

Prepare for Holy War

A Flyover of the Seven Churches During the Season Celebrating Christ's Birth

Rev 2:1 To the angel of the **church in Ephesus** write: 'The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.

² "I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false.

³ I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary.

⁴ But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.

⁵ Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.

⁶ Yet this you have: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

⁷ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.'

⁸ "And to the angel of the **church in Smyrna** write: 'The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.

⁹ "I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

¹⁰ Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.

¹¹ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death.'

¹² "And to the angel of the **church in Pergamum** write: 'The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.

¹³ "I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is. Yet you hold fast my name, and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.

¹⁴ But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality.

¹⁵ So also you have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

¹⁶ Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth.

¹⁷ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone that no one knows except the one who receives it.'

¹⁸ "And to the angel of the **church in Thyatira** write: 'The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze.

¹⁹ "I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first.

²⁰ But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols.

²¹ I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality.

²² Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works,

²³ and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you according to your works.

²⁴ But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan, to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden.

²⁵ Only hold fast what you have until I come.

²⁶ The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations,

²⁷ and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father.

²⁸ And I will give him the morning star.

²⁹ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'
^{3:1} "And to the angel of the **church in Sardis** write: 'The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. "'I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.

² Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God.

³ Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you.

⁴ Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy.

⁵ The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels.

⁶ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

⁷ "And to the angel of the **church in Philadelphia** write: 'The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens.

⁸ "'I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name.

⁹ Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie-- behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you.

¹⁰ Because you have kept my word about patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell on the earth.

¹¹ I am coming soon. Hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown.

¹² The one who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God. Never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my

God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name.

¹³ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

¹⁴ "And to the angel of the **church in Laodicea** write: 'The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation.

¹⁵ "'I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot!

¹⁶ So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.

¹⁷ For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.

¹⁸ I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see.

¹⁹ Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent.

²⁰ Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.

²¹ The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.

²² He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

(Revelation 2:1:3-22)

Holy War

[Dan Barker](#) is an American atheist activist and musician who served as a Quaker and Pentecostal preacher and composer of church music for 19 years but left to found the *Freedom From Religion Foundation*. The author of several

books, one of his most recent is *God: The Most Unpleasant Character in All Fiction* (2016), a title taken from a line in Richard Dawkin's book *The God Delusion*.

Dawkin's gained much public notoriety after a 2007 unmoderated discussion with three other atheists (Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett) which was recorded, titled, and sold as "**The Four Horsemen**," a phrase taken from the Book of Revelation. In Revelation, the Four Horsemen are supernatural entities that wage a kind of holy war against the earth. These atheists were given this title as a kind of irony, since they were perfectly natural, ordinary men who were, supposedly, trying to usher in the *Non-Apocalypse*.

Back to **Barker**. He tells us, "**While writing [the book], I found myself wading through the murky waters of the Old Testament, something I was hoping never to have to do again. Here is my list of the 10 worst Old Testament passages**" that he says show us the true character of God.¹ I'll only talk about one here. It is **Judges 18:1-28**, a story where God approves of the destruction of Laish, "**a people at peace and secure.**" He titles this point, "**God approves the massacre of a peaceful people so one of his tribes could have a place to**

¹ **Dan Barker**, "The 10 Worst Old Testament Verses," *Freethought Today* (April 2016), <https://ffrf.org/publications/freethought-today/item/26141-the-10-worst-old-testament-verses>.

live.” He then comments, “Most believers think God destroyed the Canaanites because they were depraved and immoral, although the bible does not make that claim [actually, it does]. They were killed — and labeled ‘evil’ and ‘wicked’ — simply because they did not worship him. Here is a group of people who did nothing wrong. They were ‘at peace and secure,’ but they had to be eliminated ... The Canaanites were not the evildoers. The Israelites were the invaders!”

Let’s talk about holy war for a moment. The idea was codified into law by **Moses** at the command of the LORD of Hosts, though it was there in a primitive form as far back as Abram (see **Gen 14**). When Israel went into the land, there were certain peoples that had to be utterly “devoted to destruction” (*kharam*). It was **Joshua** who presided over most of these battles. Perhaps the most famous is the battle that started it all off—the Battle of **Jericho**. The story takes several chapters to unfold.

First, after Moses dies, the LORD himself commissions Joshua to take over as leader of Israel (**Josh 1**). He assumes command of the army and immediately sends **two spies** into the great walled city where they meet **a Canaanite prostitute named Rahab**. In a major plot twist, this most **unclean** of all

the people in Jericho helps the spies and cuts a deal to save her life when they see her scarlet thread in the window. They then return to Joshua with the enemy intel (**Josh 2**) and prepare for battle.

