



RESEARCH ARTICLE

The cosmic conflict: Jesus against the devil in the letter to the church in Smyrna (Rev 2:8–11)

Bohdan Kuryliak 

University of Zürich, Zürich, Switzerland
Email: bohdan.kuryliak@uzh.ch

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Abstract

Scholars studying cosmic conflict in the book of Revelation primarily focus on chapters 12–14, while the letters to the seven churches are often overlooked. In this article I demonstrate the presence of key elements of cosmic conflict in the letters to the seven churches, with a particular focus on the letter to the church in Smyrna (Rev 2:8–11). I identify the main facets of spiritual warfare, such as Jesus Christ versus the devil; Christians versus Jews/Romans; and victory/life versus defeat/death. I conclude that this passage contributes to the military narrative of cosmic conflict in the Apocalypse.

Keywords: cosmic conflict; good and evil; Revelation; seven letters; Smyrna

The theme of the cosmic conflict is found in some passages of the Bible.¹ The first Christians believed that cosmic conflict has both heavenly and earthly dimensions. In this conflict between light and darkness, spiritual (angels, spirits) and earthly (humans) forces are divided into two opposing camps.² In the book of Revelation, this cosmic conflict plays a key role.³ A variety of symbols and concepts show a deadly

¹A version of this article was presented at the Evangelical Theological Society Annual Meeting in San Diego, California, on November 23, 2024. I am grateful to Jörg Frey and the anonymous reviewers for their comments and feedback. Of course, I remain responsible for any errors or infelicitous expressions in what follows. There are different terms for the transcendent, all-encompassing struggle between good and evil, including cosmic conflict, the great controversy and the divine war. In this study, I will use the phrase ‘cosmic conflict’. See Gerhard Pfandl (ed.), *The Great Controversy and the End of Evil: Biblical and Theological Studies in Honor of Ángel Manuel Rodríguez in Celebration of His Seventieth Birthday* (Silver Spring, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2015); John C. Peckham, *Theodic of Love: Cosmic Conflict and the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018).

²Cf. 2 Cor 10:3–5; Eph 2:2; 6:10–18; 2 Tim 2:3–4; 1 Pet 5:8–9; 1 John 4:4.

³Adela Yarbro Collins (*The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation* [Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1976], p. 3) states, ‘The basic motifs and pattern of the combat myth play a dominant role in the book of Revelation... The use of the combat myth in Revelation shows that the book should be understood primarily within this tradition.’ Also see Jörg Frey, ‘Apocalyptic Dualism’, in John J. Collins (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature* (Oxford: OUP, 2014); Steven Grabiner, ‘The Cosmic Conflict: Revelation’s Undercurrent’, *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 26/1 (2015), pp. 38–56.

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confrontation that directly affects all the inhabitants of the earth.⁴ Constant contrasts between the two sides highlight their intransigence. The battle is between the Lamb and the dragon, Michael's angels and Satan's angels, the New Jerusalem and Babylon. John contrasts the divine triad – God, Jesus and the seven spirits – with the satanic triad – the dragon, the beast from the sea and the beast from the earth.⁵

The cosmic conflict motif is more evident in Revelation 12, 13, 17–18 and 20, where there is a clear confrontation between the forces of good and evil. Therefore, theologians who study the cosmic conflict tend to focus on these texts.⁶ By contrast, commentators have paid little attention to Revelation 2–3.⁷ I found only one study related to the letters to the seven churches.⁸ Richard A. Sabuin, exploring the theme of cosmic conflict, mentions in one sentence the hostile role of Satan in the seven churches (Rev 2–3). Additionally, Sabuin devotes two paragraphs to a letter to the church of Smyrna, where he analyses Jesus' title 'The first and the last' (Rev 2:8), his promise of 'the crown of life' (Rev 2:10) and deliverance from the second death (Rev 2:11). Since the promises are related to the salvation that the righteous will receive at the second coming of Jesus, Sabuin argues that, 'In this picture, the title of Jesus as "the first and the last" is mentioned in the framework of a period of continuous time from the first century AD up to the coming of Jesus.'⁹ However, Sabuin pays almost no attention to the seven churches, writing in passing about a letter to the church in Smyrna, and focuses only on the title 'I am the Alpha and the Omega' (Rev 1:8; 21:6; 22:13).

Since the topic of the cosmic conflict has not received enough consideration in scholarly discussion on Revelation 2–3, it deserves careful attention. The following

⁴Rob van Houwelingen ('The Air Combat between Michael and the Dragon: Revelaton 12:7-12 in Relation to Similar Texts from the New Testament', in Koert van Bekkum, Jaap Dekker, Henk R. van den Kamp, and Eric Peels (eds.), *Playing with Leviathan: Interpretation and Reception of Monsters from the Biblical World* [Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2017], p. 166) notes, 'It is a conflict between divine and satanic forces in which both heaven and earth with all their residents are involved.' David C. Harris ('The Maritime Wars of 4Q285 and Revelation', *Journal of Early Christian History* 12/3 [2022], p. 53) states that John's 'apocalypse provides an eschatological war of immense scope'.

⁵See Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), p. 244.

