meaning—theologically, existentially, cosmically? It is argued that both *atonement* and *sacrifice* (or *sacrificial*) are slippery words that require careful definition and qualification—especially when examining themes of atonement and sacrifice in Revelation.¹³ It is also asserted that

⁶ H. D. McDonald, *The Atonement of the Death of Christ: In Faith, Revelation, and History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1985), 73.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁸ 5:9; 12:10; 13:8. *Ibid.*, 80.

⁹ Jesus was crucified (11:8); pierced (1:7); died (1:18; 2:8); resurrected (1:5, 18; 2:8); exalted (5:1-14).

¹⁰ The Lamb had been “slain,” but, amazingly, it was “standing” (v. 6). Both verbs are perfect tense forms, suggesting the abiding effects of the actions.

¹¹ 5:1-10; 12:10-13; 13:8. Eugene H. Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John & the Praying Imagination* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), 153; David M. May, *Revelation: Weaving a Tapestry of Hope* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2001), 92. In the centerpoint of the book, between its *inclusio* “grace markers” (Rev. 1:4; 22:21), a loud voice in heaven announces with triumphant song God’s victory over Satan’s rule, the inauguration of God’s rule in the world, and Christ’s kingly authority (Rev. 12:10-12). This is the cross event with substitutionary implications (Rev. 12:11; cf. 5:6-10).

¹² Hill, “Atonement in the Apocalypse of John, 190.

¹³ Johns, “Atonement and Sacrifice in the Book of Revelation,” 124.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

the relationship between sacrifice and atonement in Revelation is “fraught with terminological challenges.”¹⁴ Indeed there are many definitions of atonement.¹⁵ Undoubtedly a theologian/exegete’s own biases or heritage regarding atonement can unwittingly nuance him or her toward certain conclusions when exploring Revelation’s meaning. Uncovering the real meaning of the text is always challenging. Then too, one can make sacrificial language too monochrome.¹⁶ Revelation itself however, makes obvious the fact that the biblical witness of the atonement is astonishingly rich, complex, vibrant.

Two broad understandings of what atonement signifies in Revelation compete for primacy: 1) whether atonement in Revelation “signifies primarily a sacrificial death that expiates sin and puts humanity right with God”;¹⁷ or 2) whether it refers to “the larger cosmological significance of Christ’s death as it relates to the overcoming of evil and the working out of God’s purposes on earth.”¹⁸ The former would see atonement as

¹⁴ Ibid., 129. Johns states: “While it is certainly true that the slaughter of the lamb is central to the rhetorical force of the image, it is not true that expiation is. In fact, the logic and language of slaughter as expiatory sacrifice are quite rare in the Apocalypse, while the logic and language of slaughter as political resistance and martyrdom are common. Because ‘sacrificial’ language is imprecise and often implies a sacrificial force, such language should be avoided with reference to the Apocalypse” *ibid.*, 161.

¹⁵ i.e., recapitulation, ransom, moral influence, satisfaction, substitution, governmental, mystical, non-violent, etc. See McDonald, *The Atonement of the Death of Christ: In Faith, Revelation, and History*, 115-341; Charles E. Hill ed. *The Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Historical & Practical Perspectives: Essays in Honor of Roger Nicole* (ed.; Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2004), 209-404; Norman R. Gulley, *Systematic Theology: Creation, Christ, Salvation* (vol. 3; Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2012), 601-654; Darrin W. Snyder Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace: The Message of the Cross and the Mission of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012); Adonis Vidu, *Atonement, Law, and Justice: The Cross in Historical and Cultural Contexts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014); Jeremy R. Treat, *The Crucified King: Atonement and Kingdom in Biblical and Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014); Sharon L. Baker, *Executing God: Rethinking Everything You’ve Been Taught about Salvation and the Cross* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013).

