

The Assault of the Nations

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In Revelation 19:11-21, Jesus, the divine warrior on a white horse with garments dipped in blood, comes down from heaven with his army and defeats the armies of the beast and the false prophet with the word of his mouth.¹ This battle was foreshadowed in 16:12-16 (the gathering of the armies at Ἀρμαγεδών) and 17:12-14 in the assault of the beasts and the horns on the Lamb.² After the imprisonment and judgement of the beast and the false prophet, Satan is imprisoned for a thousand years while the faithful martyrs reign with Jesus (20:1-6). After his release, Satan gathers the armies of Gog and Magog to assault God's people, but the armies are destroyed by fire from heaven and Satan is thrown into the lake of fire (20:7-10); then follows the final judgement of humanity and the inauguration of God's new creation and reign (20:11-22:5).

The Assault of the Nations

These battles in Rev 19:11-21 and 20:7-10 follow the motif of an “assault of the nations” which appears in the Hebrew prophets and in early Jewish literature.³ In this motif, the enemies of God or God's people, who were often associated with evil and chaos, gather against them, and are subsequently destroyed by God or God's agents “before the attack becomes really dangerous.”⁴ It is typified in the visions of the assault of the armies of Gog in Ezek 38-39, in which the destruction of the armies of the nations is in judgement of their oppression and dispersion of Israel.⁵ In these visions, God has led out the armies of Gog against the newly restored Israel (38:3ff, 18:14-16, 39:1-2). God, presented as the divine warrior coming down to fight for Israel, destroys the armies with confusion that leads to destructive infighting and with pestilence and fire (38:17-23, 39:5-6), and a time of blessing (39:9-48:35).

Similar visions occur in Zech 12 and 14, Joel 3, Dan 11:40-12:1, and in other Jewish texts with imagery and structures derived from Old Testament precedents, such as the War Scroll from Qumran.⁶

¹For Jesus as the divine warrior, see Aune **Revelation** 1048.

²Aune **Revelation** 952, 1064.

³Aune **Revelation** 1047.

⁴Hartman **Prophecy** 47. Hartman calls this the “assault of the Gentiles” or “assault of the heathen,” which he details on p77-101.

⁵Though the motif as a whole is a development of the Holy War tradition of Israel, which is likely modeled on God's salvation of Jerusalem from the siege of the Assyrian army of Sennacherib in 2 Kings 18:13-19:27 and Isa 36-37 (Aune **Revelation** 1097).

⁶Cf 1 Enoch 56:5-6, 90:13-19; 4 Ezra 13:5-11, 33-38; *Sib Or* 3:635-701; *Ps Sol* 17:5-25.

The War Scroll combines the “assault of the nations” motif with Old Testament imagery and ancient Near Eastern myth. In this text, there is an assault against God’s people by various nations (col I:13-15) in which God decisively intervenes (I:14-15). The beginning of the battle (I:4) resembles Dan 11:40ff, and the use of Gog for the opposing army (XII:16) echoes Ezek 38:2 etc.⁷ The overall structure of the battle consists of seven “lots” or attacks, in each of which each opposing army is successful for three (I:13-15, XV-XIX); God defeats Belial and his army in the seventh (I:13-15, XIX:1-4, 9-11). This is similar to the Persian myth of a back-and-forth battle of the gods of light and darkness over several lots.⁸ Persian dualism is also evident in the distinction between the forces as “sons of light” against the “forces of darkness.” This dualism is significantly modified by the ultimate power of God at Qumran.⁹

In Revelation 19 and 20

The final battles in Rev 19 and 20 are similarly developed from a combination of the “assault of the nations” motif, Old Testament imagery, and Near Eastern myths. The basic pattern of the “assault of the nations” motif is evident in the gathering of armies from the nations against God’s people (20:9, cf 19:19, 16:16) or against the Messiah (19:19, cf 17:14) and the destruction of these forces (19:20-21, 20:9-10). The motif in Revelation appears to rely on Ezekiel 38-39. This is apparent in various imagery derived from this text, such as the summoning of birds to feast (19:17-18) and eat their fill (19:21, cf Ezek 39:4, 17ff), the oppositional characters of Gog and Magog (20:8, cf Ezek 38:2, etc), and the destruction of the army of Satan with fire from heaven (20:9, cf Ezek 38:22, 39:6[!]).

John also relies on various other Old Testament passages for his imagery in these scenes of battle, such as Isa 63:1-3 for the image of Jesus’ garments dipped in blood (Rev 19:13). John has added mythic elements to this motif by placing the final battles as the culmination of the cosmic conflict between Satan, with his angels and beastly minions, and Jesus, with Michael, his angels, and the saints. This conflict is depicted in terms of a combat myth, where Satan and his beasts are depicted as forces of chaos and Jesus, in defeating them, inaugurates a new age of order and creation (21:1), in which chaotic forces, death, evildoers, sin, and unclean acts are no more (21:8, 27).¹⁰ John’s placement of the “assault of the nations” within this mythic structure is similar to the use of myths in the Qumran War Scroll, and is a clear development of the vision of the four beasts in Daniel 7. The mythical element adds a significant desire for the resolution of the cosmic chaos and disorder resulting from Roman imperial rule to the concerns of justice and vengeance already present in the “assault” motif.

⁷For the War Scroll as an interpretation of Dan 11:40ff, see Flusser **Judaism** 145-146.

⁸Plutarch, *De Iside et Oside* 45-47, as cited and discussed in Collins **Mythology** 605.