⁶In the context of the cosmic conflict, scholars have mainly focused on the central part of the book: Rev 11–14. Adela Collins and Peter Antonymsamy Abir write about Rev 12 in Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation*; and Peter Antonymsamy Abir, *The Cosmic Conflict of the Church. An Exegetico-Theological Study of Revelation 12, 7–12* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1995). Tony Siew explores Rev 11:1–14:5 in Tony Siew, *The War Between the Two Beasts and the Two Witnesses: A Chiastic Reading of Revelation 11:1–14:5* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005). Sigve Tonstad focuses on Rev 14:12 in Sigve K. Tonstad, *Saving God's Reputation: The Theological function of 'Pistis Iesou' in the Cosmic Narratives of Revelation* (London: T&T Clark, 2006). Steven Grabiner selects hymn passages (viz., Rev 4:8–11; 5:9–14; 7:9–12; 11:15–18; 12:10–12; 15:3–4; 19:1–8) in Steven Grabiner, *Revelation's Hymns: Commentary on the Cosmic Conflict* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015). Paul Decock analyses the theme of war throughout the book in Paul B. Decock, 'Images of War and Creation, of Violence and Non-Violence in the Revelation of John', in Pieter de Villiers and Jan Willem Van Henten (eds.), *Coping with Violence in the New Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

⁷David L. Barr ('Violence in the Apocalypse of John', in Craig Koester (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Book of Revelation* [Oxford: OUP, 2020], p. 293) writes that a theme of war is 'only hinted at in the first section (chapters 1–3)'.

⁸Richard A. Sabuin, 'The Alpha-Omega and the Great Controversy in Revelation', in Gerhard Pfandl (ed.), *The Great Controversy and the End of Evil* (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute; Review and Herald, 2015).

⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 89–90.

questions remain relevant: (1) Is the cosmic battle imagery that is visible mainly in the central part of the book of Revelation, also present in the seven letters? (2) From which textual elements, images, terms or forms can this be seen? In this article I argue that the theme of the cosmic conflict is an important concept in the letters to the seven churches. Using the example of the letter to the church in Smyrna, I demonstrate the presence of key aspects of the opposition between good and evil.¹⁰ The purpose of this study is to define the concept of the cosmic conflict between Jesus Christ and the devil in the letter to the church in Smyrna. I first depict the concept of cosmic conflict in the book of Revelation in general and the letters to the seven churches in particular. I then move on to a direct analysis of the message to the church in Smyrna in Revelation 2:8–11.

Cosmic conflict in the book of Revelation

The importance of the theme of the cosmic conflict in Revelation is evidenced by the fact that the presence of military vocabulary is far more common in this book than in other books of the New Testament.¹¹ Nine out of eighteen uses of the word πόλεμος ('war, fighting, conflict') occur in Revelation.¹² Also, Revelation contains six of the seven New Testament occurrences of the verb πολεμέω ('to wage war, to fight, to war against').¹³ The motif of conflict is also expressed through the theme of victory.¹⁴ Seventeen of the 28 appearances of the verb νικῶ ('to win a victory over, to conquer') in the New Testament occur in Revelation.¹⁵ The word indicates both moral and physical, military victory.¹⁶ Also, the motif of the war between good and evil is seen in the symbol of the throne (θρόνος).¹⁷ Again, 47 of the 62 appearances of this word in the New Testament are found in Revelation, where the struggle is between the Lord's throne and Satan's throne (see e.g. Rev 2:13).¹⁸

The conflict in the book of Revelation occurs between the characters themselves, between the characters and the environment, and also in the minds of the characters regarding a choice to be on the side of good or evil.¹⁹ Conflict is often the basis of stories, and there are two aspects to war stories in the book of Revelation: 'First, in this kind of war story the actions of spiritual forces are as important as the actions of humans; and second, this is a cosmic battle determining the whole future of world.'²⁰ John also adds the theme of conflict to the hymns of praise associated with the heavenly temple service, which are found throughout the book of Revelation.²¹

¹⁰As will be shown below, all the letters to the seven churches contain aspects of cosmic conflict. Therefore, each letter can be selected for research. Since there are restrictions on the length of the article, I decided to limit myself to a letter to Smyrna, because it presents the theme of cosmic conflict quite clearly.

¹¹Sabuin, 'The Alpha-Omega and the Great Controversy', p. 85.

¹²Rev 9:7, 9; 11:7; 12:7, 17; 13:7; 16:14; 19:19; 20:8.

¹³Rev 2:16; 12:7 (2x); 13:4; 17:14; 19:11.

¹⁴Decock, 'Images of War and Creation, of Violence and Non-Violence', p. 190.

¹⁵Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21 (2x); 5:5; 6:2 (2x); 11:7; 12:11; 13:7; 15:2; 17:14; 21:7.

¹⁶Ragnar Leivestad, *Christ, the Conqueror: Ideas of Conflict and Victory in the New Testament* (London: SPCK, 1954), p. 212.

¹⁷See Laszlo Gallusz, *The Throne Motif in the Book of Revelation* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014).

¹⁸Gallusz notes, 'Thirty-six references link God individually to the throne'. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁹See James L. Resseguie, *Revelation Unsealed: A Narrative Critical Approach to John's Apocalypse* (Leiden: Brill, 1988), p. 24.

²⁰David L. Barr, *Tales of the End: A Narrative Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 1998), p. 104.

²¹Rev 4:8–11; 5:9–14; 7:9–12; 11:15–18; 12:10–12; 15:3–4; 19:1–8. See Grabiner, *Revelation's Hymns*.

