

NONVIOLENCE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT AN ORTHODOX-HERMENEUTICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract. This study discusses the problem of the incompatibility between ethnocentric tendencies within the national Orthodox churches and the New Testament teaching on nonviolence. The three main parts outline the relevant New Testament teaching (1) in the four Gospels and the book of Acts, (2) in the Pauline epistles, and (3) in John's Revelation. The study concludes that in the New Testament texts, there is no room for the justification of violence on the part of Christ-followers against their opponents. Quite on the contrary, the New Testament views the world as having the potential to become ecclesia, and the "other" as a possible sister or brother in Christ. Unfortunately, this fundamental New Testament teaching is often forgotten in modern-day Orthodoxy, notwithstanding its claims for unbroken continuity with the apostolic tradition. As an example, the Greek-Orthodox church oftentimes emphasizes national identity and heroism over ecclesial faith and ethos. Although understandable, such ethnocentric tendencies clearly contradict the New Testament witness and should be abandoned.

Keywords: Nonviolence, Greek Orthodoxy, national Orthodox churches, ethnocentrism, national identity, heroism, martyrdom, New Testament era, Gospels, Acts, Pauline Epistles, Revelation.

It is generally known and well-documented that since the birth of national Orthodox churches, there have been and still are powerful ethnocentric tendencies within the ranks of both their clergy and laity.¹ On the other hand, the same national churches claim to be in unbroken continuity with the early church as reflected in the New Testament witnesses.² At this point, the question inescapably arises about whether the above-mentioned ethnocentric tendencies are compatible with the New

¹ See the studies published in P. MEYENDORFF (ed.), *Ecclesiology and Nationalism*, in *SVTQ* 57 (2013) 235–540.

² See BISHOP K. WARE, "Strange Yet Familiar: My Journey to the Orthodox Church", in *The Inner Kingdom*, The Collected Works 1, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY, 2001, 8–14; CH. KARAKOLIS, „Auch von den anderen kann man lernen und bereichert werden“, in S. ALKIER, CH. KARAKOLIS, and T. NICKLAS, *Sola Scriptura ökumenisch*, *Biblische Argumente in öffentlichen Debatten* 1, Brill / Schöningh, Paderborn, 2021, 171–188 (171).

Testament witness on nonviolence,³ which goes along with acceptance, forgiveness, and particularly unconditional love. In the present paper, I will discuss this question by presenting and underlining the open, inclusive, and nonviolent message of the New Testament⁴ as diametrically opposed to the narrow ethnocentric discourse within modern-day Orthodoxy. The latter has a long history dating back to the early Byzantine era and, of course, concrete root causes. However, the diachronic examination of its historical development should be the subject of a specialized study.⁵ Therefore, in the present paper, I will limit myself to a concise but critical overview of the relevant testimony of characteristic New Testament texts within their historical context. In the end, I will relate my analysis to the ethnocentric tendencies of the contemporary ecclesiastical discourse focusing on the example of the modern church context in Greece.

I will divide the material under consideration into (1) the Gospels and Acts, (2) the Pauline letters, and (3) John's Revelation.

1. Gospels and Acts

Due to the enormous time gap from the events of Jesus Christ's life,⁶ as well as their crucial doctrinal significance for the Orthodox churches, even nowadays, their clergy and theologians often overlook the historical setting of those events.

According to the combined witness of the four canonical Gospels, Jesus was a Jew from Galilee.⁷ He lived all of his life within the wider geographical area of

³ Here, nonviolence refers exclusively to the repudiation of physical violence that is exerted in ethnic conflicts, while all other kinds of non-physical violence in New Testament texts are a matter of a different study. For an outline of the relevant research, see J. W. VAN HENTEN, "Religion, Bible and Violence", in P. G. R. DE VILLIERS and J. W. VAN HENTEN (eds.), *Coping with Violence in the New Testament*, STAR 16, Brill, Leiden, 2012, 3–21. Apart from the studies contained in the above-mentioned conference volume, see also inter alia S. MATTHEWS and E. L. GIBSON (eds.), *Violence in the New Testament*, Clark International, New York, NY–London, 2005; M. DESJARDINS, *Peace, Violence and the New Testament*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield, 1997.