¹⁶ Johns, “Atonement and Sacrifice in the Book of Revelation,” 129.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.* See J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001); Sigve K. Tonstad, *Saving God’s Reputation: The Theological Function of Pistis Iesou in the Cosmic Narratives of Revelation* (New York, NY: T & T Clark International, 2006); Sigve K. Tonstad, “The Book of Revelation and Reality,” *Ministry Magazine*, (January 2010): 22-24. Johns argues: “At one level the difference lies between different theories of the atonement—especially between Anselm’s satisfaction theory and

LICHTENWALTER: ATONEMENT IN REVELATION

substitutionary¹⁹ and thus relating to realities of human sin and the need for personal redemption. This includes both objective and subjective aspects of atonement. The latter would be revelatory, relating primarily to questions of theodicy and the reputation/character of God (including substitution but not the emphasis or center). The latter also often sees Christ's death as exemplary—a model for believers to follow.²⁰ It is tacit “anti-sacrificial,”²¹ “anti-substitutionary,” “non-violent.”²²

We will explore this tension, suggesting that it is not an either/or, but rather two aspects of a unified whole in the Book of Revelation and that the movement is that substitution by the blood of the Lamb vindicates God's character. A third aspect of atonement will come into view in the process, i.e., how that substitution by the blood of the Lamb brings about the salvation of God's people including their change of status within God's sovereign reign in the Great Controversy. Both theodicy and redemption are substitutionary based and the latter is part of the movement towards the

the Christus Victor theory. At another level the difference lies between the personal or individual appropriation of the power of the cross on the one hand, and the broader cosmological or social significance of the power of the cross on the other. At yet a third level, the difference is between a unique, once-for-all event and an exemplary event that is to be emulated by those who follow the Lamb wherever he goes” (Johns, “Atonement and Sacrifice in the Book of Revelation,” 125).

¹⁹ The meaning of *substitutionary*: “The word *substitutionary*, properly understood, applies solely to Christ's taking our place at the cross, doing for us what we could never do for ourselves, that is perish in the second death (Rev. 20:6) and yet live again. He paid the wages of sin (Rom. 6:23), so that we do not have to, and gave us eternal life. In paying the price for our sins, He alone could be our substitute. He had to be God in order to pay the debt and live beyond the grave; He had to be human to die our death, so that we can live beyond the grave . . . This is the most glorious good news—the wondrous exchange: ‘God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God’ (2 Cor. 5:21).” Gulley, *Systematic Theology: Creation, Christ, Salvation*, 625.

²⁰ Johns, “Atonement and Sacrifice in the Book of Revelation,” 125. Johns asserts “Jesus' death is consistently tied to language of witness and victory in the Apocalypse. Atonement for sins is not in view,” Johns, *The Lamb Christology of the Apocalypse of John: An Investigation Into Its Origins & Rhetorical Force*, 169.

²¹ Johns, “Atonement and Sacrifice in the Book of Revelation,” 129-133.

²² Non-violent atonement theories press for priority against the apparent assumptions and accommodation of violence in traditional atonement motifs. There is desire to mitigate any sense of redemption and reconciliation that is born from divine violence. God did not want or need the death of Jesus in order to offer grace or forgiveness of sins. Christ's self-sacrifice and substitution for sinners is either marginalized or negated. For contemporary examples see, Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*; Baker, *Executing God: Rethinking Everything You've Been Taught about Salvation and the Cross*. For critique see, Gulley, *Systematic Theology: Creation, Christ, Salvation*, 648-650.

former. This will be a three-part discussion accordingly: atonement as substitution, atonement and salvation, atonement and theodicy.

Beginning At the Beginning

This first article explores the theological significance of Christ's death as it relates to these differing perspectives—and in the process, asks: “How should the themes of sacrifice and atonement be best understood in Revelation?” As the book's central motif and vehicle for atonement theology is the imagery of “the Lamb,”²³ key passages in which the term “Lamb” is found will be examined.²⁴ Because Revelation purposely places the concept of “blood” in close relationship to the Lamb's person and work—it is “the blood of the Lamb” (αἷμα τοῦ ἀρνίου, 7:14; 12:11), “your blood” (τῷ αἵματι σου, 5:9), “his blood” (τῷ αἵματι αὐτοῦ, 1:5)—we will measure its rhetorical force in pressing the sacrificial realities and substitutionary atonement implications of the book's Lamb motif.

The symbol of blood is clearly important in the book of Revelation as demonstrated by the number of occurrences (nineteen) and its use throughout the book in a variety of contexts.²⁵ Revelation's blood “is not a ‘static’ or a one-dimensional literary motif. It is a dynamic symbol of life and death, which draws the reader's attention to issues of the sacred and profane, purity and pollution, deliverance and judgment.”²⁶ It is a focalizing, “dominant ritual symbol.”²⁷ We will ask about its implications with respect to sin being atoned for.²⁸

Finally, we begin our discussion of the atonement in Revelation where John begins: with a doxology of praise for liberation from our sins through

²³ Hill, “Atonement in the Apocalypse of John,” 190.