The military motif can be seen in many passages in the book of Revelation.²² John presents Jesus Christ as the new David who won a great victory in a military battle over the opponents of God's people and overthrew evil through his sacrificial death (Rev 5:5–6).²³ After the fifth trumpet, locusts appear, acting like a great army in battle (Rev 9:1–11). Following the sixth trumpet, a great troop comes into view, the number of which is 'twice ten thousand times ten thousand' (Rev 9:16).²⁴ Then John writes about the beast, who went to war against the two witnesses and destroyed them (Rev 11:1–14). This war against two witnesses 'is a result of the war in heaven'.²⁵ The cosmic conflict is likewise clearly visible in Revelation 12, where the dragon fights with the woman (God's people) and her child (Jesus).²⁶ And the war is not only on earth: Michael and his angels fight with the dragon and his angels began in heaven.²⁷ John shows that the earthly war is only part of the universal struggle between the devil and God.²⁸

The dragon continues its war against the church through the politico-religious forces of the beast from the sea (Rev 13:1–10) and the beast from the earth (Rev 13:11–18), forming a triad of evil.²⁹ The symbolic number 144,000 (Rev 7:3–8; 14:1–5) is the expression of the church as 'the army of the Lamb, the messianic conqueror of evil'.³⁰ The war against the Lamb takes on particular tension during the outpouring of the seven bowls of God's wrath, when the triad of evil gathers everyone at Armageddon (Rev 16:12–14). For this attempt to defeat the Lamb, all the political and religious powers of the earth gather.³¹ Revelation 17 contains a description of the war of ten kings with the Lamb, in which the earthly kingdoms suffer a catastrophic defeat

²²See Decock, 'Images of War and Creation, of Violence and Non-Violence', p. 190. Richard Bauckham states that 'holy war imagery permeates the book'. Richard Bauckham, 'The Book of Revelation as a Christian War Scroll', *Neotestamentica* 22/1 (1988), p. 18.

²³Bauckham, 'The Book of Revelation as a Christian War Scroll', pp. 20–21. Decock remarks, 'The verb $\sigma\phi\acute{\alpha}\zeta\omega$ appears three times in chapter 5 (verses 6, 9, 12) showing that the victory is attributed to the death of the Lamb who was violently killed.' Decock, 'Images of War and Creation, of Violence and Non-Violence', p. 191.

²⁴All translations are my own unless otherwise noted and are drawn from the Greek text in the NA²⁸.

²⁵Siew, *The War Between the Two Beasts and the Two Witnesses*, p. 78. Bauckham writes, 'The church's witness is given a context in the great cosmic conflict for the sovereignty of the world between God and the forces of evil, a conflict which began in the garden of Eden (12:7) and reaches to the parousia and the judgment (14:14–20).' Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark International, 1998), p. 285.

²⁶Cf. Tonstad, *Saving God's Reputation*, p. 65: 'the description of the war in Rev 12.7–9 brings the cosmic scope of the conflict into full view'.

²⁷See Abir, *The Cosmic Conflict of the Church*, pp. 65–7.

²⁸Shane Wood writes: 'the saturation of the Apocalypse in Old Testament allusions suggests that the key enemy in this battle is trans-geographical and trans-generational (outside of space and time)'. Shane J. Wood, *The Alter-Imperial Paradigm: Empire Studies & the Book of Revelation* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), p. 228.

²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 227.

³⁰Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, p. 285. For the military symbolism of 144,000, see Barr, *Tales of the End*, p. 114; Craig S. Keener, *Revelation: NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), p. 369; George Bradford Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1966), pp. 178–80; Peter S. Williamson, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), pp. 139–40; Richard Bauckham, 'The List of the Tribes in Revelation 7 Again', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 13/42 (1991), pp. 103–5.

³¹See Ian Boxall, *The Revelation of Saint John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), p. 232.

because Jesus is 'Lord of lords and King of kings' (Rev 17:14).³² Jesus returns for the second time to earth on a white horse as a mighty warrior and judge with his army (Rev 19:11–21).³³ All earthly forces of evil desperately rush into battle (Rev 19:19),³⁴ but the 'King of kings and Lord of lords' (Rev 19:16) sends his enemies to their doom (Rev 19:20–21).³⁵ The devil becomes a prisoner for a thousand years (Rev 20:1–3), and at the end his last attempt to conquer the New Jerusalem fails (Rev 20:7–15). John concludes the book with God's final victory over evil and the creation of a new heaven and a new earth (Rev 21–22).³⁶

Cosmic conflict in the letters to the seven churches

Despite the fact that scholars usually skip Revelation 2–3 when studying the theme of cosmic conflict, this theme can be traced in the letters to the seven churches. In this section I will indicate the general and main points in support of this thesis.

First, this theme is clearly illustrated by the motif of victory (νικῶω), which appears in each of the seven letters (Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21 [2x]).³⁷ John lists many of Jesus' promises to all who overcome the struggle: (1) the fruits of the tree of life (Rev 2:7); (2) avoiding the second death (Rev 2:11); (3) manna and a white stone with a new name (Rev 2:17); (4) power and an iron rod over the pagans (Rev 2:26); (5) white garments, the preservation of their names in the book of life and its public recognition (Rev 3:5); (6) being a pillar in the temple of God, with the name of God, Jesus and the New Jerusalem (Rev 3:12); and (7) a place on the throne of God (Rev 3:21).³⁸ All these promises share the theme of eternal life on a new earth without suffering or death.³⁹ John presents these promises to inspire the early Christians not to give up.⁴⁰ Believers must fight boldly in spiritual warfare, in which they 'overcome by word, faithfulness, and through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ'.⁴¹

Second, martyrdom is another aspect of the cosmic conflict. Paul Middleton notes that 'Christians were not only athletes in the games, they were also soldiers in a cosmic war'.⁴² Throughout the appeals to the seven churches, there is a call for a faithful witness (Rev 2:25, 26; 3:8, 11), which in some cases could lead to persecution and

³²See Louis A. Brighton, *Revelation* (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), pp. 452–3; and Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Revelation* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1996), p. 119.