⁴ R. B. HAYS, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*, Harper Collins, San Francisco, CA, 1996, 329–344.

⁵ See P. MEYENDORFF (ed.), *Ecclesiology*, 235–540.

⁶ For a critical discussion on the "historical Jesus" see O. HOFIUS, „Ist Jesus der Messias? Thesen“, in *Der Messias, JBTh* 8 (1993) 108–134 (119–129); D. S. DU TOIT, "Redefining Jesus: Current Trends in Jesus Research", in M. LABAHN and A. SCHMIDT (eds.), *Jesus, Mark, and Q: The Teaching of Jesus and Its Earliest Records*, JSNTS 214, Academic Press, Sheffield, 2001, 82–124; For an Orthodox perspective see CH. KARAKOLIS, "Hermeneutical Reflections on Modern Jesus-Research: An Orthodox View", in CH. KARAKOLIS, K.-W. NIEBUHR, and S. ROGALSKY (eds.), *Gospel Images of Jesus Christ in Church Tradition and Biblical Scholarship. Fifth International East-West Symposium of New Testament Scholars, Minsk, September 2 to 9, 2010*, WUNT 288, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, 2012, 427–434. In any case, it is an unquestionable fact that the four canonical Gospels are based on shared historical traditions about Jesus, see J. D. G. DUNN, *Christianity in the Making: 1. Jesus Remembered*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI–Cambridge, 2003, 139–336.

Palestine, almost exclusively associating with fellow Jews.⁸ The terminology and content of his teaching are biblical in origin and spirit, while the images in his parables originate mainly from the everyday life of the Jews of his time. In notable cases, such as the ones of the Syrophenician woman (Mark 7,24-30; cf. Matt 15,21-28) or the Roman centurion (Matt 8:13-13; Luke 7:1-10), Jesus is indeed presented as coming into contact with Gentiles as well, while, however, making it clear that this is a deviation from his standard practice and overall strategy.⁹ In such cases, Jesus does not teach but only acts in a miraculous way for love and mercy towards specific persons, thus moving on the borderline of the otherwise strictly defined framework of his program.¹⁰ It is also indicative that when Jesus sends his disciples to declare the coming of the kingdom of God, he draws their attention to the fact that they should by no means approach the Gentiles or the Samaritans but only the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matt 10,6).

In the New Testament era, Palestine was subjugated to the Romans. The Jews were deprived of their independence and hence their ethnic pride and honor while retaining the right to exercise their religious duties freely. On the other hand, however, the Jews felt humiliated, insulted, and angered by the defilement of their land and even the holy city of Jerusalem by the presence of Roman troops. Furthermore, they paid high taxes to their Roman oppressors.¹¹

Under such circumstances, it was only natural for them to develop strong revolutionary tendencies combined with intense eschatological expectations. Concretely, the Jews used to expect a new Mosaic prophet who would release them from the Roman yoke, reenacting somehow the signs of Exodus.¹² They also anticipated the coming Elijah, who would prepare God's final intervention in history.¹³ Finally, almost everyone was expecting the royal Messiah of Davidic origin, who would initiate

⁷ On Galilee in New Testament times, see S. FREYNE, *Galilee: From Alexander the Great to Hadrian, 323 B.C.E. to 135 C.E.: A Study of Second Temple Judaism*, Clark, Edinburgh, 1998.

⁸ G. THEISSEN/A. MERZ, *Der historische Jesus: Ein Lehrbuch*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, ³2001, 156-174.

⁹ See Jesus' words in Matt 8,10-12; 15,26.28; Mark 7,27.29; Luke 7,9.

¹⁰ In principle, Jesus' program consists in addressing his teaching exclusively to the Jews, see Mark 1,15; Matt 4,17; Luke 4,14-15.

¹¹ On the interaction between Jews and Romans in the time of Jesus see R. A. HORSLEY, *Jesus and the Politics of Roman Palestine*, University of South Carolina Press, Columbia, SC, 2014, particularly 27-79.

¹² Deut 18,15.18; John 1,21.25; 6,14; 7,40.