²⁴ 5:6-14; 7:9-15; 12:10-13; 17:14.

²⁵ 1:5; 5:9; 6:10, 12; 7:14; 8:7-8; 11:6; 12:11; 14:20; 16:3-4, 6; 17:6; 18:24; 19:2, 13

²⁶ K. C. Hanson, “Blood and Purity in Leviticus and Revelation,” *Listening: Journal of Religion and Culture*, 28, (1993): 215.

²⁷ Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), 27-29. According to Hanson, “Blood (in both ancient Israelite and Christian usage) compresses multiple meanings in one referent, for example: murder, sacrifice, pollution. Context is everything in determining its significance and emotive power. It also unifies and focalizes a variety of phenomena, such as menstruation, animal slaughter, ritual purification, and legal culpability. The polarization of meaning to which Turner refers is between the principles of social organization and moral values (the ideological pole), and the natural and physical properties (the sensory pole)” (Hanson, “Blood and Purity in Leviticus and Revelation,” 215).

²⁸ 1:5; 5:9; 7:14; 12:11.

LICHTENWALTER: ATONEMENT IN REVELATION

Jesus' blood (1:5). It is hermeneutically significant that the prevailing context or framework for the atonement theology of Revelation is doxology; that is, atonement imagery/themes occur in expressions of praise to Christ.²⁹ It is significant, too, that "though the central motif and vehicle for atonement theology in Revelation is the image of the slain Lamb, atonement language in Revelation precedes the appearance of the Lamb in the visions."³⁰ The doxology of Revelation 1:5-6 then, has both an introductory and a summarizing quality when seen in the light of other atonement related passages in the rest of the book. For the reader, this hymn is the first thing he or she encounters of Revelation's atonement language. As such it becomes foundational for understanding the atonement in the rest of the book.³¹

This observation highlights the hermeneutical importance of both Revelation's introduction and conclusion. The book's introduction (1:1-8) forms a thematic *inclusio* with the epilogue (22:6-21). Major themes that will define the book are introduced and then concluded in the epilogue.³²

Introductions give clues and provide understanding for what unfolds. When confronted with possible nuances of apocalyptic imagery (in this case the Lamb motif), the introduction has already pointed toward the intended meanings. One of those meanings obviously relates to our question of where the focus of Revelation's atonement imagery might lay: either towards the personal and substitutionary (being right with God), or towards the cosmic (theodicy, God's reputation, the expunging of evil), or perhaps both. Before the book plunges its readers into apocalyptic visions with their cosmic narrative, it is the very human and personal existential realities of that metanarrative that are first highlighted. It is as if the larger narrative somehow has meaning on the personal level first. Or at the least, that in some profound way cosmic matters and their solutions would be hollow without corresponding personal human relevance. At least this is where Revelation's atonement theology begins.

Revelation's geographic sweep comprises the local, regional, global, and the cosmic (in relation to both heaven and the earth). But there is also

²⁹ 1:5; 5:9-10, 12; 7:9-14; 12:10-12; 15:3-4; 16:5-7; 19:1-7

³⁰ Hill, "Atonement in the Apocalypse of John," 190.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 191. Johns incorrectly downplays the important role Revelation 1:5 plays in Revelation's atonement theology, both by way of its reference to sin and sacrificial implications (Johns, "Atonement and Sacrifice in the Book of Revelation," 128).

³² Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation* (ed. Moisés Silva; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 50.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

the geography of the human heart.³³ The book begins with the personal and existential³⁴ and then, dynamically moves back and forth from various aspects of human and cosmic moral/spiritual realities. In the conclusion, there is return to the personal, individual, existential—focusing again clearly on matters of sin and atonement.³⁵ This reminds the reader that one’s personal life in a profound way mirrors and unfolds the cosmic conflict between Christ and Satan. That somehow our own fortunes are integrally tied with those of the Lamb. The epic battles unfolding within the book encompass private heart battlefields of sin, fear, rebellion, and unbelief.