Before taking the city, however, things have to be right, **ceremonially speaking**, with God's people. This was part of Mosaic law, which demanded sacrifice and ritual purity (cf. **Lev 15:16-18**; **Dt 23:9-14**; **1Sa 13**; etc.) before going to holy war.² Joshua must first cross over the Jordan, a symbolic **baptism** where the ark of the covenant goes before them, picturing Yahweh on his throne going before the people to fight for them (**Josh 3-4**). After this, it was vital that the men of Israel be **circumcised**, because Moses had neglected this duty with the new generation (**Josh 5**). Finally, just before the battle dawns, Joshua was by Jericho and he lifted up his eyes and saw “**a man standing before him with his drawn sword in his hand**” and asked him, “**Are you for us, or for our adversaries?**” (**Josh 5:13**).

The man replied, “**No.**” Wrong question, Joshua. “**I am the commander/prince of the army of the LORD**” (cf. **Dan**

² **Going Deeper:** In a fascinating short study, rooted in the work of Tremper Longman and Daniel Reid, David Schrock has summarized the things Israel had to do before, during, and after holy war. For our purposes, **before the war** is very important: seeking God's will, spiritual preparation such as sacrifice, and staying ritually pure. **During the battle** is also important for the Joshua/Revelation typology: numbers were often to be at a minimum so that God would gain the glory (think of Gideon and his 300 men); there were instructions on how to march, the ark of God went before the people, and the heavenly host fought for Israel. **After the battle** there was praise and plunder. See **David Schrock**, “Holy War in the Bible: Before, During, and After the Battle,” *Via Emmaus* (July 7, 2011), <https://davidschrock.com/2011/07/07/holy-war-in-the-bible-before-during-and-after-the-battle/>.

8:11; 12:1). Joshua had come face to face with the LORD of Hosts, the Angel of Yahweh, who was unsheathing his sword for battle. Joshua fell on his face and worshiped (14). In this way, everything was set in order for The LORD to go before the camp of Israel and fight the battle of Jericho for them. All they had to do was, by faith, march around the city and perform a series of three telescopic “sevens”: for seven seven days they march around it, the last day they march seven times, then they blow seven trumpets at the end. The people would then shout a mighty shout and Christ himself would destroy the mighty walls. The city would be destroyed (Josh 6; cf. Heb 11:30), but not before Joshua yells out to Rahab the whore, “Come out of the evil city and be saved!”

This may seem a strange way to begin a sermon looking at the seven churches of Revelation. What could holy war possibly have to do with that? More than you might think. The answer lies in coming to grips with a critical insight that scholars like Warren Gage have had,³ that Revelation is the NT’s equivalent to Joshua—a book of holy war. In looking

³ Three recourses from him are Warren Austin Gage, *Gospel Typology in Joshua and Revelation: A Whore and Her Scarlet, Seven Trumpets Sound, A Great City Falls* (Fort Lauderdale, FL: St. Andrews House, 2013); *Essays in Biblical Theology* (Fort Lauderdale, FL: Warren A. Gage, 2010), 55-60; and “Dr. Chip Bennett and Dr. Warren Gage Discuss The Book of Revelation as Comedy,” *Grace Community Church* (Wed, Oct 22, 2014), https://vimeo.com/110072816?fbclid=IwARISEaNU2VaCSNhpOOU1hk2el7fgAu_wZMcOGa7OTPHblwHNI81JDBipwK. See also Jean Danielou, S.J., “The Fall of Jericho and the End of the World,” *From Shadows to Reality: Studies in the Biblical Typology of the Fathers*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, originally published in 1960 by Continuum), pp. 276–286.

at this, we will take a detour out of Revelation's relationship to John's Gospel and into this OT parallel.

The Greater Joshua

We can begin this by going back to the **first three Greek words** of Revelation: *Apokalupsis Jesou Christou*—**The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ**. “Jesus” is the Greek equivalent of Joshua. Every time the LXX translates “**Joshua**,” it calls him **Ἰησοῦς**, Jesus. Hence, any Jew reading these first words of Revelation would have instantly recognized the similarity. That, obviously, isn't enough to make for parallels, so let's think about the trumpets of Jericho for a moment.

