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A Non-combat Myth in Revelation 12*

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The presentation of Jesus in his appearance in Rev 12.5 includes his birth and his ascension, but it does not mention his death, despite its important role elsewhere in the book. The present study, after surveying some typical explanations of this lack, suggests a twofold solution. First, the comparison of the christophanies in the Apocalypse reveals a characteristic sequence in their description into which the messianic appearance in ch. 12 fits well. Second, the fact that John sharply separates the depiction of the satanic intent to kill the Messiah from Jesus' death contributes to the Christology of Revelation. The protagonist of the book is unequivocally superior both to the devil and to all popular mythical figures who must face the forces of chaos.

Keywords: Rev 12.5, Christophany, Jesus' death, ascension, literary structure, combat myth

1. An Emphatic Silence in Revelation 12.5

In the middle of the book of Revelation there is a curious appearance of Christ. In 12.5, in the story of the conflict between the woman clothed in the sun, perceived usually as the symbol of God's people, and the dragon, equated in 12.9 with Satan, the woman gives birth to a male child, who 'will rule all the nations with a rod of iron' and who 'is caught up to God and to his throne'. In the history of interpretation this last point has been identified most often as the ascension of Christ. This connection seems correct in view of the reference to the Second Psalm, an important messianic psalm, in the previous clause, and of the frequent association of God's throne with the glorious Christ in Revelation (e.g. 3.21; 5.6; 6.16; 7.9; 22.1). This explanation admitted, Rev 12.5

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mentions the birth, the future heavenly rule and the ascension of Christ; but in contrast with the majority of early Christian creeds this brief summary is silent about his humiliation, his suffering and his death.[1] Most interpreters of the Apocalypse detect this strange description and offer various explanations for this absence.[2]

One of the popular solutions comes from source-critical investigations. Adela Yarbro Collins, following R. H. Charles, identifies two non-Christian (Jewish) sources behind the story of Revelation 12 and she relates the curious formulation to the careless editing of the original text:

> The absence of any reference to the life or deeds of the messiah, especially the lack of any notice of a redemptive death, and the complete projection of the messianic office of the child into the future, make it quite unlikely that the narrative concerning the woman, the dragon and the child was originally composed to suit a Christian context.[3]

But Yarbro Collins' cumulative argument in support of her hypothetical sources is not very convincing. She dismisses the view identifying the woman clothed with the sun with 'the Church' because the Christian community can hardly be described as the mother of Christ. But she overlooks the fact that early Christianity often identified itself with the OT people of God (e.g. Matt 8.10–12; Gal 3.7–9), and we find clear signs of the same association in Revelation (e.g. 7.1–10; 21.10–14). Thus, this interpretation does not fragment 'the image of the woman into two' since the author probably considered these two realities distinguished in Yarbro Collins' exegesis as only one.[4] Moreover, she finds the presence of the woman first in heaven (v. 1), then, without any transition, on the earth

1 Concerning the humiliation and the death of Jesus in the Christian confessions of the NT period, see Richard N. Longenecker, *New Wine into Fresh Wineskins: Contextualizing the Early Christian Confessions* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999) 41–2; cf. 129–30, for the prominence of the theme of Jesus' redemptive death in the book of Revelation.

2 I do not discuss here the arguments for a messianic (or human or astral) figure other than Jesus in Rev 12.5. The Apocalypse is in agreement with the Gospels and other NT writings about the identification of the Messiah, and seems homogeneous in this respect. I also reject as speculative the hypotheses suggesting an allusion to 'another characteristic' of Jesus, e.g. Josephine Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation: Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (AB 38; New York: Doubleday, 1975) 200–201, who maintains here the possibility of 'mystical experiences' enjoyed by the 'son-warrior'. For a series of fanciful explanations from church history, see Charles Brütsch, *Clarté de l'Apocalypse* (Genève: Labor et Fides, 4th ed. 1955) 132 n. 10.

3 Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation* (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1976) 105. Cf. R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St John*, vol. 1 (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1920) 299–300; Roland Bergmeier, 'Altes und Neues zur "Sonnenfrau am Himmel (Apk 12)": Religionsgeschichtliche und quellenkritische Beobachtungen zu Apk 12.1–17', *ZNW* 73 (1982) 97–109; Ulrich B. Müller, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (GTB 510; Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 1995) 234–5.

(v. 13) contradictory.[5] However, the unmarked switch from the heavenly scene to the earth is not exceptional in the Apocalypse (e.g. 10.1, cf. the indication of the setting for chs. 4–9 in 4.1)[6] and if the woman refers to the people of God, in the context of the book being in part in heaven and at the same time on earth, there is not any extraordinary feature in this change. The main problem of Yarbro Collins' view is its incongruity. In the second chapter of her thesis, she detects the basic characters and movements of a widespread ancient Mediterranean combat myth. She identifies nine typical traits of this story in Revelation 12.[7] Then, in the third chapter, she divides the story of the woman and the dragon between two distinct sources and several redactional additions. However, only five of the previously listed basic features belong to her first source, two to the second and the other two to the redactor.[8] Thus, she weakens her argument as she hypothesizes an entire mythic story edited from two different, unrelated but complementary sources of the same story by a Christian redactor. Since the story is built up of many OT allusions, supposedly used by a Christian author as well, and since it is woven into and developed in the plot of the following chapters,[9] it seems more probable that John himself rewrote (or at least alluded to) the well-known combat myth to serve his own purposes.[10]