It appears that no matter how large the cosmological significance of Christ’s death as it relates to the overcoming of evil, the working out of God’s purposes on earth, or the vindication of the character and reputation of God, there is reference to individual believer’s sins being atoned by the blood of Christ.³⁶ Christ’s death is concerned primarily with the once-for-all sacrifice that puts humanity right with God. The reader intuits this personal reality. The text leaves us with a feeling that somehow the fortunes of God are inextricably linked to ours, and that our fortunes are linked with that of the Lamb, and heaven’s fortunes linked with ours. Here the vicarious and sacrificial capacity of Christ’s death looms large. It is indeed a mystery that challenges our reflection.

Threefold Doxology

John’s first doxology praises Jesus for His redeeming work in relation to His followers: “the language is Johannine” and “is intimately connected with the primary themes in the book.”³⁷

To the one loving us (1:5)

And has freed us from our sins by his blood (1:5)

And made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and father (1:6)

—to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1:6)

³³ 2:23; 3:20; 6:16, 17; 22:11, 12.

³⁴ 1:3, 5, 7.

³⁵ 22:7,11-12,14-15,17,18-19.

³⁶ 1:5; 5:9; 7:14; 12:11.

³⁷ Osborne, *Revelation*, 59.

LICHTENWALTER: ATONEMENT IN REVELATION

The threefold doxology³⁸ unfolds important themes within the book's atonement theology: divine love, human sin, blood (sacrificial/substitutionary), liberation from sin's bondage through the shedding of blood, a new status in relation to God and the world as a result of the shed blood, and theodical worship.³⁹ These themes set the stage for understanding the apocalyptic images, which appear later. In particular they help prepare the reader for the striking introduction of the image of the Lamb later in Revelation 5.⁴⁰

The doxology nuances an understanding of the atonement in two related directions. The first has to do with God: His love for us—the divine motive that lies behind our atonement. The second are expressions that affirm God's character and sovereign reign over all, and which springs from a heart of gratitude, wonder, and surrender. These are significant relational images within the book's cosmic conflict narrative, questions of theodicy, and atonement themes. The heart, character and reputation of God are the clear focus. Love indicates matters of the divine character and motive. Liberation speaks to the salvific reality of atonement. Blood speaks to matters of instrument of atonement. Doxology returns to divine character, being and justice—theodicy.

The present substantival participle (*tō agapōnti*, the one who loves) is an all-embracing concept that summarizes Christ's past love leading to His sacrificial death,⁴¹ His present love, and his future love seen in the defeat of the forces of evil. It is love that is current, continuous, compelling, real—and intensely personal. It is love that encompasses our past, our present, and our every tomorrow. So also does the Lamb's sacrificial death as a historical event.⁴²

This love that leads to the Lamb's atoning death is no abstraction. Nor is it elusive. It is personal. Real. It is born of love that longs to restore us so that we can behold with wonder the face of Him who now loves us so

³⁸ Stephen S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John: Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 35; James L. Resseguie, *The Revelation of John: A Narrative Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 67.

³⁹ Doxology and theodicy are organically linked in Revelation. Doxology is the context or framework in which theodicy issues are voiced, 1:5; 5:9-10, 12; 7:9-14; 12:10-12; 15:3-4; 16:5-7; 19:1-7.

⁴⁰ Hill, "Atonement in the Apocalypse of John," 195.

⁴¹ 5:6, 9, 12; 7:14; 12:11; 13:8; cf. Rom. 8:37; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 5:2, 25.

⁴² cf. 12:10, 11; 13:8; 20:15; 22:27.

deeply (Rev 22:4). While Revelation mentions divine love in only two other places, an atmosphere of divine love permeates the book.⁴³

Liberation from Sin

These doxological themes and images remind us that the matter of God's character, actions, and judgment are important themes in Revelation.⁴⁴ "John's Revelation is, above all, a triumphant disclosure of God's love, expressed through his judgment."⁴⁵ The text however, reminds us that this divine love was especially demonstrated in the Lamb's atoning blood that has freed us from our sins (1:5b). Christ's work and its effects are emphasized.⁴⁶ The verb "loves" is paired with the next verb "freed" in such a way that the first may be seen as the basis for the second.⁴⁷ One sees in the second the display of the first. Love is displayed in the redemptive release from sin via sacrificial blood: "In the aorist (*lysanti*, loosed or freed) the present love of Christ is exemplified in his past sacrificial death."⁴⁸ Revelation presents "the shed blood of Christ as the life of Jesus poured out in substitution" and "understands that sacrifice as providing liberation from sin and death."⁴⁹

Two phrases predominate in Revelation for this redemptive work, "the slain Lamb"⁵⁰ and the sacrificial "blood."⁵¹ As noted above, the theme of blood is a "dominant ritual symbol" in the Apocalypse.⁵² Here the emphasis is on the "atoning effects" of Christ's death, i.e., it "freed us from our sins"

⁴³ Osborne, *Revelation*, 63, 64. See also Larry L. Lichtenwalter, *Revelation's Great Love Story: More Than I Ever Imagined* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald Publishing Association, 2008).