Joshua 6:4 tells us, “**Seven priests shall bear seven trumpets of ram's horns before the ark. On the seventh day you shall march around the city seven times, and the priests shall blow the trumpets.**” The only other time there are seven trumpets anywhere in the Bible is Revelation. They begin in **Revelation 8:2**, “**Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them.**” These trumpets form the third of the seven cycles of Revelation,

1. *Cycle 1*: Christ and his Seven Churches (Chapters 1-3).
2. *Cycle 2*: The Vision of the Seven Seals (Chapters 4-7).
- 3. *Cycle 3*: The Vision of the Seven Trumpets (Chapters 8-11).**
4. *Cycle 4*: The Persecuting Dragon and the Church (Chapters 12-14).
5. *Cycle 5*: The Vision of the Seven Bowls (Chapters 15-16).
6. *Cycle 6*: The Fall of Babylon and the Churches Vindication (Chapters 17-19).
7. *Cycle 7*: The Great Consummation (20-22)

and are **parallel to the seven bowls of God's wrath** poured out by **seven angels**, depending on how you look at it:

- A. Prologue (1:1-20)
- B. Seven Epistles to Seven Angels (2:1-3:22)
- C. Seven Seals (4:1-8:1)
- D. 144,000 saints and Seven Trumpets (8:1-11:19)**
- E. The Two Witnesses (11:1-13)
- F. Woman clothed with the sun (12:1)
- G. Dragon in Heaven (12:4)
- H. Woman flees to wilderness (12:6)
- I. Satan cast out (12:12)
- H'. Woman flees to wilderness (12:14)
- G'. Dragon persecutes woman (12:15)
- F'. Woman's seed keeps the commandments (12:17)
- E'. The Two Beasts (13:1-18)
- D'. 144,000 saints and Seven Angels (14:1-15:4)**
- C'. Seven Bowls (15:1,5-16:21)
- B'. Seven angels: whore of Babylon vs. New Jerusalem (17:1-22:5)
- A'. Epilogue (22:6-21)

- A. Prologue (1:1-20)
- B. Seven Epistles (2:1-3:22)
- C. Seven Seals (4:1-8:5)
- D. Seven Trumpets (8:2, 6-11:19)**
- E. The Little Book (10:1-11)
- F. The Two Witnesses (11:1-13)
- F'. The Dragon and the Woman (12:1-17)
- E'. The Two Beasts (13:1-18)
- C'. Seven Angels (14:1-15:4)
- D'. Seven Bowls (15:1, 5-16:21)**
- B'. Seven Angels (17:1-22:5)
- A'. Epilogue (22:6-21)

It's interesting that we do find the seven trumpets mentioned in **extra-biblical Jewish literature**, such as the **great War Scroll** found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. This scroll depicts the epic eschatological battle between the Sons of Darkness and the Sons of Light. It describes the trumpets as:

1. Trumpet of the Assembly
2. Trumpet of the Formation
3. Trumpet of the Men of Renown
4. Trumpet of the Slain
5. Trumpet of Ambush
6. Trumpet of Pursuit
7. Trumpet of Return from Battle

The purpose of these trumpets is to **strike fear into the heart of the enemy at every major stage of battle**. This is precisely what Rahab says had already happened to the people of Jericho when they heard about the battle between Moses and the giants Sihon and Og (**Josh 2:10-11**). The people were terrified, for a mighty God fought for Israel and not even the Nephilim could withstand his fierce sword.

This is a good moment to **explain something about holy war**. The four atheist horsemen above fail to understand what a lot of Christians also fail to realize. Biblical holy war is not against people, so much as it is against *the gods* and their *gigantic unclean offspring*. The Hebrew word for “holy war” is *kherem*. It comes from the same root as **Mt. Hermon** (*khermon*). This is no accident. Mt. Hermon is the place where all the ANE cultures said that the watchers came down from heaven, took human women, and had the gigantic Nephilim offspring. Og, for instance, is clearly said

to be of the remnant of that offspring in that part of the country (**Dt 3:11**). He and those humans associated with him had to be destroyed because they polluted with their presence and their vile actions the land that Yahweh was now taking as his own. **All of the passages** in the OT that have Israel completely **devote a people to destruction** bare some relationship to the giants and to a people who have made themselves unclean and wicked by following the immoral ways of their fallen gods. This obviously won't convince an atheist of much, but their lack of faith doesn't make it false.

It is also precisely what the holy war announced by the trumpets does in Revelation. This is not a mere physical war. It is **spiritual**. The trumpets are loud blasts that **God is coming to judge the nations and their gods** even as he frees his people from their captivity. There are supernatural entities galore defeated later in this book. Also in Revelation, God comes to the **great Whore Babylon** to destroy it. She is a whore because of her adulteries with the gods of the nations. This is pictorially described as being **clothed in scarlet**. But he sends the mighty **New Jerusalem** down from heaven which returns God's people to Tree of Life in a greater Garden of Eden.