¹³ Mal 3,1.22-23; cf. Matt 11,14; 16,14; 17,10-12; Mark 1,2; 6,15; 8,28; 9,11-13; Luke 9,8.19; John 1,21.25.

and lead the war against the Romans, liberate God's elect people, and re-establish the kingdom of ancient Israel.¹⁴

The Jews of Jesus' time, at least those who refused to compromise with the presence of the Romans in their land, may have felt humiliated and enraged but not necessarily desperate. According to their sacred texts, they believed in a God who had often intervened in the past to rescue his elect people. He drew their ancestors out of Egypt, led them to the Promise-land, helped them prevail over the Canaanites, and settled them there permanently. He also gave them David and Solomon as their kings, brought them back from their captivity in Babylon, and liberated them from the Seleucids. In the same way—they believed—God could do the same by driving the Romans away for good even now.¹⁵

According to the above, a spark coming from a charismatic personality with a solid appeal to the Jewish masses should be (and historically speaking, was) enough for them to revolt. The Zealot movement aimed to revive the Maccabean insurrection and wars.¹⁶ The devastating Judean war between 66-70 A.D. was the peak of those irredentist tendencies. The ultimate destruction of the native Judaism of Palestine was completed with the rebellion of Bar Kochba in 132-135 C.E., its violent repression, and the transformation of Jerusalem into the Roman city of Aelia Capitolina.¹⁷

According to the testimony of the Gospels and in diametrical opposition to the above-mentioned revolutionary atmosphere and irredentist impulses in Palestine, Jesus did not urge the recipients of his preaching to revolt against the Roman invaders or even to raise claims of ethnic rights. Furthermore, he did not invoke retaliation or attempt to impose justice by force. On the contrary, in his preaching, he demanded unconditional love, even towards the enemies (Matt 5,44; Luke 6,27), self-sacrifice for the benefit of others (Matt 5,39-42), and generally self-denial (Matt 16,24-25; Mark 8,34-35; Luke 9,23-24).¹⁸ He himself provided the model for such an attitude by healing the slave of a Roman centurion, an a priori enemy of the Jews (Matt 8,13; Luke 7,10), while at the same time proclaiming that this man's faith

¹⁴ This is not the place to analyze further the complex messianisms and eschatological expectations of early Judaism. See for further information the relevant studies of the volume edited by M. BOCKMUEHL and J. C. PAGET (eds.), *Redemption and Resistance: The Messianic Hopes of Jews and Christians in Antiquity*, Clark, London–New York, 2007.

¹⁵ Cf. M. HENGEL, *The Zealots: Investigations into the Jewish Freedom Movement in the Period from Herod I until 70 A.D.*, transl. by D. SMITH, Clark, Edinburgh, 1989, 271–290.

¹⁶ See HENGEL, *Zealots*, 313–376.

¹⁷ K. BIEBERSTEIN, "Aelia Capitolina", in Z. KAFATI and R. SCHICK (eds.), *Jerusalem before Islam*, BAR International Series 1699, BAR Publishing, Oxford, 2007, 134–168.

¹⁸ Cf. also Matt 20,28; Mark 10,45; 14,24; Luke 22,20; John 10,11.15; 11,51.52; 15,13. All these texts may refer to Jesus' self-sacrifice but, *mutatis mutandis*, his disciples will have to follow his example while preaching the gospel for the salvation of all nations and sacrificing their lives to this aim, thus, imitating him.

was greater than the one of any Israelite (Matt 8,10; Luke 7,9). Also, when asked whether the Jews should pay taxes to the Romans or not, he replied that they should give Caesar what he already owns and attribute to God that which belongs to him (Matt 22,21; Mark 12,17; 20:25). This means that they should remain faithful to God but at the same time be law-abiding subjects by paying the required tribute to the Romans.¹⁹ Among his disciples, there were even tax collectors (Matt 10,3; 11,19; Mark 2,15; Luke 3,12; 5,27-30; 15,1; 19,2-10), the most hated collaborators of the Roman conqueror.²⁰ Typical cases thereof are the ones of Matthew-Levi (Matt 9,9; 10,3; Mark 2:14; Luke 5,27-29) and Zachaeus (Luke 19,8-9).