⁹Collins **Mythology** 607.

¹⁰Yarbro Collins **Combat** 76ff, 162-164. Combat myths were common in the ancient Near East and Greek mythology, and were used to describe foes of Israel in cosmic holy war imagery in Dan 7-8 (Aune **Revelation** 667f). They depicted a divine hero, representing order, in a battle for universal kingship against a monster associated with chaos (Yarbro Collins **Combat** 57).

Another interesting additional element is the separation of the battles by an intermediary reign of the Messiah and the holy ones (Rev 20:4-6) prior to the fulfillment of the reign of God or end of history. This intermediary reign of the Messiah was a common expectation at the end of the 1st century, and could include the destruction of foes (cf 4 Ezra 7:26-44,¹¹ 2 Baruch 40:1-4, and 1 Cor 15:28). However, the need for *two* battles to fully remove oppositional forces and inaugurate God's reign is unique.¹²

The "final battle(s)" in Rev 19 and 20, alongside Rev 16:12-16 and 17:14, are a development of the "assault of the nations" motif, which John has combined with other Old Testament and early Jewish imagery and ancient combat myths. This combination of sources is consistent with the use of this motif, as is evident in the "War Scroll," and has various elements which are particular to Revelation. John's use of this motif, however, reflects a particular vision of the end. One must be careful not to impose that motif on other eschatological scenarios in the New Testament.

In the New Testament

There are expectations of eschatological conflict in other New Testament books, but no detailed vision of final battle between the gathered armies of God and of Satan, such as we see in Revelation. These conflicts may have a military character, but they lack some of the details found in Revelation. In 1 Cor 15:23-28, Paul envisions the subjection of powers, both cosmic and earthly, and of death, but without an extended battle scene.¹³ In the Deutero-Pauline 2 Thessalonians, there is a description of Jesus as the divine warrior coming with the clouds of war to destroy the "lawless one" with his breath (τῷ πνεύματι τοῦ στόματος, 2 Thess 2:8; cf Isa 11:4, 4 Ezra 13:10-11). This conflict with the "lawless one" comes closest to the scenario of a final battle, but again lacks a depiction of armies arrayed for battle or the final destruction of opposing forces, especially since Satan remains. It would go beyond the text to read it as a full eschatological battle between the forces of good and evil.¹⁴

In Mark 13 and its parallels in Mt 24 and Lk 21, Jesus is depicted as coming in judgement, but there is no battle envisioned in which the divine warrior with God's forces destroys the arrayed powers of evil or the armies of the nations.¹⁵ In Ephesians 6:10-20, "Paul" exhorts members of the faithful community to put on the armor of God, so they might stand against the "wiles of the devil" (NRSV), against cosmic powers of darkness, and might resist on the "evil day" (6:11-13). Such a call to battle is a present call to stand firm which will come to a climax in the future "evil day,: not a call to eschatological battle, as at Qumran (1QM) or in Revelation.¹⁶

¹¹Cited in Aune **Revelation** 1105.

¹²Hartman **Prophecy** 23.

¹³Thiselton **First Corinthians** 1231ff, cf 238f.

¹⁴As does E J Richard **1-2 Thessalonians** 1231ff; cf 238f.

¹⁵David C Sim (**Apocalyptic** 100) argues that Mt 24:15-28 *does* envision such a conflict, based on connections to 2 Thess 2. See the critique in France **Matthew** 624n, 912n, 918.

¹⁶Lincoln **Ephesians** 446, 430-441; cf 1 Thess 5:8 for an exhortation using armor imagery.

In various NT passages, Jesus' death and resurrection bring victory against the authorities of the world, the devil, and death (Col 2:15, Heb 2:14-15, Eph 4:8). In John, likewise, Jesus' victory on the cross is the definitive battle in which he defeats the devil, the ruler of this world (12:31, 14:30, 16:11; see also 1 John 5:4-5, 19). There are no extended battles, but there is a conflict between powers of light and powers of darkness, with a "final battle" so to speak, in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

As we can see, there is a lack of clear examples of the "assault of the nations" motif as the "final battle" in the rest of the New Testament. The ambiguous nature of some eschatological scenarios and speculation in the New Testament, especially when there are associations with military imagery, has led some scholars to discern this particular motif in various texts. However, significant details of the "assault of nations" motif, such as the gathering or existence of opposing armies, are not present or alluded to in these texts. Therefore, we can say that only Revelation, among New Testament texts, depicts a "final battle" or battles of this sort at the end of the age.

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The Editors

The End in Mark 13, as Matthew notes, is not reached by a battle. It is reached in a different way: in the catastrophic destruction of This World. The judgement of Jesus merely assigns places in the World to Come. The failure of that Final Catastrophe to appear within the lifetime of some present, as promised by Jesus in Mk 13:30, was awkward for believers, as witness the jeers of outsiders (2 Peter 3:4). Major solutions may be grouped as (1) future: extending the time, as in 2 Peter 3:8-9; (2) present: envisioning a constant war with Satan the Tempter, to which Paul's military imagery easily applies; and (3) past: personal salvation is not decided at any future judgement, but was secured once and for all by the previous self-sacrifice of Jesus.

The Final Battles of Revelation would be a fourth. But are they really unique? We are inclined to see them as hinted in the more military descent of Jesus in 1 Thess 4:16 (interpolated?) and as implied in 2 Thess 2:8 (Deutero-Pauline); these, in our dating, might provide a chronological lead-up to the fully described battles of Revelation.

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