However, disregarding the number of hypothetical sources included in the narrative, the writer (or final editor) of the Apocalypse seems like a very thorough author. For example, he not only composed seven blessings in his work in accordance with his preference for symbolic numbers: he used the name of Jesus fourteen times, the titles 'Christ', 'the one who sits on the throne' or 'the Alpha and the Omega' seven times and the designation 'Lamb' of Jesus twenty-eight times![11] Is it

4 Yarbro Collins, *Combat Myth*, 105–7. For a detailed list and criticism of the typical interpretations concerning the woman figure, see Heinz Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (RNT; Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1997) 271–4.

5 Yarbro Collins, *Combat Myth*, 102–3.

6 Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 206. Cf. the detailed analysis of Michael Koch, *Drachenkampf und Sonnenfrau: Zur Funktion des Mythischen in der Johannesapokalypse am Beispiel von Apk 12* (WUNT 2/184; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004) 101–8, about the 'dynamische Struktur' of Rev 12.

7 Yarbro Collins, *Combat Myth*, 59–61.

8 Yarbro Collins, *Combat Myth*, 101–16; cf. 61.

9 Rev 13 relates the deeds of the allies of the dragon. Ch. 17 contrasts the woman and her seed in ch. 12 with the great prostitute and her offspring. The dénouement of the story takes place only in Rev 20, with the final judgment of the devil.

10 I find the criticism of Pierre Prigent, *L'Apocalypse de Saint Jean* (CNT 14; Genève: Labor et Fides, rev. and augm. ed. 2000) 297, appropriate. 'Faute de pouvoir produire le modèle juif supposé, cette explication ne doit être retenue qu'en désespoir de cause, en l'absence de toute autre interprétation plus simple et plus économique'.

11 Gregory K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 60–2, citing many more instances from Richard Bauckham, *The*

likely that the lack of mention of Jesus' death, so important elsewhere in the book, escaped his attention? Not really. Then, if one argues for a non-Christian source for this chapter, one must also explain why John left the story as it is.

Other scholars argue that the text implies the death of Christ. Here, I consider only the proposal of Gregory K. Beale:

> The deliverance described in v 5 is not absolute protection from death but resurrection from the dead... Allusion to resurrection from the dead may be implicit in the word ἁρπάζω ('catch up'), which is often used of taking something away forcefully. The idea may be that the devil momentarily devoured the Christ-child by putting him to death, only to have victory taken away at the resurrection (12:11 shows that the context has Jesus' death in mind).[12]

It is right that the larger context mentions the blood of the Lamb; however, this observation does not answer our question, only changes it: why does the author delay this allusion until v. 11? And though the use of ἁρπάζω is indeed to be explained, nevertheless, as in the closer context nothing else seems to refer to Jesus' death and to the momentary devouring of the child by the devil, this interpretation seems to lack sufficient basis.

Perhaps the most convincing suggestion is that of André Feuillet. He does not argue for the implication of Jesus' death and resurrection in the 'catching up' of the child; rather, he connects it to his 'birth' and chiefly to the pains leading to it, alluding to a Johannine analogy, the imagery of giving birth in John 16.19–22.[13] Some critics attack this sort of solution on the basis that the birth in Rev 12.5 would establish Christ's divine sonship in this case, similarly to the Second Psalm cited here by the author (cf. Ps 2.7); however, he is born here rather as the human child of the woman.[14] In spite of the force of this argument in view

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Climax of Prophecy: Studies in the Book of Revelation (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993) 29–37, and augmenting it with his own examples. I adhere to their conclusion: these numerical patterns, according to their great number and to the theological importance of the terms occurring 4, 7, 10, 12 times in all probability are not coincidental.

12 Beale, *Revelation*, 639. Cf. M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1989) 158. Without any explication, Ben Witherington III, *Revelation* (NCBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2003) 169, also seems to include the death and the resurrection in the narrative.

13 André Feuillet, 'La Messie et sa mère d'après le chapitre XII de l'Apocalypse', *Revue Biblique* 66 (1959) 55–86; followed by e.g. Prigent, *L'Apocalypse*, 297–8; and Pablo Richard, *Apokalypse: Das Buch von Hoffnung und Widerstand* (Luzern: Exodus, 1996) 152–3. See the similar explanation of Akira Satake, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (KEK 16; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008) 284: 'Also versteht er [Johannes] unter der Geburt die himmlische Inthronisation Christi, die im Anschluss an dessen Tod stattfindet'.

14 Jürgen Roloff, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (*Zürcher Bibelkommentare* NT 18; Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1984) 127–8; cf. Witherington, *Revelation*, 169.

of other instances mentioned by Feuillet,[15] John 16.20–22 looks like a proper parallel to the examined verse in that both link the picture of the birth pangs to the grief of the earthly messianic community. The only uncertainty with this view concerns the acquaintance of the first readers of Revelation with this passage of the fourth Gospel: whether it was known to them and whether it was so important in their sight that they associated it with the story of the woman giving birth to the male child.