It is not just the trumpets and judgment that *follows* that parallel of Joshua delivering the people and bringing them into the land flowing with milk and honey. It is all *that comes before* it. As we have seen, Revelation 1 hints at this in its introductory words about Jesus-Joshua. The vision John sees of the risen Christ confirms it.

We also saw where Jesus takes the keys of **Hades** and **Death** (Thanatos), two spiritual entities. It also appears to be in ch. 1 in the title Jesus takes, “Pantokrator,” which is a title the pagans had given to Hades’ brother **Zeus**. Its only rightful owner is Jesus—God of gods, who proves it in this book by defeating them all.

This title **Pantokrator** is translated as “Almighty.” Very often, the LXX translates this from *Sabaoth*, “The LORD of Hosts.” It is a title that gets at the heart of describing **God as a Warrior**. John uses this title for Jesus several times, roughly corresponding to the seven cycles of the book (**Rev 1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7 and 14; 19:6 and 15; 21:22**).

If we compare Its appearance in **1:8** structurally to its parallel in the second half of the chapter, we find that this Almighty God **holds** seven stars in his hands. Of course he does; he is Almighty. He also has a mouth with “**a sharp two-edged sword**” (**16**).

A. (1) The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John,

B. (2) who bore witness to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. (3) Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.

C. (4) John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne,

D. (5a) and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth.

E. (5b) To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood (6) and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

D'. (7) Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen.

C'. "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty."

B'. (9) I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

A'. (10) I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet (11) saying, "Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea."

↔ A. 12 Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, (13a) and in the midst of the lampstands

B. (13b) one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. (14) The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, (15) his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters.16a) In his right hand

C. (16b) he held seven stars: from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.

D. (17a) When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.

E. (17b) But he laid his right hand on me, saying, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, (18) and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.

D'. (19) Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this.

C'. (20a) As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw

B'. (20b) in my right hand,

↔ A'. (20) and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

The sword is the weapon of a warrior. In this case, it is the Divine Warrior. Do you remember the Divine Warrior that Joshua saw? He had a drawn sword in his hand. John now sees the same Person and, like Joshua, he falls at his feet. Why is Jesus coming with a sword? Because he is preparing to do battle. This is a greater battle than Joshua fought, and it is a greater warrior than Joshua was. This sword is not with metal, but mouth. It is a war waged with words—the law and the gospel. It's power is eternal, not temporal. It is not *against* flesh and blood, but against the powers and

principalities in heavenly places. At some point in time, flesh and blood will be held accountable for their part in a rebellion against Yahweh. **But not yet.** That's the good news. The reason for this is that **today is the day of salvation (2Co 6:2).** Putting that in military language, today is the day of **recruitment.**

I want you to remember why the Lord Jesus came the first time. It is a story told very often in the advent birth-songs of the church. In *Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus* we sing of Jesus, “**Born to set thy people free; born thy people to deliver.**” Remember the angel who told Joseph, “**He will save his people from their sins**” (**Matt 1:21**). **Salvation is the language of warfare,** of the Exodus. “**The LORD saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians**” (**Ex 14:30**).

But Jesus is not saving us from Egypt. Over and over our songs tells us, what he saves us from (and isn't it interesting that it is found so often in our older Christmas music, but not newer music?): “**O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, from the depth of hell thy people save, and give them victory o'er the grave ... Free thine own from Satan's tyranny.**” “**God rest You Merry, Gentlemen ... to free all those who trust in him from Satan's power and might.**” “**Hark, the Glad Sound ... He comes, the pris'ners**

to release in Satan's bondage held, the gates of brass before him burst, the iron fetter yield." The church has all but lost this message in its telling people why Jesus was born of a virgin.

As a side note, given that the time of year we are in, people talk about Christmas trees, not understanding the symbolism that goes back to Eden, with its Tree of Life. That is a picture of the world tree with its tops in the heavens (the star), its roots in the earth, the lights or tinsel on it (angels). It is essentially a different kind of Jacob's ladder. Jesus is the World Tree that links heaven and earth, the only bridge between them. I bring this up because Jesus addresses this letter to the Seven Candlesticks—the churches.



The candlestick in the tabernacle was simply a picture of this Tree of Life. In fact, some have pointed out that they would have reminded the Jews of Hannukah, the Feast of Lamps.⁴ The churches now are that tree as Christ's body on earth. The way to the Tree of Life has been opened to all who trust in Christ alone.