³³See Eduard Lohse, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983), pp. 101–2; Tobias Nicklas, 'The Eschatological Battle According to the Book of Revelation: Perspectives on Revelation 19:11–21', in Pieter de Villiers and Jan Willem van Henten (eds), *Coping with Violence in the New Testament* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2012), p. 236.

³⁴T. F. Glasson notes, 'it is the final world-conflict in which all the kings of the earth take part'. T. F. Glasson, *The Revelation of John* (Cambridge: CUP, 1965), p. 110.

³⁵See Ian Paul, *Revelation: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), pp. 321–24.

³⁶See John M. Court, *Revelation* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), p. 115.

³⁷Bruce M. Metzger, *Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), p. 30.

³⁸See M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1989), pp. 89–90.

³⁹See Matthijs den Dulk, 'The Promises of the Conquerors in the Book of Revelation', *Biblica* 87/4 (2006), pp. 521–2.

⁴⁰See Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2018), p. 57.

⁴¹Decock, 'Images of War and Creation, of Violence and Non-Violence', p. 191.

⁴²Paul Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom and Cosmic Conflict in Early Christianity* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), p. 79.

martyrdom.⁴³ John singles out the example of Antipas, who was killed in the dwelling place of Satan (Rev 2:13). The motif of victory (νικῶω) is also associated with martyrdom. Ragnar Leivestad states, ‘The martyr is the typical conqueror, because he has demonstrated his faithfulness to the end; his victory is finally established. The living are still engaged in struggle; nobody knows how many of them will stand firm to the end. But he who has suffered death for Christ’s sake has conquered.’⁴⁴

Third, the conflict is visible in the ideological war between truth and false teachings.⁴⁵ John lists the following enemies of the community and Jesus: (1) those who are evil (Rev 2:2); (2) false apostles (Rev 2:2); (3) the teachings of the Nicolaitans (Rev 2:6, 15); (4) Jews and the ‘synagogue of Satan’ (Rev 2:9; 3:9); (5) the devil and his doctrine (Rev 2:10, 13, 24); (6) ‘Balaam’s’ teaching (Rev 2:14); and (7) ‘Jezebel’ (Rev 2:20).⁴⁶ John teaches that the evil forces mutilate a truth, imitate it and spread false theories. He warns Christians against apostasy from the truth, as it leads to a departure from moral principles and separates them from God.⁴⁷ On the other hand, Jesus is presented as a warrior with the sharp two-edged sword in his mouth (Rev 2:12, 16). The sword in the mouth is a symbol of the word of God, that is, the truth, which is the weapon of both Jesus and his followers against heresies.⁴⁸

Fourth, the personal dimension of the cosmic conflict is visible between holiness and immorality. John writes about the following spiritual dangers: (1) loss of their first love (Rev 2:4); (2) failing to repent (Rev 2:5, 16, 21, 22; 3:3, 19); (3) suffering and trials (Rev 2:10; 3:10); (4) compromise (Rev 2:14, 15, 20); (5) incomplete works (Rev 3:2); (6) failure of vigilance (Rev 3:3); (7) spiritual tepidity (Rev 3:15, 16); and (8) pride and nakedness (Rev 3:17, 18).⁴⁹ All these points are presented as part of the tactics of the devil and his servants, which can lead to Christian defeat in the war. Therefore, Jesus’ warning and rebuke to the seven churches are intended to strengthen and direct to the right path in order to successfully win the battles in the cosmic conflict.⁵⁰

Cosmic conflict in the letter to the church in Smyrna (Rev 2:8–11)

Although the shortest of the seven, the letter to the church in Smyrna contains a deeply developed concept of the cosmic conflict. John depicts two warring camps – the side of good, led by Jesus Christ, and the side of evil, led by Satan, opposing each other in both the spiritual and earthly dimensions.

⁴³Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom and Cosmic Conflict*, pp. 160–61. Decock (‘Images of War and Creation, of Violence and Non-Violence’, pp. 191–2) writes that ‘Rev 2:26 links the word “conquering” with the phrase “persevere to the end in doing the works of Jesus” as the expression of their radical commitment and their faithfulness unto death.’ Also see Paul B. Decock, ‘The Works of God, of Christ, and of the Faithful in the Apocalypse of John’, *Neotestamentica* 41/1 (2007), pp. 37–66.

⁴⁴Leivestad, *Christ, the Conqueror*, p. 215.

⁴⁵See Robert W. Wall, *Revelation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), p. 74.

⁴⁶See Peter J. Leithart, *Revelation 1–11* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018), pp. 139–40.

⁴⁷See Heinz Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (Regensburg: F. Pustet, 1997), pp. 114–5.

⁴⁸Decock writes that this symbol indicates that ‘this is not an ordinary, human war’. Decock, ‘Images of War and Creation, of Violence and Non-Violence’, p. 190.

⁴⁹Decock comments, ‘For the followers, however, victory also includes repentance, by which they avoid being punished by Jesus (Rev 2:5, 16, 21–13; 3:3, 19). An important dimension of repentance is to turn away from the works of Satan: Rev 2:22; 9:20; 16:11.’ Decock, ‘Images of War and Creation, of Violence and Non-Violence’, p. 192.