Furthermore, in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus asks God the Father to forgive his executioners by claiming that they do not know what they are doing (Luke 23,34). Jesus is, then, in a position to plead for his opponents because he has already forgiven them.²¹ He is not presented as suffering on the cross for the ethnic liberation of the elect people but for the spiritual salvation of the world as a whole (John 3,16.17; 4,42; 6,51; 12,47). He does not respond to violence by using violence but by his voluntary self-sacrifice.²² His death on the cross is, among other things, a par excellence model of love towards the enemies. While he can protect himself by destroying those who lead him to death, he refuses to do so (Matt 26,53). Although people repeatedly challenge him to descend from the cross, he remains silent (Matt 27,40.42; Mark 15,30.32; Luke 23,35.37). He, thus, demonstrates in a concrete way how to turn the other cheek to an offender (Mark 5:39; Luke 6:29). He clearly shows what it means to forgive everything up to 490 times, practically always (Matt 18,22).²³

Besides, while during his earthly ministry, Jesus addresses his preaching exclusively to the Jews, the Gospels testify that before he departs from the world, he sends his disciples to all the nations.²⁴ At this point, an enormous paradigm shift takes place. Except for a few Old Testament texts, like most notably the book of

¹⁹ Cf. R. A. HAGNER, *Matthew 14–28*, WBC 33B, Word, Dallas, TX, 1995, 636.

²⁰ See J. R. EDWARDS, *The Gospel according to Luke*, PiNNTC, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, 111–112.

²¹ This phrase of Jesus (Πάτερ, ἄφεες αὐτοῖς, οὐ γὰρ οἶδασιν τί ποιοῦσιν) is absent from some important ancient manuscripts (P⁷⁵, B, D, W, Θ, 070, etc.) resulting in the doubting of its authenticity; see the relevant discussion in R. L. OMANSON, *A Textual Guide to the Greek New Testament*, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, Stuttgart, 2006, 152. However, whether or not the phrase belongs to the initial text of Luke, it certainly reflects the spirit of the teaching of Jesus, who sacrifices himself for the whole world, his crucifiers included, cf. inter alia Luke 2,32; 24,47.

²² This is evident by his willing surrender to his captors and his denial to accept any violent defense on his behalf, see Matt 26,51-54; Luke 22,51; John 18,2-11.

²³ Cf. HAGNER, *Matthew 14–28*, 537.

²⁴ Matt 28,19-20; 13,10; Luke 2,32; 24,17; John 17,18.21; cf. also Matt 10,18; 24,14; Mark 11,17; Luke 2,32; John 11,52.

Jonah,²⁵ the Old Testament often propagates or at least accepts the idea of hatred against all Gentiles, especially hostile ones (Lev 19,18; cf. Matt 5,43). Thus, in the Old Testament, the Israelites are presented as having to be ruthless towards their enemies, an attitude usually attributed to God's will.²⁶ Jesus, on the other hand, preaches something radically different: he preaches love not only towards those being racially and religiously close as required by the Old Testament (Lev 19,18) but even towards the enemies (Matt 5,44; Luke 6,27.35).

The gap between Jews and Gentiles is gradually bridged in the book of Acts. Here, while the initial preaching of the first church is addressed exclusively to Jews of both Palestine and the Diaspora,²⁷ it then is extended to the Gentiles as well. Thus, Peter preaches the gospel for the first time to the Gentiles when converting the family of Cornelius (Acts 10). Furthermore, according to the command of the resurrected Jesus (Acts 1,8), Paul seeks to preach to all nations, a goal that he potentially achieves by finally reaching Rome (cf. Acts 28,14-31).²⁸ From now on, everyone believing in Jesus Christ, whether Jew or Gentile, belongs to God's new community and is invited to participate in his kingdom.²⁹

Based on the above mentioned, the four Gospels and Acts do not leave any room for an ethnocentric understanding of Jesus' and the apostles' preaching and activity. Of course, the concept of ethnic as a group of people with common characteristics, such as language, origin, and cultural identity, may not be altogether abolished in these books. However, ethnic is abolished as a collective reality that separates people from one another. Now, believers belong to the same community, regardless of their ethnic origin. They are not guided by a political program. They are called upon to relate to each other and the world through unselfish love. It

²⁵ See Jonah 1,2; 3,2.10; Corresponding notions about the possibility of the nations to come to faith and salvation can be found inter alia in Isaiah, see mainly 52,10.15; 55,4-5; 56,7; 60,3; 66,18-20.

