

## The Lamb's Power and Modern America

By Ted Grimsrud



Amid claims of a power shift resulting from the Democrats taking control of the U.S. House and the Senate, it is worth looking at what Revelation says about power.

The fifth chapter of the book of Revelation begins with a poignant image. John has just seen an awe-inspiring vision of the throne of God and the entire animate creation worshipping the one on the throne. Then a shadow falls. John sees a scroll in the

right hand of the one on the throne symbolizing the fulfillment of history.

But it can not be opened. Who can open the scroll? "No one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or look into it." So, John weeps bitterly.

We all struggle with this question: How is the scroll of the redemption of history to be opened? What kind of power serves the outcomes we desire? We tend to think of power as the ability to control events, to force others to do one's will. We respond to the question of how to open the scroll with the impulse to *force* it open by firepower.

John is told not to weep; one has been found to open the scroll. He *hears* of a mighty king who, apparently, will arise and open the scroll with *force*.

However, John *sees* something shockingly different. He may have *heard* the promise of a warrior king, but he actually *sees* "a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered." The creatures and elders, and ultimately the rest of creation, worship this Lamb as the one who does have the power to open the scroll.

The book of Revelation as a whole conveys a similar view of power. The Lamb, who conquers with suffering love, is crowned as king, named the "ruler of the kings of the earth."

The counter image to the Lamb is the Beast, also named "Babylon" (symbolizing the Roman Empire, echoing the terrible ancient Babylonian Empire). The Beast conquers through brute force but in the end falls. History is littered with the corpses of kings and empires who have assumed that the Beast's power is ultimate.

How might we apply this critique of the Beast's self-defeating power to today's America? We may see confirmation of the critique in the historic losses suffered by the Republican Party in recent midterm elections, with Democrats making huge gains across the board.

It does seem that the Republican pursuit of unchecked power and the quest for permanent one-party rule have been rebuked.

However, troubling questions remain (beyond whether claims to have stopped the press for unchecked power might turn out to be premature). Might it not be superficial to limit the critique of the Beast to the present-day *Republican Party* version of Empire?

Were Democrats victorious on Nov. 7 because of a clear repudiation of Empire? Or was it more that they were the only available alternative, given the sense that the Republican exercise of power has become corrupt? Are the Democrats offering anything more than (to borrow from Neil Young) "a kindler, gentler machine-gun hand"?

I believe the American people would like to repudiate empire. Most Americans do not want to imitate Rome and do not want political leaders to worship brute power. However, our ruling class seems addicted to this kind of power, Democrat and Republican alike (see James Carroll's recently published history of the Pentagon, *House of War*).

We should well be grateful that our nation's electoral democracy still shows signs of life. However, a sense of the generally bipartisan embrace of Empire might encourage us to be more attentive to the argument of Revelation.

Revelation does not *primarily* concern itself with a critique of Empire – though that critique is sharp, profound and important. The critique of Empire, though, and of trust in Beast-like power serves a deeper concern for John.

John challenges his audience to follow the Lamb as an alternative to following the Beast. John cares most of all about their embodying in their common life the virtues that characterized Jesus' own life and teaching. John recognizes that such an emphasis leads to vulnerability (the two churches he commends without qualification are poor [2:9] and "have but little power" [3:8]). However, his vision concludes with an astonishing vision of the kings of the earth and the nations healed and at home in the New Jerusalem. Following the Lamb promises to have world-transforming consequences.

The power of the Beast ultimately is not very powerful. Those who trust in it will inevitably go down. The power that truly serves life, the power that opens the scroll, is the power of love. ◀

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