⁵⁰See Leithart, *Revelation 1–11*, p. 130.

The first aspect of the cosmic conflict in the letter to Smyrna is Jesus' victory through death.⁵¹ Christ declares that he 'died and came to life' (ἐγένετο νεκρὸς καὶ ἔζησεν, Rev 2:8). Previously spoken words 'I died, and behold I am alive for ever and ever' (καὶ ὁ ζῶν, καὶ ἐγενόμην νεκρὸς καὶ ἰδοὺ ζῶν εἰμι εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων, Rev 1:18) are repeated here.⁵² John uses the participle ζῶν twice to emphasise the reality of eternal existence.⁵³ In Revelation 2:8 it refers to historical events: the death on the cross and the resurrection.⁵⁴ Christ's death and resurrection is 'the turning point in the conflict between God and the forces of evil'.⁵⁵ Early Christians viewed death as the enemy of humankind (1 Cor 15:26), the weapon of the devil (Heb 2:14). But while death on the battlefield in war meant defeat and loss, the death of Jesus was a victory and triumph over the powers of evil for believers (Col 2:15; Eph 2:16), because after death came the resurrection. The Apocalypse says that Christ came to life and therefore 'the keys of Death and Hades' (τὰς κλεῖς τοῦ θανάτου καὶ τοῦ ᾄδου) are in his hands (Rev 1:18). John depicts Jesus as the living argument for the rationality of following him, and the historical precedent of a victory should inspire Christians in Smyrna to faithfulness.⁵⁶ Buist Fanning notes that 'Christ's resurrection is the guarantee that all who are his will also be raised (1 Cor 15:20–26; Phil 3:20–21)'.⁵⁷

However, John not only presents the death of Jesus as an inspiring example of victory, but he sees it as having significant consequences for the personal dimension of the cosmic conflict in the lives of Christians. In the context of defeating the devil, John writes about believers that 'they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death' (Rev 12:11). Thus, Christ's words that he 'died and came to life' (ἐγένετο νεκρὸς καὶ ἔζησεν, Rev 2:8) could have been a reminder to the church in Smyrna of their possibility of personal spiritual victory over the devil in the cosmic conflict.

The second aspect of the cosmic conflict, which has a local dimension specific to Smyrna, is the confrontation between Christians and Jews. John writes about 'the blasphemy of those who say that they are Jews and are not' (τὴν βλασφημίαν ἐκ τῶν λεγόντων Ἰουδαίους εἶναι ἑαυτοὺς καὶ οὐκ εἰσιν, Rev 2:9).⁵⁸ Christians living in

⁵¹Bauckham (*The Climax of Prophecy*, p. 184) writes that John represents the death of Jesus Christ 'as the fulfilment of Jewish hopes of the messianic conqueror'.

⁵²See Oliver Cremer, *Das sagt der Sohn Gottes: Die Christologie der Sendschreiben der Johannesoffenbarung* (Göttingen: Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Theologie, 2014), p. 70.

⁵³See John Thomas Christopher and Frank D. Macchia, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2016).

⁵⁴See Gerhard Maier, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes: Kapitel 1–11* (Witten; Giessen: SCM R. Brockhaus, 2012), p. 151.

⁵⁵Judith L. Kovacs, "'Now Shall the Ruler of This World Be Driven Out': Jesus' Death as Cosmic Battle in John 12:20–36", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 114/2 (1995), p. 231.

⁵⁶Just as Christ bore witness in the face of opposition, remained faithful unto death, and was rewarded with life beyond death that could not again be quenched, so the disciple who bears witness in the face of opposition, even unto death, can be assured of the same reward.' David A. deSilva, 'Out of our Minds? Appeals to Reason (Logos) in the Seven Oracle of Revelation 2–3', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 31/2 (2008), p. 136.

⁵⁷Buist M. Fanning, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), p. 126. Cf. Cremer, *Das sagt der Sohn Gottes*, p. 74: 'In the message to the society of Smyrna, the attributes of Christ's self-presentation emphasize his closeness to the oppressed.'

⁵⁸For an exploration of blasphemy in the cosmic conflict in the books of Daniel and Revelation, see Bohdan Kuryliak and Ihor Kuryliak, 'Daniel and Revelation: Blasphemy in the Cosmic Conflict', *Open Theology* 10/1 (2024), pp. 1–17.

Smyrna had problems in relations with the Jews, who slandered them (presumably to the Roman authorities).⁵⁹ Slander and denunciations were ‘weapons’.⁶⁰ Jewish blasphemy led to the persecution and suffering of God’s people and eventually reached God.⁶¹ However, according to John, Jesus does not consider them true Jews, but calls them ‘a synagogue of Satan’ (συναγωγή τοῦ σατανᾶ, Rev 2:9).⁶² Satan’s name means ‘accuser’, and he is later named ‘the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them day and night before our God’ (Rev 12:10).⁶³ Therefore, John presents the Jews’ accusation of Christians as the work of Satan himself. Linking Revelation 2:9 with Revelation 12:10 testifies to the general theme of the cosmic conflict that began in heaven (cf. Rev 12:7). John writes about the human dimension of this war at the church in Smyrna, where the devil, with the help of his servants, harms Christians and, through them, Jesus.⁶⁴