²⁶ See, for instance, how the Israelites treat the inhabitants of Jericho in Josh 6,21. According to the Old Testament witness, similar principles are valid in all collective wars of Israel and sometimes even in interpersonal grudges and enmities; see, for instance, the final instructions of the dying David to his son Solomon about the extermination of his enemies in 1 Kgs 2,3-9.

²⁷ Undoubtedly, the nations mentioned as recipients of Peter's preaching right after the descent of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2,8-12) are actually geographical attributes for Jews and proselytes living in the Diaspora and speaking various languages and dialects, cf. Acts 2,5; 10,10-17.34-35.44.

²⁸ Because at that time, Rome was considered as the center of the world, the fact that Paul's gospel reaches it, means in essence that it is just a matter of time until it is also spread to the whole world; see the relevant discussion in J. A. FITZMYER, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AYB 31, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2008=1974, 206-207.

²⁹ According to Paul's missionary program, as described in Acts, the apostle usually initiates his local missionary activity by preaching in the Synagogue. Only at a second stage, he expands his activity outside of it (see the characteristic text in Acts 17,1-3). The new communities he finds include both Jews and Gentiles.

would seem that this attitude would eventually become the primary vehicle of the spread of Christianity.³⁰

2. Pauline Letters

Paul had been a fanatically pious Jew and a Pharisee (Phil 3,5; cf. Acts 23,6; 26,5).³¹ Therefore, we can plausibly assume that as a pious Jew, he should not have been indifferent to the Roman occupation of the sacred land, at least not before his conversion.³²

On the other hand, as is known from his letters, after his conversion, he implied or even supported, among other things, the need for loyalty towards the Roman authorities. Especially in his epistle to the Romans, Paul attributes every form of power to God (13:1). State power is granted by God to prevent people from evil in fear of punishment (13:3). Whoever opposes state power opposes God himself (13:2). State power serves God by imposing the good on the world (13:4). Christ-followers have to attribute to the rulers whatever they owe them: taxes, dues, honor (13,6-7).³³

Of course, Paul does not identify himself as part of the Roman establishment. He thinks and acts as a Jew who is well-versed in the Scriptures and firmly believes in the God of his ancestors. Assuming that the information of Acts about his being a Roman citizen by birthright is trustworthy (Acts 16,37-38; 22,25-29; 23,27), he never uses or even refers to this privileged identity of his in his letters, even when providing his recipients with autobiographical information. His reference to his multiple

³⁰ R. STARK, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*, Harper Collins, San Francisco, CA, 1997, 211–215, has convincingly demonstrated that perhaps, the most effective mission on the part of Christ-followers was not the preaching of Christ but their loving attitude towards the “other.”

³¹ See M. HENGEL, *The Pre-Christian Paul*, SCM, London, 1991, 27–34, 63–86; K.-W. NIEBUHR, *Heidenapostel aus Israel: Die jüdische Identität des Paulus nach ihrer Darstellung in seinen Briefen*, WUNT 62, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, 1992, 43–66.

³² See M. R. FAIRCHILD, “Paul’s Pre-Christian Zealot Associations: A Re-examination of Gal 1.14 and Acts 22.3”, in *NTS* 45 (1999) 514–532.

³³ This particular text of Paul has been often used as an argument in favor of autocratic regimes, while also having been considered as undermining every attempt against injustice of those exerting power; see the relevant discussion in D. J. MOO, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1996, 822–826; B. LATEGAN, “Romans 13:1-7: A Review of Post-1989 Readings”, in *Scriptura: Journal for Contextual Hermeneutics in Southern Africa* 110 (2012) 259–272. However, to be adequately understood, this text should be viewed in its own historical context. Roman persecutions are still unknown, and the gospel’s message is peaceful. Paul does not aim at a violent overthrow of the Roman empire but at a peaceful conversion of its members within a very limited time period at that, since he is convinced that the Lord’s Parousia is imminent (see inter alia 1 Cor 7,31; 16,22; Phil 4,5; 1 Thess 4,17).

imprisonments and corporal punishments (2 Cor 11,23-27; cf. Acts 16,21) demonstrates that he is not privileged by the Roman state, while his overall activity could even appear as threatening to the Roman regime. It is then even more striking that Paul never questions Roman power or urges the members of his communities to disobedience, indiscipline, or even active resistance.