Several interpreters cite a remark of Joachim Jeremias about a characteristic Semitic literary device presenting a story with the allusion to both its beginning and its end and they suggest that the absence occurring in Revelation 12 can be explicated on the basis of this phenomenon.[16] Nevertheless, the presentation of Jesus' life in the NT rather focuses on his crucifixion and his resurrection. Only one of the four canonical Gospels relates his ascension and two his birth, while all centre around his death. Richard Longenecker, probably correctly, ascribes the proposed summary function rather to the latter detail: 'So prominent, in fact, was the theme of Christ's redemptive death on a cross in the consciousness of the early Christians that at many places in the NT the terms "death" and "cross" appear in metonymous fashion for all the work of Christ in accomplishing human redemption'.[17] G. K. Beale enumerates more verses of the Apocalypse (1.5, 17–18; 2.8) offering '[t]he same kind of abbreviation…with a focus on Christ's death and resurrection'.[18]

In the light of this significance given to the crucifixion among the first Christians it is likely that the lack of mention of Jesus' death is not accidental. Moreover, as John himself also stresses the importance of Christ's death elsewhere in his book, it seems reasonable to suggest that the silence about this significant fact is also emphatic. In general, every conclusion based on silence is very tentative, since various plausible reasons can be given for this absence. Nevertheless I think that closer consideration can detect a characteristic literary pattern in Revelation on the one hand, and an important relational aspect of

15 E.g. Acts 13.33 (wrongly referred to as 15.33 in Feuillet, 'Messie', 63; cf. Prigent, *L'Apocalypse*, 297) cites indeed the seventh verse from the same psalm as the confirmation of Jesus' relationship with the heavenly Father in the context of his resurrection from the dead.

16 E.g. Mathias Rissi, *Was ist und was geschehen soll danach: Die Zeit- und Geschichtsauffassung der Offenbarung des Johannes* (AThANT 46; Zürich: Zwingli, 1965) 44 n. 145; Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Revelation: I Saw Heaven Opened* (BST; Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1975) 118. Cf. David E. Aune, *Revelation 6–16* (WBC 52B; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998) 689. The solution of Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001) 358, is similar: 'John mentions two main redemptive facts: he stresses Jesus' birth *on earth* that includes his ministry and his ascension *into heaven* that includes his majestic rule' (Kistemaker's italics).

17 Longenecker, *New Wine*, 42.

18 Beale, *Revelation*, 639.

the action described in v. 5 on the other: both can explicate the interesting formulation, the first from the viewpoint of literary structure, the second from that of Christological content.

2. The Seven Glorious Appearances of Christ

A useful observation concerning the literary structure of the book can help us understand the silence about Jesus' death in Rev 12.5. In the whole book, there are seven personal appearances of the glorious Christ which are undisputed by the great majority of the scholars: 1.7, 13; 5.6; 7.9; 12.5; 14.1; and 19.11. In the six cases other than 12.5 the description of Jesus or the connected hymns make a clear reference (or at least a more direct allusion) to his death or to his blood.

Each of the seven instances occupies a significant position in the narrative structure of Revelation: they are parts of the introduction of new, important sections. In six cases, the presentation of Christ clearly occurs in two steps. First, we are informed of his honour and his sovereignty. Then, in the second step, his glory is related to the mention of his death or of his blood. Let us survey the six sections.

Revelation 1.1–8 is the overture of the whole book. First, 1.1–3 introduces the work as ἀποκάλυψις. Here, John shows Jesus, the glorious Revealer who is able to mediate the divine will to God's servants. In vv. 4–8, we find the introduction of the book as a letter. The Christ of this section is no less majestic, he is the faithful witness and the ruler of the kings of the earth. However, the picture is completed: he is simultaneously the *firstborn of the dead* and he has freed us *by his blood*. The passage reaches its crescendo in v. 7, at Jesus' appearance when every eye will see him, even those who *pierced* him.

The second section is 1.9–20, the introduction of the seven letters to the churches of Asia Minor. Verses 10–16 present the Son of Man in his divine majesty, using the attributes of God according to the visions of Ezekiel 1–3 and of Daniel 7. Afterwards, John falls to his feet and the Lord encourages the seer by introducing himself as the living one who *was dead*, and who has control over the keys of death and of Hades (1.17–18).

Chapters 4 and 5 constitute the introduction to the breaking of the seven seals. The appearance of Christ is to be found in 5.5–14. In a first step, we hear the announcement of the victorious Lion of Judah, the Root of David who is able to open the scroll (v. 5). Then, in vv. 6–14, we witness the appearance and the due celebration of the Lamb who is like one *put to death* (v. 6; cf. v. 12), and who is praised for *he was slain* and he purchased (his people) *by his blood* from every language and every nation (v. 9).

Revelation 7.9–17 introduces the series of the seven trumpets. First, we are present again at the worship of the Lamb by the great multitude clothed in white robes (7.9–12). Subsequently, the conversation of the author with one of

the elders identifies the assembly: these are the ones who washed their robes and made them white *in the blood of the Lamb* (7.13–17).