⁵⁹The common view among commentators is that ‘those who say that they are Jews’ refers to the Jewish community in Smyrna. Craig Koester (*Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014], p. 273) notes, ‘The Jewish community at Smyrna was well-established.’ See also Adela Yarbro Collins, ‘Insiders and Outsiders in the Book of Revelation and Its Social Context’, in Jacob Neusner and Ernest S. Frerichs (eds), *To See Ourselves as Others See Us: Christians, Jews, ‘Others’ in Late Antiquity* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), pp. 205–6; Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, p. 35; E. Leigh Gibson, ‘Jews in the Inscriptions of Smyrna’, *Journal of Jewish Studies* LVI/1 (2005), pp. 66–79; Eduard Lohse, ‘Synagogue of Satan and Church of God: Jews and Christians in the Book of Revelation’, *Svensk exegetisk årsbok* 58 (1993), pp. 105–23; Ernst Lohmeyer, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1953), p. 24; Henry B. Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John* (London: Macmillan, 1911), p. 31; John W. Marshall, *Parables of War: Reading John’s Jewish Apocalypse* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2001), pp. 12–6, 132–4; Mark R. J. Bredin, ‘The Synagogue of Satan Accusation in Revelation 2:9’, *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 28/4 (1998), pp. 162–4; Paul B. Duff, ‘“The Synagogue of Satan”: Crisis Mongering and the Apocalypse of John’, in David L. Barr (ed.), *The Reality of Apocalypse: Rhetoric and Politics in the Book of Revelation* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), p. 148; Robert Henry Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John: With Introduction, Notes, and Indices, Also the Greek Text and English Translation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1920), vol. 1, pp. 56–7; Steven J. Friesen, ‘Satan’s Throne, Imperial Cults and the Social Settings of Revelation’, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 27/3 (2005), pp. 354, 366; Steven J. Friesen, ‘Sarcasm in Revelation 2–3: Churches, Christians, True Jews, and Satanic Synagogues’, in David L. Barr (ed.) *The Reality of Apocalypse: Rhetoric and Politics in the Book of Revelation* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), p. 134. Some researchers, however, believe that this reference to Jews refers a group of people within the church at Smyrna, whether Jewish Christians or gentile Judaizers, or both: Barclay Moon Newman, *Rediscovering the Book of Revelation* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1968), pp. 48–55; David Frankfurter, ‘Jews or Not? Reconstructing the “Other” in Rev 2:9 and 3:9’, *Harvard Theological Review* 94/4 (2001), pp. 403–25; Heinrich Kraft, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1974), pp. 60–61; John G. Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism: Attitudes Toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity* (Oxford: OUP, 1985), p. 132; Stephen G. Wilson, ‘Gentile Judaizers’, *New Testament Studies* 38/4 (1992), pp. 605–16.

⁶⁰See Koester, *Revelation*, p. 274: ‘Here, the primary sense of *blasphēmia* is denunciation of Christians before Greco-Roman authorities.’ Gregory Beale suggests, ‘The specific accusations of Jews before government authorities were probably that Christians were upsetting the peace of the status quo, were not a Jewish sect, and refused to pay homage to Caesar as Lord.’ Gregory K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans; Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1999), p. 590.

⁶¹Koester, *Revelation*, p. 275. The hostile actions of Jews against Christians are often recalled by Luke. See Acts 13:45, 50; 14:2–7, 19; 17:5–9, 13; 18:5, 6, 12; 21:27.

⁶²The believer in Jesus as Messiah/Savior is a true Jew (Rom 2:18–28; Gal 3:29; Eph 2:11–22); see Lohmeyer, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, p. 24.

⁶³See J. Ramsey Michaels, *Revelation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 75.

⁶⁴Christians considered actions against them as actions against Jesus Christ (see e.g. Acts 9:4, 5).

The third aspect of the cosmic conflict is the hostility of the local Roman authorities, which is also directed against the community of Christians. Here, too, John portrays Satan as the one behind the human power fighting against the church.⁶⁵ He quotes Jesus as saying, 'Behold, the devil is going to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested' (ἰδοὺ μέλλει βάλλειν ὁ διάβολος ἐξ ὑμῶν εἰς φυλακὴν ἵνα πειρασθῆτε, Rev 2:10). This metaphorical language, as in the previous case with the Jews, again conveys the idea of cosmic conflict: there is a close connection between people and spiritual beings. John shows that earthly power is carrying out the devil's plan. Once again, the same idea is repeated by the author in Revelation 12, where the dragon tries to destroy a child (Messiah) (Rev 12:4) and then the woman (church) (Rev 12:13–17). The hostility of the dragon against Jesus and the early church manifested itself on a human level through the Jews and the Romans. John transfers this aspect of the cosmic conflict to the life of the Christian community in Smyrna. He reports that with the assistance of the devil, local authorities will put some Christians in prison.