Why did our fathers in the faith talk about this in their songs about Jesus' birth? J. Ramsey Michael's explains,

The mystery of Christmas is unfolded in various ways in the New Testament. In one account it is the story of poor visitors in Bethlehem who give birth to a child “destined to cause the fall and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed,” with a warning to the mother that “a sword will pierce your own soul too” (Lk 2:34–35). In another account the infant Jesus is threatened by Herod the Great and taken to Egypt by his parents when Herod “gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under” (Mt 2:16). [Do you hear the warfare language in both?]

The third story, less well known, is a kind of transformation of the second. A pregnant woman is threatened by a great dragon that intends to “devour her

⁴ Austin Farrer cited in Peter J. Leithart, *Revelation*, ed. Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain, vol. 1, The International Theological Commentary on the Holy Scripture of the Old and New Testaments (London; Oxford; New York; New Delhi; Sydney: Bloomsbury; Bloomsbury T&T Clark: An Imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2018), 109.

child the moment it was born.” But when she gives birth, the male child is “snatched up to God and to his throne,” while the woman flees to the desert to “a place prepared for her by God” (Rev 12:4–6). Wherever we look, the mystery of Christmas is linked to danger and to the ancient conflict between good and evil ... The point at issue is ... the uses to which the imagery is put in John’s vision and in the testimony he bears to the seven churches in Asia Minor.⁵

Not only was his birth a time of warfare, this great work of the virgin-born Son of God was carried out in his ministry against diseases, demons, and death as he healed the sick, cast out evil spirits, and raised the dead to life. It was carried out on the cross as he carried out God’s law to offer the perfect Sacrifice as the perfect High Priest that would cleanse his people from their sin. It was carried out in his descent to the realm of the dead where he proclaimed his victory over the gods and lead a train of captives free. It was carried out in his resurrection as he gained victory over Death itself.

All of this is found in our descriptions of Jesus in Revelation 1. For this Divine Warrior is “the firstborn of the dead” who “loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood” (Rev 1:5). He is “the Alpha and the Omega ...

⁵ J. Ramsey Michaels, *Revelation*, vol. 20, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), Re 12:1.

who is and who was and who is to come, the **Almighty**” (8). He wears the raiment of a **priest**, with his long robe and golden sash (13). He carries the **sword** (16) and has the appearance of a terrifying **warrior**, arrayed in light and fire (14-16). He has conquered the **grave** and has the very keys of Death and Hades (18).

But Jesus also **ascended into heaven**. It is from his lofty position in heaven that he speaks to John on earth through a vision. And it is in his ascension that the war he began continues to be carried out, today, through his church. We call her, **The Church Militant**, and this is truly at the heart of what the seven letters to the seven churches is all about. Recruiting, preparing, fighting, standing firm, conquering. It’s the language of war, full of enemies and dangers and spoils to the victor. Let’s turn to a flyover of Revelation 2-3 to see how this works itself out in the specific letters to the seven churches.

Setting Apart for Holy War

We will begin by getting and understanding of how the letters are written. There are **seven of them**, one for each of the seven churches of western Asia Minor. Each short letter follows a standard formula composed of seven parts:

(1) Address

Modified from *The Returning King*

- (2) Identification of Christ
- (3) Claim of knowledge
- (4) Evaluation
- (5) Duty
- (6) Promise and/or Threat
- (7) Conclusion

Church	Character of Christ	Strength	Problem	Duty	Promise	Conclusion
Ephesus	Authority	Doctrinal Zeal	Lost Love	Repent	Tree of Life	"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."
Smyrna	Giving life	Spiritually Rich	(NONE)	Suffer for Christ	Freedom from Death	
Pergamum	Warrior against Sin	Holding Fast	False Teaching	Repent	Spiritual Significance	
Thyatira	Searching heart	Love, Service	False Teaching, Immorality	Repudiate Jezebel	Rule over Nations	
Sardis	Source of Spirit	A Few Faithful Saints	Spiritually Dead	Awake!	White Robe (Honor)	
Philadelphia	Opening Door	Keeping the Word	Little Strength	Continue	Secure Dwelling	
Laodicea	True Witness	(None)	Worthless	Admit Need; Receive from Christ	Fellowship	

How can this help us understand the holy war? Well, for example, each of the promises (the *sixth* part of the formula) uses a very interesting word. The ESV translates it each time as “conquers.” “To him who conquers” (2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21). This is a much better translation than the word sometimes chosen: “overcome.” Why?