⁴⁴ 15:3, 4; 16:5-7; 19:1-6. Osborne, *Revelation*, 38. See discussion of theodicy in John's Apocalypse: Grant R. Osborne, "Theodicy in the Apocalypse," *Trinity Journal*, 14, (1993): 63-77; Tonstad, *Saving God's Reputation: The Theological Function of Pistis Iesou in the Cosmic Narratives of Revelation*.

⁴⁵ Stephen S. Smalley, *Thunder and Love: John's Revelation and John's Community* (Milton Keynes: Nelson Word, 1994), 147-149; Smalley, *The Revelation to John: Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse*, 35.

⁴⁶ Osborne, *Revelation*, 64.

⁴⁷ Hill, "Atonement in the Apocalypse of John," 191.

⁴⁸ Osborne, *Revelation*, 64.

⁴⁹ Paige Patterson, *Revelation* (ed. E. Ray Clendenen; vol. 39; Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2012), 61.

⁵⁰ 5:6, 12; 13:8.

⁵¹ 1:5; 5:9; 7:14; 12:11. Osborne, *Revelation*, 64.

⁵² See Hanson, "Blood and Purity in Leviticus and Revelation," 215-230.

LICHTENWALTER: ATONEMENT IN REVELATION

(1:5b).⁵³ This is the only place in the NT where *lyō* has redemptive connotations.⁵⁴ In addition, the concept of sin (*hamartia*) is found only twice elsewhere in Revelation (18:4, 5) where it appears in relation to the sins of the harlot Babylon. The implication and awesome wonder is that “While the sins of the enemies of God continue to pile up in readiness for divine judgment, the sins of those who have turned to God have already been ‘loosed’ by the ‘blood’ of Christ.”⁵⁵

The doxology’s language—“released us”—recalls the Exodus, the first of several Exodus motif references in Revelation.⁵⁶ At its core, Egypt stands as a symbol of oppression, suffering, bondage, sin and the brokenness of our world. The Exodus is seen as a story repeated in every soul (and generation) that seeks deliverance from the enmeshing and enervating influence of the world. Here it is specifically linked to the reality of human sin. John’s doxology connects the blood/death of Jesus directly with the severing of the hold of sin over us.⁵⁷ The phrase “has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father” reflect the eschatological aspect of Christ’s work.⁵⁸ This is Exodus imagery.⁵⁹

Revelation’s opening vision of atonement is thus linked to the fundamental reality of human sin. It begins with the reality of human sin, not objective or cosmic evil per se. This suggests that any dealing with evil

⁵³ Osborne, *Revelation*, 64.

⁵⁴ Karl Kertelge, “Luo,” *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* 2:368. “Luo” is a cognate of the Greek redemption terms: “*lytron*”—means of redemption; and “*apolytrōsis*”—setting free/release (ibid, 2:365-366, 368).

⁵⁵ Osborne, *Revelation*, 64.

⁵⁶ Resseguie, *The Revelation of John: A Narrative Commentary*, 67. Of all the New Testament books, the Apocalypse uses the Exodus motif most thoroughly in its unfolding theology and ethics. The Exodus symbolism in Revelation is both subtle and pervasive. Where the Apocalypse’s Old Testament allusions are drawn from Isaiah or the Psalms, the Exodus forms the moral/spiritual backdrop for the respective imagery, further portraying Revelation’s underlying Exodus motif. See my discussion Larry L. Lichtenwalter, “Exodus and Apocalypse: Deliverance Then and Now,” in *Christ, Salvation and the Eschaton: Essays in Honor of Hans K. LaRondelle* (ed. Jifí Moskala Daniel Heinz, Peter van Bemmelen; Berrien Springs, MI: Old Testament Department Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University, 2009).