Revelation 14.1–5, the introduction of the last series of judgments[19] is the only other appearance of the Lamb in the book, besides 12.5, that does not contain any explicit reference to the death of Christ; but in vv. 3–5, the formulation strongly implies it. In its first half, the vision shows us the Lamb with his entourage, the one hundred and forty-four thousand (14.1–3a). The second half of the section presents these followers as the ones who had been *purchased* from the earth and who were *purchased* from the people (14.3–4). This is a clear allusion to the hymn of the heavenly choir in 5.9 where they adore the Lamb who purchased his people by his blood.[20] The characterization of these worshippers as the ones who 'follow the Lamb wherever he goes' and the imagery of 'firstfruits' reinforce the sacrificial tenor of the description, with reference to the Lamb.[21] The merely implicit reference to Jesus Christ's death in these verses is presumably in connection with the exclusiveness of the redeemed ones' song (14.3). Only they know its glorious content: they—only they—can present it with their voices and with their holy lives.

The last appearance, in 19.1–16, introduces the finale of the chef-d'oeuvre. Long hymns and the warning of a 'fellow servant' (an angel, in all probability) prepare us for the great event (19.1–10). The Lamb is celebrated since his wedding has come; and we are informed that the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy (19.6–10). Then, he appears in person. His description ends with his robe *dipped in blood*. The majority of interpreters recognize here an allusion to the divine Warrior of Isa 63.1–3, and therefore, to the realization of the final judgment of God's enemies. But they exclude the possibility of the identification of this blood with that of Christ perhaps too quickly: they find it incompatible with the Isaianic reference.[22] The remark of Beale and McDonough concerning the use

19 The introductory function of the messianic appearance in 14.1–5 is perhaps contrary to most scholars' structural conception. The majority consider both Rev 12.1–15.4 and Rev 15.5–16.21 as coherent units. Although one must accept the coherence of the succession of seven bowls in the latter instance, the addition of Rev 14.6–20 to this section seems rational. While chs. 12–13 present us with the leaders of the enemy, from 14.6 we are informed of the judgment coming upon their people.

20 Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, 809–10, 814; Roloff, *Offenbarung*, 148–9; Mounce, *Revelation*, 270–1; Prigent, *L'Apocalypse*, 333.

21 Beale, *Revelation*, 741–2. Cf. Eduard Lohse, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (NTD 11; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988) 84–5: 'Dieser Weg aber führt auch in das Kreuz hinein, durch Leiden und Sterben zur Herrlichkeit'.

22 For the arguments against the identification of the blood in 19.13 with that of Jesus, see Beale, *Revelation*, 958–60; David E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22* (WBC 52C; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998) 1057; and Prigent, *L'Apocalypse*, 418–19. The contrary view to these, recognizing the blood of the Lord here is supported by, e.g., Mathias Rissi, *Alpha und Omega: Eine Deutung der Johannesoffenbarung* (Basel: Friedrich Reinhardt, 1966) 188–9; Boring, *Revelation*, 196–7;

of the OT in Revelation is accurate: 'even though John handles these OT figures with creative freedom, almost always these pictures broadly retain an essential OT association and convey principles of continuity between the OT and the NT'.[23] However, it is important to notice that John often deepens, enriches or modifies the emphases of the same allusions by the context in his book, usually thus Christianizing them. With the juxtaposition of the Lion of Judah and the Lamb looking like one slaughtered, he presents the victorious Messiah, in accordance with the Christian interpretation, as the required sacrifice to God (5.5–6). As he connects the grateful song of Moses celebrating the Exodus to the song of the Lamb, he reinforces and at the same time redefines the central salvation event of Israel's history (15.3). When the description of the new Jerusalem relates the names of the twelve tribes of Israel to the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb, he recasts the OT reference to the people of God in an obvious Christian sense (21.12, 14). With regard to the robe of the rider in Rev 19.13, the blood in the Apocalypse is never explicitly related to the blood of the enemies, although in 14.30 it refers in all probability to it. But we have one clear reference to the blood of Christ (1.5), and three more to that of the Lamb (5.9; 7.14; 12.11). The last of these declares that his blood is the means of victory. Moreover, the expression used for *dipping in blood* of the divine Warrior's robe (βάπτω, the translation of Hebrew טבל) is one of the technical terms in the LXX version of the Pentateuch for sacrificial cleansing, often employing blood (e.g. the purification of the priests: Lev 4.6, 17; 9.9; cf. the instructions concerning the Passover in Exod 12.22 as well). In Revelation, the sacrificial blood of cleansing is always that of the Lamb. So it seems likely that the first readers understood the word *blood* in 19.13 as the blood of victory (similar to the OT imagery of the divine Warrior): but this blood of victory is related to the death of Christ (in agreement with the Christological orientation of Revelation). This reference can be understood in the light of Longenecker's appropriate comment about the book (in relation to Rev 5.6):

> What is interesting, however, is that these two ideas of sacrificial victim and victorious leader are merged in the Johannine Apocalypse… It is, in symbolic language, the same message as appears throughout the rest of the NT: Jesus is the triumphant conqueror at the eschatological end because he was the Lamb who was sacrificed on the cross.[24]

Robert W. Wall, *Revelation* (NIBC 18; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991) 230–1; Giesen, *Offenbarung*, 422.