When we take a look, for example, at each of the characteristics of Christ revealed in in the *second* part of the formula, we see that they are all descriptions used in ch. 1 for *the divine warrior*. So, some are of his *war* (two-edged sword, 2:12; eyes like flame, feet like burnished bronze, 2:18). Some are of his *power* (holds seven stars, 2:1; came to life, 2:8; opens and shuts, 3:7; beginning and end, 3:14). And some are of his *holiness* (walks among the seven golden lampstands, 2:1; flames, 2:18; seven spirits, 3:1). If we imagine that these seven formulas might made a chiasm, then this second and sixth formula parallels one another

nicely. In other words, his divine warrior imagery relates directly to us conquering as his church.

There are more ways of understanding that these letters are related to holy war. Consider the fact that the seven letters themselves seem to be written chiastically such that **the first and last church pair up**, the second and sixth, the third and fifth, with the fourth—Thyatira (by far the longest of the seven letters) is in the center.

- A. **Ephesus**: No strengths to commend. Jesus will reject the entire church unless there is repentance (2:5)
- B. **Smyrna**: Faithful. Testing from “the synagogue of Satan” (2:9). No weakness of the church.
- C. **Pergamum**. Unfaithful, fallen into sin, but a faithful group still.
 - D. **Thyatira**. Central position, longest letter, contains all seven common elements of the seven letters. Idolatry/Worshiping the Beast is a major theme of the book. Jezebel is a false teacher, charged with deceiving God’s servants (2:20). Climax of unfaithfulness.
 - C’. **Sardis**. Unfaithful, fallen into sin, but a faithful group still. Still, worse than Pergamum.
 - B’. **Philadelphia**: Faithful. Testing from “the synagogue of Satan” (3:9). No weakness of the church.
- A’. **Laodicea**: No strengths to commend, but harsher than Ephesus. Jesus will reject the entire church unless there is repentance (3:16)⁶

There are some interesting features that demonstrate the relationships. **First**, he uses the language “**synagogue of Satan**” only for Smyrna (#2) and Philadelphia (#6). Satan is a *supernatural* entity. Who is the war against? These are also the only two churches that have **no major weakness**. Second, Ephesus (#1) and Laodicea (#7) are the only two churches that have **no strengths** to commend them. In both, Jesus tells

⁶ See **Paul M. Hoskins**, *The Book of Revelation: A Theological and Exegetical Commentary* (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2017), 119-121

them that he will reject them if they do not repent (2:5; 3:19). What's interesting is that in both cases, the latter church is depicted as worse than the former. There is a progression from bad to worse that makes us uneasy and helps to impress the warning in our minds and hearts.

But notice how **repentance** is put in terms of warfare: “Therefore repent. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth” (2:16). This word is said to the church in **Pergamum** (#3), an unfaithful church, like its pairing at **Sardis** (#5). It is highly instructive to look at the center three churches in this regard, because it reveals the nature of the warfare.

In **Pergamum**, Jesus has the **sharp two-edged sword** (2:12). He says they dwell “**where Satan's throne is.**” He has come to do battle. Now, many still hold fast Christ's name (13), yet there are some who hold “**the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality**” (14). Harlotry in the city. The language also has to do with OT **ritual purity**, something one must ever beware when going to holy war. Furthermore, some there hold “**the teaching of the Nicolaitans**” (15). In the parallel with John's Gospel, this

word parallels **Nicodemus** who comes to Jesus at night. It is interesting that Nicodemus means “**Conqueror of the populace**” or “**Victor over the people,**” while Nicolaitanes means “**Destroyer of the people.**”⁷ That’s warfare language again. This is a spiritual war that is further worked out in Pergamum’s pairing with Sardis and in the center with Thyatira.

In **Sardis**, Jesus has “**the seven spirits of God and the seven stars**” (3:1). This is a church that has a few people “**who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white**” (4). That’s also the language of **ritual purity**, which again is needed when going to holy war.

Thyatira, as the center church, is truly helpful for understanding this holy war. Jesus is depicted as the Son of God with **eyes of fire** and **feet like burnished bronze** (2:18). This is a church that tolerates “**that woman Jezebel,**” “**who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols**” (20). More harlotry in the city, which we just saw that with Balaam in Pergamum, but this now takes us from a pagan prophet to **a pagan harlot woman**, something I’ll return to in a moment. Later, he tells these

⁷ **Stelman Smith** and Judson Cornwall, *The Exhaustive Dictionary of Bible Names* (North Brunswick, NJ: Bridge-Logos, 1998), 185.

same people that those listening to her have “learned what some call the deep things of Satan” (24). If they will not repent, “I will strike her children dead” (23). That’s holy war. If they should conquer and keep Jesus’ works until the end, he will “give authority over the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron” (27). This is the language of conquering warriors. Whom do they overcome? Satan. In this way, the churches are likened in a strange way both to the conquering holy army and to the evil city being conquered. But what could that possibly mean?