This attitude of Paul must be related, among other things, to the fact that the Roman Empire is the ideal setting for the spread of the gospel. Being cosmopolitan, Paul moves around and travels in the politically uniform and religiously pluralistic Roman world with great ease. Therefore, in principle, he is not and cannot be hostile to this world but considers it as the unified missionary field that God has entrusted to him (Gal 2,8-9). Accordingly, Paul does not consider himself a heroic-violent warrior but a peaceful witness (cf. Rev 22,15).³⁴ Even when using military terminology, he only does so metaphorically to refer to the spiritual struggle of the believer against sin.³⁵

In addition to the above, Paul abolishes the strict ethnic and religious distinction between Jews and Gentiles in an unprecedented way. He addresses both the Jews and the Gentiles through his local missionary activity, thus, incorporating them into the same ecclesial body.³⁶ Paul's inclusive missionary strategy has been crucially essential and fundamental to the gradual transformation of the faith in Christ from being a narrowly bounded Jewish sect into a worldwide religion.³⁷ In his epistle to the Romans (9–11), Paul envisions the eschatological re-incorporation of "Israel according to the flesh" (1 Cor 10,18) as a whole (Rom 11,26) into the unified body of the new people of God. According to God's plan, the Jews had to temporarily reject the gospel to make room for the Gentiles to enter the "ecclesia of God" (1 Cor 15,9).³⁸ However, all Jews will finally be part of the ecclesia before the Lord's

³⁴ Εἰρήνη is a constituent element in Paul's overall teaching about the new reality in Christ; see Rom 8,6; 14,17.19; 15,13; 1 Cor 7,15; 14,33; 16,11; 2 Cor 13,11; Gal 5,22; Phil 4,7; 1 Thess 5,23. On the notion of peace in Paul, see P. CHRISTOFIDES, *The Functional Role of Peace in the Ethos of the Followers of Christ according to Paul*, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, 2000 (doctoral dissertation), 141–306.

³⁵ See, for instance, Rom 5,12-8,10, as well as the relevant analysis in CH. KARAKOLIS, "Death, Life, and Resurrection: Christology, Ethics, and Soteriology in Romans 6,1-24", in J. M. G. BARCLAY (ed.), *Dying with Christ – New Life in Hope: Romans 5,12–8,39*, Colloquium Oecumenicum Paulinum 24, Peeters, Leuven, 2021, 43–75.

³⁶ Cf. Gal 2,11-14; 3,28. See also CH. KARAKOLIS, "Church and Nation in the New Testament: The Formation of the Pauline Communities", *SVTQ* 57 (2013) 361–380.

³⁷ The term "sect" is here used in its sociological and not its theological meaning; see G. THEISSEN, *Kirche oder Sekte? Über Einheit und Konflikte im frühen Urchristentum*, in *Einheit der Kirche im Neuen Testament: Dritte europäische orthodox-westliche Exegetenkonferenz in Sankt Petersburg 24.–31. August 2005*, WUNT 218, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, 2008, 81–101 (81–89).

³⁸ On the understanding of ecclesia in Paul also as a unified supra-local entity see R. E. BROWN, *Biblical Exegesis & Church Doctrine*, Paulist Press, New York, NY, 1985, 114–134; A. DU TOIT, "Paulus Oecumenicus: Interculturality in the Shaping of Paul's Theology", in *NTS* 55 (2009) 121–143 (132–142).

parousia.³⁹ In Paul's letters, the organic unity of Jews and Gentiles within the ecclesia is not just expressed through their shared participation in the eucharist but even through the collection gathered under his instructions in communities with mainly members of Gentile origin to be sent to the Jewish believers of Jerusalem.⁴⁰