23 G. K. Beale and Sean M. McDonough, 'Revelation', *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007) 1081–161, here 1085.

24 Longenecker, *New Wine*, 130. See the similar conclusion in Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 184.

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There are at least three more appearances of heavenly beings often associated with Christ: the vision of the rider on the white horse in 6.2, that of the 'mighty angel' in 10.1 and the figure 'like a son of man' in 14.14.[25] They all have several attributes used elsewhere in connection with the glorious Jesus or with God: the white horse (6.2; cf. 19.11); the cloud (10.1; 14.14; cf. 1.7); the rainbow (10.1; cf. 4.3); the face like the sun (10.1; cf. 1.16); and the title 'one like a son of man' (14.14; cf. 1.13). However, other attributes relate them to other personages in Revelation as well, e.g. the mention of the crown (6.2; στέφανος) is connected to the faithful (2.10); to the locusts (9.7); to the woman clothed with the sun (12.1); but never to Jesus in the book.[26] Moreover, the golden crown (14.14) is assigned elsewhere to the twenty-four elders of the heavenly throne room (4.4; and cf. also 9.7). Therefore, it seems impossible to decide the identity of these figures with certainty, but the context perhaps suggests that they are angelic beings representing the glorious Christ in the process of the judgment.[27] The rider appears in a scene where the Lamb is present as well: he opens the first seal (6.1).[28] The heavenly being in 10.1 is called 'another mighty angel': this would be a peculiar title for the protagonist of the book.[29] The person 'like a son of man' acts in accordance

25 The degree of scholarly support for the identification of these figures with Christ is very different. Probably the majority of commentators rejects the equation of Christ with the rider of 6.2, and perhaps the majority admits it in relation to the 'one like a son of man' in 14.14. The widespread adoption of the latter position is in all probability the result of the similarity of this designation with the name 'the Son of Man' used in the Gospels for Jesus. However, the expression is anarthrous here, in opposition to its articular use in the sayings of Jesus preserved in the Gospels. See Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, 840–2, and I. Howard Marshall, 'Son of Man', *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (ed. Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992) 775–81.

26 The rider in 19.12 has 'many diadems' (διαδήματα πολλά): John uses the same word here as at 12.3 and at 13.1 concerning the dragon and the beast!

27 Cf. Loren T. Stuckenbruck, *Angel Veneration and Christology: A Study in Early Judaism and in the Christology of the Apocalypse of John* (WUNT 2/70; Tübingen: Mohr, 1995) 232: 'If several angelological texts in Revelation are reminiscent of motifs found in the opening epiphany, this does not occur at the expense of an emphasis that Christ is superior to God's angels'.

28 Jens Herzer, 'Der apokalyptische Reiter und der König der Könige: Ein Beitrag zur Christologie der Johannesapokalypse', *NTS* 45 (1999) 230–49, argues for a possible Christological approach to the rider in Rev 6.2. For other detailed treatments of the figure with different conclusions, see Michael Bachmann, 'Noch ein Blick auf den apokalyptischen Reiter (von Apk 6.1–2)', *NTS* 44 (1998) 257–78; John C. Poirier, 'The First Rider: A Response to Michael Bachmann', *NTS* 45 (1999) 257–62; Heinz Giesen, 'Im Dienst der Weltherrschaft Gottes und des Lammes: Die vier apokalyptischen Reiter (Offb 6:1–8)', *Studien zur Johannesapokalypse* (Stuttgarter Biblische Aufsatzbände 29; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2000) 260–85; and Jens-W. Taeger, 'Hell oder dunkel? Zur neueren Debatte um die Auslegung des ersten apokalyptischen Reiters', *Johanneische Perspektiven: Aufsätze zur Johannesapokalypse und zum johanneischen Kreis 1984–2003* (FRLANT 215; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006) 139–56.

29 For arguments defending the messianic identification, see Beale, *Revelation*, 522–6; and Robert H. Gundry, 'Angelomorphic Christology in the Book of Revelation', *SBLSP* 33 (1994)

with the order of an 'other angel'—and his task is described in complete parallelism with a new 'other angel' (14.14–16; cf. 14.17–19).[30] But even if we accept the view that Christ in person is present in these figures, their function and their presentation strongly differ from the other appearances where Jesus is worshipped as the glorious Messiah: in these cases, he only announces, launches or completes the judgment of God.

The male child's birth in 12.5 rather fits into the sequence of Christ's *glorious* appearances. This event marks the introduction of God's enemies and their intrigues in the book. He is characterized with the words of the Second Psalm. According to this messianic psalm, very popular among the early Christians, he will rule the nations with a rod of iron.[31] In addition he is taken to God and to his throne. But where is the second step, the mention of his death?

The story continues: his mother must flee to the desert where she finds protection and rest prepared by God—and suddenly, the scene is changed, and we are right in the middle of the heavenly battle between Michael and his angels on the one hand, and the dragon on the other (12.7–8). Only after the dragon's defeat, in his definitive absence resounds the loud voice in heaven, celebrating God and his Christ and announcing the victory accomplished by our brothers and sisters over their accuser by means of the *blood of the Lamb* and the word of their testimony (12.10–11)!