⁵⁷ Hill, “Atonement in the Apocalypse of John,” 192.

⁵⁸ Osborne, *Revelation*, 64.

⁵⁹ See Lichtenwalter, “Exodus and Apocalypse: Deliverance Then and Now,” 393-396, 400-401; G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (ed. I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner; Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 192; Resseguie, *The Revelation of John: A Narrative Commentary*, 67.

has the question of sin and its atonement as an integral element. In so doing, the book “voices an atonement doctrine compatible with that found in Paul.”⁶⁰

It is suggested that, because reference to believer’s sins being atoned for by the blood of Jesus occurs only once in Revelation (1:5b), sin is rarely if ever seen as a “problem” that separates humanity from God. Rather, it is suggested, the real problem is the presence of evil and the ongoing battle for the establishment of God’s reign on earth.⁶¹ The text however, demonstrates that John is quite aware of and accepts the idea that Christ’s death was unique and efficacious—even vicarious—for the individual, particularly within the context of the larger cosmic conflict. Appearing as it does in the book’s introduction, it becomes a conceptual marker that guides the reader’s understanding as the book unfolds.

Atoning Blood

The blood of Jesus occupies an important place in Revelation (as well as in NT thought as a whole).⁶² One cannot read either the Exodus—on which Revelation’s imagery is built—or the Apocalypse without being confronted with the idea of “liberating blood.”⁶³ As noted above, blood is an extremely vivid part of the visual imagery of Revelation. It occurs nineteen times.⁶⁴ Sometimes it refers to a blood-red color. In describing the wrath of God, bloody waters abound. Often, however, blood is a metaphor for a “violent death.”⁶⁵ Here it points to the violent death of Jesus on our behalf.

Furthermore, Jesus is described as the Lamb twenty-seven times in Revelation. The Lamb motif is the most profound description of Jesus and first appears in Revelation chap. 5: “And I saw between the throne (with the four living creatures) and the elders a Lamb standing, as if slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God, sent out into all the earth.” (5:6). Revelation 13 refers to Jesus as “the lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (13:8). Christ’s violent sacrificial death is well summarized by the phrase “blood of the Lamb” (7:14; 12:11).

⁶⁰ Patterson, *Revelation*, 61.

⁶¹ Johns, “Atonement and Sacrifice in the Book of Revelation,” 128.

⁶² Smalley, *The Revelation to John: Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse*, 35, 36.

⁶³ Lichtenwalter, “Exodus and Apocalypse: Deliverance Then and Now,” 400.

⁶⁴ 1:5; 5:9; 6:10, 12; 7:14; 8:7, 8; 11:6; 12:11; 14:20; 16:3, 4, 6; 17:6; 18:24; 19:2, 13.

⁶⁵ Hanson, “Blood and Purity in Leviticus and Revelation,” 215.

LICHTENWALTER: ATONEMENT IN REVELATION

Thus, like Exodus, the Apocalypse sets substitutionary atonement squarely in the context of the cosmic conflict between Christ and Satan, and the final exodus (15:1-4). The blood of Lamb, the death of Lamb, and the saving power of the slain Lamb are recurring themes.⁶⁶ It is a theme set against a backdrop of warning trumpets, plagues of wrath, and heavenly appeal. The Gospel call that celebrates the slain Lamb is the only solution. One is invited to wash their robes in this liberating blood (7:14; 22:14).

Revelation outlines four realities of Christ's atoning blood in the believer's life. Sin as enslaving bondage (1:5)—the Lamb's Blood releases. Sin as incalculable debt (5:9)—the Lamb's Blood purchases. Sin as moral/spiritual defilement (7:14)—the Lamb's Blood cleanses. Sin as legal guilt, condemnation, and shame (12:11)—the Lamb's Blood justifies, acquits, and removes shame so we can behold the face of God. Revelation does not explain how these realities occur, but it affirms that they do—through the Lamb's blood.