To begin to get at this, I want to get one more interesting vantage point for looking down on these churches to see what Jesus is telling them. This one deals on the level of the totality of the book of Revelation. This time, we want to compare the letters to the seven churches with their parallel in the larger chiasm which in this case is the Seven Angels who pour out their bowls and then judge the whore Babylon. This “seven angels” parallel is interesting because these letters are written to the seven angels of the seven churches!

Warren Gage explains the correspondances establish a relationship between the seven churches, their true believers, and those in their midst who are committing

spiritual adultery with the whore of **Babylon** and the **new Jerusalem** which Jesus takes as his bride.⁸ The Babylon whore will be judged and destroyed and the people in the churches who refuse to repent will be judged and destroyed. That's **holy war** language in both cases. Think, for example, of how in Thyatira, Jezebel is the harlot that the people must repent of following and if they do not, they are threatened with death and the death of their children (the extinction of their local church).

I want to return against to the story of Joshua right here, but this time as told in Revelation. Jesus is getting ready to wage holy war on the unholy city, walled up with a prostitute inside (i.e. the great whore Babylon). But before he does this, he sends not two spies, but **two witnesses** in to the city **great walled city** (**Rev 11:3**). Then we learn that **the ark of the covenant** goes before him and things start to rumble and thunder and quake (**11:19**). **Seven seals** are opened (**6:1ff**). This telescopes in the seventh seal to **seven trumpets** (**8:2ff**). This telescopes in the seventh trumpet to **seven bowls of wrath** (**15:7ff**). As the trumpets are blaring, suddenly there is a **shout in heaven**, “**The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his**

⁸ On this discussion see **Warren Austin Gage**, *John's Gospel: A Neglected Key to Revelation?* (Fort Lauderdale, FL: Warren A. Gage, 2001), 94–95.

Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever” (Rev 11:15). The great city falls, but not before a loud cry goes out, “Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues” (Rev 18:4). Come out of where? Out of the whorish scarlet city. Do you see it yet?

Do you understand what is happening here? There are two peoples in the churches. One professes and knows Christ by faith. The other, does not. They have not been born again. They are the symbolic harlot in scarlet who are nevertheless still called yet to come out of her! It is not too late. Repent. Turn from your wicked ways. Renounce Satan and the teachings of demons and prophetesses and sorcerers. Do not delay, for the sword is drawn. Faith purifies. Repentance purifies. These seven letters are the NT’s preparations for holy war, the equivalent of Joshua baptizing and circumcising the people, the equivalent of Mosaic law forbidding contact with impurity before going to war.

Those who have been purified and set apart go to holy war to fight as Christ’s church, surrounding the city, blowing the warning trumpets, shouting to the people, “Come out of her!” These are the justified, those declared not guilty, those given a new status, those set apart, those

put into union with Christ, those given new hearts and minds by faith in him. We cannot be defeated, because Christ fights for us.

Thus, the letters to the seven churches are a simultaneous warning to the Christians to hold fast to Christ who died for them and gave his blood to justify them and to the pretenders to turn to him before the walls finally fall. This was part of the theophanic vision of the Divine Warrior John had in the very first chapter. Trust in him alone and walk by faith as the army that surrounded Jericho did. Purity to go to holy war is the key. “I will give him a white stone” (2:17); “walk with me in white garments” (3:4-5); buy from me “white garments” (18). Be refined in the fires of tribulation that you may be purified (2:10). This is a past (justification), present (sanctification), and future (glorification) reality.

This amazing paradox that so many people miss when they view Revelation apart from its grand story (and comedy, with a wedding at the end), is pictured so very well by Rahab. The walls may be falling, but Jesus is sending in those to save all terrible sinners who heed the call. Rahab throws her scarlet out the window. It is no use here. And she is saved. If Rahab, who had no claim on God’s mercy, can

be saved, anyone can. She's the worst kind of sinner in the eyes of people. Think about this idea of Babylon being a great scarlet whore in Revelation and this warning not to follow the teachings of Jezebel the great adulteress in relation to Rahab, the prostitute Canaanite woman who should have been utterly wiped out with everyone else, but was spared.

Rahab was not only spared, it could be argued that **no woman in the OT is given a greater place of honor** in the NT than this woman who now made white like wool as her sins were cast as far as the east is from the west. James says, **“Was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by *works* when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?”** (James 2:25). But you must read this verse along side of Hebrews, lest you fall into the great error of the Galatians. **“By *faith* Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies”** (Heb 11:31). Her works were not done to get saved; they were done out of sheer trust that God would save her though she deserved death *for her works*. She was a Canaanite prostitute after all! But God granted her a faith that worked through the mediation of the two spies and the

report they gave her which she believed. She demonstrated her faith in helping the two spies (that's he works of faith).