Hence, the delay in mentioning Christ's death fits well into the recognized literary pattern present in the book of Revelation. The appearance of the Son introduces a new section in the book; first, he is presented as the child participating in the authority of God; second, his power is related to his victorious blood. But the timing perhaps is not only the result of a rigid organization of the material. The influence of a Christological consideration could also contribute to the unusual description.

662–78, who recognizes Jesus in the angelic beings of Rev 7.2–3; 8.3–5; 18.1–3, 21; 20.1–3; 22.6 as well.

30 See Giesen, *Offenbarung*, 336–7; Beale, *Revelation*, 770–2; and Prigent, *L'Apocalypse*, 347–8 for the reasons in support of the equation with Christ. I agree with Beale that the parallelism in the description of this heavenly being with that of 10.1 is important. However, contrary to him, I think that this link rather weakens the messianic identification. Stuckenbruck, *Angel Veneration*, 240–5, 261–73, and Matthias Reinhard Hoffmann, *The Destroyer and the Lamb: The Relationship between Angelomorphic and Lamb Christology in the Book of Revelation* (WUNT 2/203; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005) 30–104, suggest the presence of an 'angelomorphic Christology' in this passage.

31 Moreover, the birth of the son of the woman, in front of the dragon, the ancient serpent, perhaps signals the eagerly expected fulfilment of the divine promise in Gen 3.15.

3. The Non-combat Myth

I previously argued that the silence about the death of the Messiah in Rev 12.5 seems conscious and emphatic. How can it contribute to the theological message of the book?

The prime importance of the plot of ch. 12 does not lie in the characterization of the three personages in themselves but rather in the presentation of their relations. Verse 4b prepares us for the relation of the dragon and the child as it exists in the purposes and desires of the former. Verse 5 relates the total failure of his intentions in this relationship. He is unable to come close to his future conqueror; he cannot even hurt the woman's son. Every contact between them is broken. So, mentioning Christ's death in this context would be misleading. The dragon has nothing to do with the crucifixion of Jesus. The emphatic absence of the latter underlines this theological message.[32]

In Revelation, the significance of the main events often exceeds the point when they actually took place. Likewise, the death of the Messiah also has a perpetual importance after its completion.[33] In this respect, the representation of the principal temporal developments in the book resembles John's characteristic treatment of space in chs. 2–3: there, we read concrete letters to concrete churches addressing their concrete situations—but the seven churches of Asia Minor, in the context of the Apocalypse, represent the whole Christian church; thus, these messages simultaneously present the Lord to every Christian everywhere. Similarly, the crucifixion of Jesus at a particular point of history carries a universal meaning at every point of history. This event describes the wonderful character of Christ—even in his glory in the presence of God (5.6–14). It creates the content of every relationship between the believers and their Lord. There is only one relation within which the death of Jesus is unintelligible: that of Christ and the dragon. Revelation 12.11 affirms that the crucifixion precedes this latter relationship: only the consequences of this sacrifice are important in that they define the perspective of the church about the dragon. The blood of the Lamb is the means of victory for his people in the war waged against the devil.

The silence about Jesus' death in Rev 12.5 constitutes the same reminder as the one declared explicitly in John 14.30. There, preparing his disciples for his crucifixion, Jesus announces the coming of 'the prince of this world' (i.e. the devil);

32 See the similar conclusion of Mounce, *Revelation*, 239: 'The significant point is that the evil designs of Satan were foiled by the successful completion of Christ's messianic ministry, which culminated in his ascension and exaltation'. Cf. the comment of Beale, *Revelation*, 639: 'One purpose for these omissions is to highlight the victory at Christ's resurrection and ascension'.

33 Moreover, the crucifixion of Jesus has cosmic significance even before the incarnation according to Rev 13.8.

but he immediately adds that the prince of the world has no hold on him.[34] The devil is powerless against Christ.

Two facts seem to reinforce our proposition. First, the use of the verb ἁρπάζω. If it refers to the ascension in itself, the usage of the more common ἀναλαμβάνω (Acts 1.2, 11, 22; 1 Tim 3.16) or ὑψόω (Acts 2.33; 5.31; cf. Phil 2.9 and perhaps John 12.32) would have been more comprehensible, even if the realization of Christian hope, i.e. the resurrection and the *catching up* of the believers at the *parousia* of Christ in relation of which ἁρπάζω is applied in 1 Thess 4.17, is sometimes connected in the NT to the resurrected Lord's being taken up and reigning in glory (John 14.2–3; 17.24; 2 Tim 2.12; Heb 6.19–20). With the force and violence inherent in ἁρπάζω, and with the association of the cognate nouns ἁρπαγμός and ἁρπαγή with robbery,[35] the use of this verb is most intelligible in the context if it points here to the powerful breaking of all contact between the child and the dragon.[36] The dreadful enemy is definitively robbed of the possibility of devouring the Messiah. The irresistible force of the divine action is directed against his obvious intentions.