The fourth aspect of the cosmic conflict relates to the contrast of courage and fear, which lead to either victory or defeat in battle.⁶⁶ John communicates Jesus Christ's appeal to the church: 'Fear nothing you are about to suffer' (μηδὲν φοβοῦ ἃ μέλλεις πάσχειν, Rev 2:10). Christians in Smyrna received a call to be fearless. In the book of Revelation, one can see at various points the contrast between bold and cowardly Christians (Rev 2:10, 11; 21:8). It was known that fear in war leads to surrender, flight and defeat.⁶⁷ John reproduces this idea within the framework of the cosmic conflict and writes that cowards will eventually lose the spiritual battle and die the second death (Rev 21:8). However, courage was considered one of the most important traits of victorious warriors.⁶⁸ Accordingly, the promise of the Apocalypse assures that Christians who are courageous and fearless will escape the second death (Rev 2:11).⁶⁹

The fifth aspect of cosmic conflict is the motif of victory. It is expressed in two calls and promises of Jesus, which can be represented as parallelism. John places conditions at the beginning of every promise: the invocation 'Be faithful to death' (γίνου πιστὸς ἄχρι θανάτου, Rev 2:10) is paralleled with 'The one who conquers' (Ὁ νικῶν, Rev 2:11). The author of the Apocalypse equates courageous and unwavering loyalty with victory. Thus, both phrases indicate victorious triumph. Readers should have understood that conquest is a condition, the fulfilment of which leads to an eternal reward.⁷⁰ There is also a parallelism between the two rewards: 'the crown of life' (στέφανον τῆς ζωῆς, Rev 2:10) awaits the conqueror and he 'will not be harmed by the second death' (οὐ μὴ ὀδικηθῆ ἕκ τοῦ θανάτου τοῦ δευτέρου, Rev 2:11). In addition, there is cross-parallelism between conditions and rewards: he who died the first death will not die the second death,⁷¹ and he who

⁶⁵See David E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5* (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1997), p. 166.

⁶⁶See Num 13:30–14:9; Jude 3; Josephus, *Jewish War* 1.1.3.

⁶⁷See 1 Sam 7:7; 17:11; 23:3; 28:5; Judith 2:28; 4:2; 1 Mac 9:6; 10:76; 12:28; Josephus, *Jewish War* 1.6.5; 1.17.7; 6.1.7; 7.4.2–3; Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 4.125.1.

⁶⁸See Num 21:31–35; Deut 1:21; 3:2, 22; 8:1; 10:8, 25; 11:16; 20:1; 2 Kings 6:16; 19:6; 2 Chron 20:15, 17; Neh 4:14; Ps 3:6; 1 Mac 4:6–18; Wisdom 8–15; Josephus, *Jewish War* 2.19.2; 6.1.5.

⁶⁹See J. Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), p. 396.

⁷⁰One of the aspects of the cosmic conflict can be traced here – martyrdom: 'This call to death is the call to conquer, a crucial concept in the Apocalypse.' Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom and Cosmic Conflict*, p. 161.

⁷¹See 'The second death' marks the end of the cosmic war, culminating in scenes of battle that give the notion of "standing in harm's way" new meaning (20:7–10; 14:13–20). When "the second death" bears down on the

conquered will receive the crown of life. The listener's gaze is thereby turned to the coming resurrection.⁷²

The crown would have had many associations for the early readers of the book of Revelation.⁷³ Most scholars see only athletic connotations in the image of 'the crown'.⁷⁴ Although it is true that the crown was associated with sports games, it should be noted that the crown also has a military meaning, which is often ignored.⁷⁵ Aune gives evidence of crowns as rewards for military victories among both the Greeks and the Romans.⁷⁶ Greek warriors who distinguished themselves in battle received golden wreaths.⁷⁷ The Romans followed the practice of the Greeks and developed many different types of crowns as a reward for soldiers in the army for their exploits in war.⁷⁸ Generals who were victorious in battle received a triumphal crown or laurel wreath at home. The military leaders also received noble golden wreaths from grateful people.⁷⁹ Among the Jews, too, the celebration of victory in battle was accompanied by wearing a crown.⁸⁰

In addition, military connotations are contained in the expression 'The one who conquers' (Ὁ νικῶν, Rev 2:11).⁸¹ Grant R. Osborne states regarding this metaphor, 'In the NT the military overtones are primary.'⁸² Christians in Asia Minor saw on coins and temples

world in all its demonic fury (2:11; 20:6, 14), believers "will not be harmed." There can be no better advice than to stay tuned.' Sigve K. Tonstad, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), p. 76.

⁷²See Cremer, *Das sagt der Sohn Gottes*, p. 74; Pablo Richard, *Apocalypse: A People's Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), p. 57; Wayne D. Mueller, *Revelation* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1996), p. 33.

⁷³Maier (*Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, p. 160) gives the following possible interpretations: (1) the wreath for the winners in athletic competitions; (2) the wreath worn by the leading priest at the Dionysus Mysteries; (3) the wreath for public honors, e.g. for civil or military merits; (4) the wreath worn by pagan priests at their sacrifices; (5) the wreath for the priestly authorities of the city; (6) the wreath as a sign of Christian joy at Christian festivals; (7) the wreath as the epitome of the beautiful city architecture of Smyrna; and (8) the wreath, which according to Sir 45:12, the high priest wore in addition to his headband. Also see Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), pp. 72–7.

⁷⁴See Ben Witherington III, *Revelation* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), p. 101; Boxall, *The Revelation of Saint John*, p. 56; Brighton, *Revelation*, p. 73; David L. Barr, *Tales of the End: A Narrative Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2011), p. 56; Gerald L. Stevens, *Revelation: The Past and Future of John's Apocalypse* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014), p. 306; Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, p. 110; Lohmeyer, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, p. 25; Metzger, *Breaking the Code*, p. 33; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 76; Richard Eckley, *Revelation: A Commentary for Bible Students* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2006), p. 71; Stephen S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John: A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), p. 67.

⁷⁵See Keener, *Revelation*, p. 117; Leihart, *Revelation 1–11*, p. 163.

⁷⁶See Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, p. 173.