Finally, **Matthew** tells us about Rahab. After being saved, this most unclean of all people married **Salmon**, who just so happened to be descended directly from **Judah** in such an important line that the two had the baby **Boaz**, Boaz had **Obed**, and Obed had **Jesse** who was the father of **David** who was the father of **Jesus Christ** (**Matt 1:5**)! God so highly exalted this woman that he took a Canaanite prostitute and turned her into **Jesus's great grandmother**! She was the unnatural vine grafted into the royal line.

On the other hand, in the book of Joshua there is a man named **Achan** who appears immediately after the battle is finished. Achan was a faithless Jew, who stole, and disobeyed, and lied, and God's anger burned against him. He was in the visible church of the OT. Not only was he in it, it tells us he was a **prince ... of Judah** (**Josh 7:1**). This man **did not heed the words of purification** and for it, God destroyed him and his family and he forever became known as "**The Troubler of Israel**" (**1Chr 2:7**). He "**broke faith**" (**Josh 22:20**).

It is **Achan and Rahab**, both, who are in the seven churches today. Will you **heed the warning** of the New

Joshua, the Divine Warrior, who is even now waging war against the evil city? Will you **turn to him by faith** this day? Will you remember that this man we all think about this time of year not only came as **a baby**, but came as a **king**, to conquer sin, death, and the devil? Will you “**hold fast his name**” and not “**deny his Faith**” (**Rev 2:13**)? Will you **repent** of the false teachers who get you to commit spiritual adultery with the world and its goes (**14, 15, 20**). Will you **come out of her, my people**? Will you see that the Divine Warrior is **here to rescue you**? Will you look to him and him alone as your Deliverer and Savior?

Do you know where **the book of Joshua is placed in the Hebrew canon**? Is it placed as **the first of the books ... of the prophets**! This is because the Jews recognized that their history is more than just an interesting story. Their history *was* prophecy. John understood this when he saw the same man with the sword Joshua saw, and he wrote the new covenant book of Holy War to warn his churches to be pure, to be justified by faith alone in Jesus Christ and then to follow him with their lives.

There is no other name that will save. But when he does, this King does it in the most remarkable, unthinkable of ways. He takes **a scarlet prostitute out of a wicked city and**

clothes her with pure and spotless white wedding garments. He then takes her as his bride and marries her, thereby bringing her into the very royalty of heaven itself. But when his word is not heeded, he takes those who are the most privileged, the most secure in their own self-righteousness, the most satisfied in this life rather than the life to come, and he destroys them with the word of his mouth. The (s)word cuts both ways—it heals and it destroys. All there is left for that person is to be thrown where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth outside of the New City coming down out of heaven, away from the Tree of Life, from the Candlesticks of Light in this world, from his church, from his people, from their sanctifying presence, and from the Beloved himself.

Jesus will be the Divine Warrior because *he is* the Divine Warrior. He has conquered *and he will* conquer. He must win this battle for his people to inherit the heavenly paradise. He calls his people to prepare themselves to holy war against the spiritual world of darkness, not to faint, not to give up. The Four Horsemen are coming. They are here. Do not listen to those who false horsemen who mock his Lordship and holy reign. He is risen from the dead and he holds the keys of

Death and Hell and his Horsemen wreak devastating *eternal* havoc on all unbelievers.

Listen to the words of **Gregory of Elvira** (396 AD) from long ago, “Just as the Church made up of many nations is called a harlot, so, as a type of the Church, we see Rahab welcoming the Saints. The fall of Jericho prefigures those last days when the destruction of this world will be brought about and the seven plagues through the seven trumpets or the seven angelic vials will strike the human race together with Antichrist. Then no one will be saved except those shut up in Rahab’s house, that is, the Church.”⁹ I’m not telling you anything new, just some things that a lot of the church seems to have lost in its fascinations with other aspects of the book. Don’t miss the forrest for the trees.

Listen to the voice of the one who tells each of his churches, the one who conquers, I will give **the tree of life (2:7)**, the **hidden manna**, a **white stone with a new name (17)**, **white garments (3:5)**, **authority over the nations (2:26)**, who **will not be hurt by the second death (11)**; who will **never have his name blotted out of the book of life (3:5)**; who will become a **pillar in the temple of God (12)**, who will **sit with him on his throne (22)** forever. So be it. Amen.

⁹ Cited in Danielou, 257.

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