The other observation is connected to the sequel of the story. In the context of the Apocalypse, the desire of the dragon aiming at personal contact with the Messiah will never be realized. He and his armies can launch attacks only on the saints (e.g. 13.7). The only verse in Revelation that describes the Lamb as personally included in an actual battle is Rev 17.14 where the mention of the future war of the ten kings allied against him is immediately joined to the announcement of his victory over them.[37] There are in fact two further notes showing him in connection with fighting: first, Rev 19.11 reports the Rider on the white horse as one who judges and makes war with justice; however, it is more a characterization of his pure divine personality than the record of a concrete battle. Secondly, Rev 2.9 is only a strong warning ironically against Jesus' own church which is ready to accept the false prophets' teachings. The possibility of this latter combat remains open *for* his people, and not *against* his enemies. In summary, we can assume that the Christ of the Apocalypse does not participate personally in the wars waged by

34 Judith L. Kovacs, ' "Now Shall the Ruler of This World Be Driven Out": Jesus' Death as Cosmic Battle in John 12:20–36', *JBL* 114 (1995) 227–47, here 230, states that the following verse in John 14 further strengthens the same point: 'Verse 31, however, makes clear that Satan is not the most important actor in the drama. In the end, Jesus' death comes about only because it is the will of the Father...which is willingly accepted by the Son... The ἄρχων is allowed to "come" so that Jesus' love and obedience to the Father may be known'.

35 Erich Tiedtke and Colin Brown, 'Snatch, Take Away, Rapture: ἁρπάζω', *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*. Vol. 3, *Pri–Z* (ed. Colin Brown; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1992) 601–5.

36 Matt 12.29; 13.19; John 10.28–29; Acts 8.39; 23.10 clearly use the same verb in the sense of the forceful termination of a relationship.

37 This juxtaposition is strikingly similar to 12.4–5. In both passages we are informed about the intention of the enemies (17.14 is in the future tense!) and of the failure of their purposes.

the evil one.[38] This fact does not indicate that he is outside the struggle of the *ecclesia militans*. He is over this struggle.

In the light of the conceited ambitions of the dragon, reality is completely humiliating for the latter. He cannot face his conqueror even at the moments of his judgment. As a tiny lizard, he is seized and thrown down by angels of the Messiah twice in the Apocalypse (12.7–9; 20.1–3).[39] He seems terrible—but in reality, he is nothing in the presence of the Lamb.

Now, it is useful to return to the widespread and probable hypothesis about the presence of some characteristic features of a well-known Mediterranean combat myth in ch. 12 of Revelation. This story relates how a dragon-like figure threatened by the approaching birth of his future conqueror—usually a god like Apollo or Horus—attempts to destroy the pregnant mother or the newborn baby; and how he himself will be killed subsequently by the protagonist's hand.[40] The fundamental counter-argument to the identification of this myth in the Apocalypse is vigorously formulated by Leon Morris as follows:

> John's imagery is to be understood from its use in Revelation, not from the imagery of the myths... We must not degrade him to the level of a copyist of ill-digested pagan myths. Moreover it is plain from his whole book that he abominated paganism. It is thus most unlikely that he would borrow significantly from that source, or that pagan religion will give us the key to his ideas.[41]

Morris' judgment concerning John's opposition in respect of all sorts of paganism seems correct, yet the possibility that the author refers consciously to the myth familiar to his readers remains perhaps also tenable.[42] The three

38 In the context of the book of Revelation, πολεμέω and particularly πόλεμος mostly refer to the intentions and the activity of God's enemies (e.g. 11.7; 12.17; 13.4, 7; 16.14; 19.19; 20.8).

39 Antoninus King Wai Siew, *The War between the Two Beasts and the Two Witnesses: A Chiastic Reading of Revelation 11.1–14.5* (JSNTSup 283; London: T&T Clark, 2005) 166, states: 'The dragon, as powerful as he is depicted in Rev. 12–13, is only an angel. He meets his match in his encounter with Michael, an angel'. This perspective of the book practically turns the pretentious question asked by the worshippers of the dragon's agent, the beast, in 13.4, into ridicule.

40 For the various forms of the combat myth, see the presentation of Yarbro Collins, *Combat Myth*, 61–71; Peter Busch, *Der gefallene Drache: Mythenexegese am Beispiel von Apokalypse 12* (TANZ 19; Tübingen: Francke, 1996) 75–85; and Koch, *Drachenkampf*, 144–50.

41 Leon Morris, *The Book of Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary* (Tyndale; Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 2d ed. 1987) 151.

42 The remark of Stefan Schreiber, 'Die Sternenfrau und ihre Kinder (Offb 12): Zur Wiederentdeckung eines Mythos', *NTS* 53 (2007) 436–57, is very useful. He urges consideration of both the author's intentions and the probable reception of the first readers (444). It is all the more important that John seems to know the addressees of the book very well, as the 'letters' in chs. 2–3 demonstrate his familiarity with the situation of the churches in Asia Minor.