In the imagery of John's Revelation, the horrible effects of sin are more than bondage or captivity. It is an incalculable debt. It is defilement. It incurs legal guilt/shame.⁶⁷ "You were slain, and with your blood purchased men for God," we hear the four living creatures and twenty-four elders sing (5:9; cf. 14:3). The Lamb's blood (death) "bought" people for God out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation! Sin incurs a debt against God's holiness and justice, which has resulted in our being sold into slavery or captivity. It's a debt and bondage to sin that leads ultimately to death (cf. Rom. 6:20-21, 23). There is no arbitrary cancellation of the debt. A price is to be paid. The Lamb bought us out of captivity, paid the debt that had bound us over to sin and death. This He did with the price of His precious blood (Rev 5:9; cf. 1 Peter 1:18, 19). It is in keeping with what John writes elsewhere: "*Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*" (Jn. 1:29).

In Revelation chapter 7 John sees a vision of this very multitude of purchased people, a group "that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands" (7:9). Later these saints clothed in white are described as those who have "come out of the great tribulation, and they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (7:14).

⁶⁶ 1:5; 5:6, 9, 12; 12:11; 13:8.

⁶⁷ Hill, "Atonement in the Apocalypse of John," 207.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Here we meet a paradox—blood that whitens. The redeemed wash their robes white in the Lamb’s blood. Here we are dealing now with the idea of sin, not as a debt or bondage, but sin as defilement. Sin renders sinners impure and unfit for the presence of a holy God. The clothing metaphor (here “robes”) represents one’s life, their character as reflected in thought, values, and deeds. It relates to whom one is in his or her inner private world, and all which one does because of what he or she is—*being*.⁶⁸ White garments symbolize righteous character.⁶⁹ They symbolize a range of positive meanings that include both ritual and moral holiness and purity.⁷⁰

Revelation connects existentially with how sin defiles. How we can have the inner sense that we are impure? Unfit for the presence of God? We feel shame and guilt. Dirty. And our conscience accuses. John expresses this truth of sin as defilement elsewhere when he writes: “if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 Jn. 1:7). In light of Christ’s love and sacrifice, we are to think “How much more . . . will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!” (Heb. 9:14, NIV; cf. Rev. 7:14, 15). Revelation touches on this phenomenon with the imagery of those who run from the

⁶⁸ Revelation likewise employs “garments” or “robes” as metaphors for an individual’s moral and spiritual condition and character (Rev. 3:5, 18; 4:4; 6:11; 7:9, 13, 14; 16:15; 17:4; 19:8; 22:14). Like in Zechariah 3:1-5 where the priest Joshua the high priest is depicted as wearing dirty clothes while standing before the angel of the Lord. It is a metaphor for the sins of both the priest and the people. The removal of these dirty clothes explicitly represents the removal of both guilt and moral impurity as well as one becoming something new both in character and life. See David E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5* (ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker; vol. 52; Dallas, TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1997), 222. In Joshua’s re-commissioning, two conditions are laid down. If these conditions are fulfilled the he will have two specific privileges. Eugene H. Merrill writes: “Having invested Joshua with pure, clean clothes and a spotless turban, thereby signifying the removal of his ritual impurity, YHWH reveals to him the meaning and purpose of what He has done. He has prepared him for a larger role in the covenant community, provided Joshua meets the conditions of obedience incumbent in that relationship. . . . Joshua has not been cleansed for nothing. He must now respond to the act of grace by assuming the task to which his reinstatement has called him. There are, however, two conditions that must be met, one having to do with his way of life and the other with his specific vocation as a priest.” Eugene H. Merrill, *An Exegetical Commentary: Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1994), 137-139.

⁶⁹ Beatrice S. Neall, *The Concept of Character In The Apocalypse With Implications For Character Education* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, Inc, 1983), 121.

⁷⁰ Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 223.

LICHTENWALTER: ATONEMENT IN REVELATION

face of God and those who see his face (Rev. 6:17; 22:4). Revelation's garments of white are neither earned or self-made. Rather, they are graciously given or offered to receptive people by God (Rev. 3:5, 18; 6:11; 19:8)—and predicated on the Lamb's atoning blood.

Revelation's imagery of sin incurring legal guilt focuses on accusation and condemnation. In Revelation chapter 12 John sees a vision where the great red dragon (Satan) is defeated explicitly in his role as *accuser* (12:7-10). Each of the dragon's names—the Devil and Satan (12:9)—has the connotation of accuser or adversary. Accusations have to do with guilt, and thus we are confronted with the idea of sin as legal transgression.⁷¹ In verse 11 the accuser—the one who would bring a charge against God's people—is decisively defeated. His claims in God's court have been stricken down through the blood of the Lamb. Christ's death has justifying power on behalf of the sinner. The language of the law court and legal guilt is evidenced further in Revelation's prevailing judgment theme where record books are opened and everyone ultimately is held accountable and judged by the things written therein.⁷²

The epochal close to Revelation's post-millennial judgment asserts, “if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire” (20:15). One can easily focus on the negative here and miss the book's tacit promise that there had been beforehand (and for the reader, presently) a way of escape for this profound existential moment at eternity's hinge. Only for those whose names are in “the book of life” will the last judgment mean joyful vindication rather than shameful destruction.