⁷⁷Arrian, *Anabasis* 7.5.4–5.

⁷⁸See Valerie A. Maxfield, *The Military Decorations of the Roman Army* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 55–66.

⁷⁹Gregory M. Stevenson, 'Conceptual Background to Golden Crown Imagery in the Apocalypse of John (4:4, 10; 14:14)', *Journal of Biblical literature* 114/2 (1995), p. 265. See Pliny, *Natural History* 16.3–5; 22.4–7; 33.11.38; 33.16.54; Livy 6.20.4–9; 7.10.1–14; 7.26.10; 7.37.1–3; 10.44.3–4; 26.48.5–6; 34.52.8; 37.46.4; 37.58.4; 37.59.3; 39.5.14; 40.34.8; Velleius Paterculus, *History of Rome* 1.12.4; 2.81.3; Plutarch, *Life of Aemilius* 34.3; *Alcibiades* 33.2; *Life of Marcellus* 22; Josephus, *Jewish War* 1.231; 7.124, 135; Cicero, *Against Piso* 58; Cicero, *Laws* 24; Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 4.121; Velleius 1.12.4; 2.81.3.

⁸⁰Stevenson, 'Conceptual Background', p. 258. See Judith 15:13; Josephus, *Antiquities* 14.299; Philo, *De mutatione nominum* 109.

⁸¹Koester, *Revelation*, p. 265. See Plutarch, *Life of Caesar* 50.

⁸²Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), p. 122.

emperors in military clothing with military trophies and victory crowns, along with Nike, the personification of victory.⁸³ Bruce Metzger writes, ‘The word *conquer* is a military term. It suggests that the Christian life, so far from being a bed of roses, involves a struggle against anyone and anything that saps the Christian life of all that gives it strength and power.’⁸⁴

Accordingly, given this military context, a victor’s wreath symbolises the crown of the triumphant, an award given for military merit in the cosmic conflict.⁸⁵ Craig Koester writes, ‘Revelation pictures the persecution of the church as a war in which Christians are combatants, whose weaponry is their witness to truth (11:7; 12:11; 13:7). For them, wreaths are like the honors given to soldiers.’⁸⁶ John is not writing about a literal crown but uses it as a metaphor for eternal life – ‘the crown of life’.⁸⁷ The letter to Smyrna indicates the fate of the participants in the conflict: the victorious warriors will receive eternal life, and the defeated warriors will die a second death.⁸⁸

Conclusion

Although cosmic conflict is prominent in the central part of the book of Revelation and unfolds in the later chapters, my analysis has shown its strong presence in the first part of the book (Rev 2–3). I have identified four general facets of spiritual warfare: (1) the motif of victory, (2) martyrdom, (3) the ideological war between truth and false teachings and (4) the conflict between holiness and immorality. The seven letters present a clear confrontation between Jesus and the devil, and between Christians and the servants of Satan, which ends in God’s victory.

The analysis shows that the letter to the church in Smyrna in Revelation 2:8–11 contains five key points relating to cosmic conflict. First, John shows a war between two leaders of rival camps. The good side is led by Jesus Christ speaking to the church, and the evil side is led by Satan (Rev 2:9–10). John presents the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as victory over the devil. Second, the letter describes community-based opposition between Christians and Jews (Rev 2:9). The war of words through blasphemy and slander by the Jews is a manifestation of a defining characteristic of the devil, waging war against the sovereignty of God in heaven (Rev 12:7–9). The connection of the letter to Smyrna with a central passage on cosmic conflict in Revelation 12 indicates John’s intention to reflect this theme in the seven communities. Third, John, speaking of the attack of the local Roman authorities, incited by the devil, on the community (Rev 2:10), confirms the connection between spiritual and earthly forces in the cosmic conflict. Fourth, the personal dimension of cosmic conflict is expressed in the contrast of courage and fear, which were often characteristics of either victorious or conquered warriors (Rev 2:10). Fifth, military connotations are clearly visible in the

⁸³See Steven John Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins* (New York: OUP, 2001), p. 62.

⁸⁴Metzger, *Breaking the Code*, p. 30.

⁸⁵Kraft, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, p. 62.

⁸⁶Koester, *Revelation*, p. 277.

⁸⁷Tonstad, *Revelation*, p. 75, concludes, ‘Here, the crowning happens in the context of battle. It will be awarded when the war is won.’

⁸⁸The concept of the second death is mentioned four times in the book of Rev (2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8). For the meaning of the second death, see Alberdina Houtman and Magda Misset-van de Weg, ‘The Fate of the Wicked: Second Death in Early Jewish and Christian Texts’, in Alberdina Houtman, Albert De Jong, Magda Misset-van De Weg (eds), *Empsychoi Logoi – Religious Innovations in Antiquity: Studies in Honour of Pieter Willem van der Horst* (Leiden: Brill, 2008); Richard Bauckham, ‘Judgment in the Book of Revelation’, *Ex auditu* 20 (2004), p. 18.

motive of victory, which is expressed in the parallelism of two calls and two promises. John describes the call to martyrdom and victory leading to spiritual military triumph – receiving the crown of life and avoiding the ultimate defeat – the second death (Rev 2:10, 11).

All these symbols together form a military narrative of cosmic conflict no less clearly than in other parts of the book of Revelation. Therefore, the seven letters in Revelation 2–3 in general, and the letter to Smyrna in particular, deserve to be included in the discussion of the cosmic conflict in the book of Revelation.