personages, the dragon, the woman and the son, awaken associations too direct to be incidental. But the obvious reorganization of the story and the use of OT imagery in the description suggest that the writer utilized the components of the narrative freely.[43] This can mean that his purposes were basically polemical.[44] The key to this affirmation is the recognized absence of every contact between the Messiah and the dragon in Rev 12.5 (and in the whole book). The battle of the woman's son (or sometimes her husband) and of the dragon-like figure is at the centre of the story in every known version of the myth, and it leads to the catharsis, the climactic victory of the hero. In some versions, the latter dies as well, and it is only by the persistent efforts of his mother (or his wife) that he can return to life and triumph over his enemy.[45] Thus, the dragon and the hero are equal partners in the battle which is the central element of the narrative as the broadly accepted 'combat myth' term suggests it. But the narrative in the Apocalypse, the reworking of the myth, denies the possibility of any warfare between Christ and the dragon. John greatly diminishes the importance of the combat when he alters the opponent of the evil one and asserts that the angelic army vanquishes him with ease. It is no more a combat myth. From the diabolic point of view, it is a pure 'defeat myth'. Christologically, it is a 'non-combat myth'.

As John does not seem to paraphrase any concrete version of the widespread myth, but freely reworks it applying the symbolical language of the OT, the force of the polemics can be directed to the cult of the deity Apollo[46] as well as to that of Isis and Horus.[47] In both forms of the myth, the mother is constrained to rescue her child from the pursuit of his foe. In some versions, she must look for security before the birth; in other forms, she takes flight with the little boy. In Revelation

43 Richard, *Apokalypse*, 152: 'Möglicherweise kannte der Verfasser der Johannesapokalypse diese Mythen und verwendete sie mit neuer Sinngebung'. See the arguments leading to a similar conclusion in Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, 670–2.

44 Following the expression used by Witherington, *Revelation*, 166, it is an 'antiestablishment mythology'. He continues thus: 'Christianity reworks its biblical heritage and transforms pagan material in line with its own aim of communicating truth in its cultural context'. Cf. Jan Willem van Henten: 'Dragon Myth and Imperial Ideology in Revelation 12–13', *SBLSP* 33 (1994) 496–515.

45 Though the pertinence of these versions is dubious: the Ugaritic parallels for the protagonist's death cited by Yarbro Collins, *Combat Myth*, 61–2, are too distant in time from the composition of the book of Revelation to be relevant here; moreover, both these and the Egyptian texts concerning Osiris' fate (62–63) are quite dissimilar from the storyline in Rev 12.

46 Yarbro Collins, *Combat Myth*, 245–52 asserts the presence and the central importance of the Apollo cult and the knowledge of the myth relating the birth of the deity in the region. We can find another hint of the polemics against Apollo in Rev 9.11, cf. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, 535; Beale, *Revelation*, 502–4.

47 Schreiber, 'Sternenfrau', 446–50, suggests the influence of the Horus and Typhon myth. However, Busch, *Der gefallene Drache*, 75–81, argues convincingly on the basis of contemporary accounts that the birth of Horus apparently disappeared from this myth before the first century C.E.

12, the Messiah is born in the presence of the dragon—and the frightening enemy is totally unable to injure him. Jesus is above the mortal attempts of the dragon. And in the same way, he is above every deity occurring in the popular combat myths, even above the emperor proclaiming himself the incarnation of Apollo:[48] Christ does not need to fight with the source of every chaos, he is the Lord of every creature, he is the only Lord even above the dragon.

John's first readers undoubtedly recognized the emphatic change in the well-known action. Jesus who is the Lord of the Christian community, living in the uncertain situation of an often misunderstood religious minority and facing recurrent persecutions, is the incontestable Victor of the past, the present and the future. His people do not have to worry about the moves of their enemy. Under the protection of Christ, they will triumph, and they will rule the nations with a rod of iron (2.27) received from the son caught up to the throne of God. The devil cannot change the decisions of the majestic Jesus. He is miserably defeated in a 'non-combat'.

4. Conclusion

As the recognized literary structure of the glorious appearances of Christ demonstrates, John does not ignore, but only delays the mention of Jesus' death in Revelation 12. He underlines every time, as the victorious Jesus enters the stage, that his majesty is tightly connected to his crucifixion. However, he stresses everywhere that this event does not indicate the weakness of the Lamb, it rather manifests his sovereignty. Nobody can take away his life—he gives his blood freely as the resource for the victory; he would have the power to resist, and he has the power of giving his life (cf. John 10.18). Even the Satan waging constant warfare against the Christians is disabled in front of him.

Jesus' death receives the suitable stress in heaven at the moment of the definitive absence of the dragon. And even if the enemy and his allies continue their assaults on God's eschatological people, Jesus' followers, the readers and the hearers of Revelation are already acquainted with the heavenly reality unknown to the Satan. They can face these attacks with the certitude resounding in the hymn (12.11): they possess the blood of the Lamb and the word of the testimony, the sufficient means of victory!

48 See van Henten: 'Dragon Myth', 505–14; Jürgen H. Kalms, *Der Sturz des Gottesfeindes: Traditionsgeschichtliche Studien zu Apokalypse 12* (WMANT 93; Neukirchen–Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2001) 122–6; and Heike Omerzu, 'Die Himmelsfrau in Apk 12: Ein polemischer Reflex des römischen Kaiserkults', *Apokalyptik als Herausforderung neutestamentlicher Theologie* (ed. Michael Becker and Markus Öhler; WUNT 2/214; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006) 167–93 (184–92).