We can only wonder, how the mere appearance of one's name in “the book of life” can counterbalance the damning evidence contained in the book of our deeds (Rev. 20:12).⁷³ It is because this “book of life” belongs to the Lamb who has been slain in sacrifice for those listed in it (Rev. 13:8). John later refers to it as the “Lamb's book of life” (21:27) and links it also with the cross (13:8).⁷⁴

Substitutionary atonement and mediation are assumed in the imagery of the *Lamb's book of life*. Ultimately, it is the blood of Jesus that releases one from this epochal judgment. Defiled, condemned, indebted and sold into slavery, those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life have,

⁷¹ Hill, “Atonement in the Apocalypse of John,” 206.

⁷² 14:7; 20:11-15; cf. 22:11, 12; 17:1-18:24; 19:1-2.

⁷³ Dennis E. Johnson, *Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2001), 85.

⁷⁴ Osborne, *Revelation*, 180.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

by His blood, been purchased for God and installed by Christ as pure and holy, acquitted priests in His kingdom (20:2-6; 5:9, 10; 1:5, 6). They are cleansed from sin. Freed of shame, guilt, and condemnation. They have become the Lamb's spotless bride (19:7-8).

Being "released from our sins by his blood" at Revelation's doxological opening ultimately brings us to the reality of the "second death" at the book's closing.⁷⁵ The horrible effects of sin as brute bondage, incalculable debt, shameful defilement, and accusing legal guilt/shame all converge here in a soul wrenching horror of darkness, dereliction, despair, and death from which there is absolutely no escape, no resurrection—the "second death." The blood of Jesus releases us from it all!

Thus, atonement in Revelation is substitutionary.

Conclusion

For the reader, Revelation's opening hymn is the first thing he or she encounters of Revelation's atonement language. As such it becomes foundational for understanding the atonement in the rest of the book. The substitutionary atonement of the Jesus is the most glorious good news—the wondrous exchange: 'God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God' (2 Cor. 5:21). It evokes spontaneous doxological praise with implications which ripple throughout Revelation's cosmic conflict narrative: "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing" (5:12). It is both integrally linked to and foundational to other nuanced aspects of atonement within the book—salvation and theodicy. The redeeming substitution by the blood of the Lamb, unites vicarious suffering and victorious power, sovereign kingship and redemption—and in the process, enjoins theodicy and redemption.

Rhetorically placed in Revelation's beginning, the reader is reminded that one's personal life in a profound way mirrors and unfolds the cosmic conflict between Christ and Satan. It suggests that somehow our own fortunes are integrally tied with those of the Lamb. The epic battles unfolding within the book encompass private heart battlefields of sin, fear, rebellion, and unbelief. It appears that no matter how large the cosmological significance of Christ's death as it relates to the overcoming of evil, the working out of God's purposes on earth, or the vindication of the character

⁷⁵ See my discussion, Lichtenwalter, *Revelation's Great Love Story: More Than I Ever Imagined*, 28-43.

LICHTENWALTER: ATONEMENT IN REVELATION

and reputation of God, there is reference to individual believer's sins being atoned by the blood of Christ. Christ's death is concerned primarily with the once-for-all sacrifice that puts humanity right with God. The reader intuits this personal reality. The text leaves us with a feeling that somehow the fortunes of God are inextricably linked to ours, and that our fortunes are linked with that of the Lamb, and heaven's fortunes linked with ours. Here the vicarious and sacrificial capacity of Christ's death looms large. It is indeed a mystery that challenges our reflection.

Larry L. Lichtenwalter is Dean of Philosophy and Theology and the Director of the Institute for Islamic and Arabic Studies at Middle East University in Beirut, Lebanon. He is a preacher, pastor, systematic theologian, author, and holds a Ph.D. in Christian ethics. lichtenwalter@gmail.com