Furthermore, the unity between Jews and Gentiles is not just an internal matter of the ecclesia; it is also a vision and a target that encompasses the world as a whole. Potentially, the whole world can and eventually should become God's ecclesia (Rom 11,12.15). From this particular perspective, the enemy cannot be anyone who, at present, is not a part of the ecclesial community. The true enemy is only the devil,⁴¹ while the outsider is potentially tomorrow's brother or sister in Christ. In the deutero-Pauline letter to the Ephesians, the ecclesia is presented as an accomplished organic unity of Jews and Gentiles, which continually expands to ultimately identify with the world as a whole (Eph 1,22-23).⁴² The most characteristic image used here is the one of a house, which is being built constantly until becoming a complete temple of God founded on the apostles and consisting of the ecclesia members as living building materials (Eph 2,19-22).⁴³ The "dividing wall" between Jews and Gentiles has now been demolished (Eph 2:14). Both Jews and Gentiles make up the one tree (Eph 3,17) or the one holy temple of God (cf. 2,21; see 3,17), that is, the ecclesia; they all belong to its body whose head is Christ himself (Eph 1,22; 4,15; 5,23).

3. John's Revelation

John's Revelation seems to be addressed to one or more ecclesial communities in view of an awaited or already occurring persecution by the Roman authorities.⁴⁴ Things are expected to become much worse for Christ believers, who will eventually have to suffer and die for their faith (cf. 13,7.10; 16,6; 17,6; 18,24).

³⁹ On Romans 9–11 and the final conversion of Israel as a whole, see S. GROVE EASTMAN, "Israel and the Mercy of God: A Re-reading of Galatians 6.16 and Romans 9–11", in *NTS* 56 (2010) 367–395.

⁴⁰ Rom 15,25-27; 1 Cor 16,1-4; 2 Cor 8-9. On the Pauline collection, see among others P. VASSILIADIS, "Equality and Justice in Classical Antiquity and in Paul: The Social Implications of the Pauline Collection", in *SVTQ* 37 (1992) 51–59; D. J. DOWNS, "Paul's Collection and the Book of Acts Revisited", in *NTS* 52 (2006) 50–70.

⁴¹ Rom 16,20; 1 Cor 5,5; 7,5; 2 Cor 2,11; 11,14; 12,7; 1 Thess 2,18.

⁴² R. SCHNACKENBURG, *Der Brief an die Epheser*, EKK 10, Benzinger–Neukirchener, Zürich–Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1982, 83–85.

⁴³ See the relevant discussion in M. BARTH, *Ephesians 1–3: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary*, AYB 34A, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2008=1974, 314–322.

⁴⁴ See the discussion on the historical framework of this persecution in G. K. BEALE, *The Book of Revelation. A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC, Eerdmans–Paternoster, Grand Rapids, MI–Cambridge–Carlisle, 1999, 12–16.

Revelation takes a very hostile position towards Roman power,⁴⁵ which differentiates it radically from the rather neutral (or somewhat positive) attitudes of other New Testament writings, such as the Pauline letters or Luke-Acts. Rome is symbolically portrayed as the whore Babylon⁴⁶ and the Roman emperor as the beast, the instrument of the devil.⁴⁷ Roman power opposes the will of God and consequently seeks to exterminate Christ-followers and persecute God's ecclesiae that are collectively portrayed as the woman clothed with the sun, wearing a crown of twelve stars, and having the moon under her feet (Rev 12,1).⁴⁸

However, even under such circumstances, the seer does not consider Christ-followers as warriors but martyrs (Rev 20,4). Their inheritance is the new, heavenly Jerusalem, which is extensively described and presented as incomparably superior to any earthly city (Rev 21; see also Rev 3,12). Accordingly, the king and lord of the faithful is Jesus Christ and not some earthly monarch (Rev 1,5; 17,14; 19,16). The only punisher of the evildoers, those who have received the mark of the beast (Rev 13,17-18), is God through his angels (Rev 6,10; 16,2). The wars described in Revelation concern non-believers and are mainly conducted between angelic and demonic powers.⁴⁹ Christ-followers are depicted as having to suffer, be persecuted, and killed, but they are urged to persevere to the end and never resist by violent means.⁵⁰ While the book of Revelation is full of descriptions of violent events per se, Christ-followers never actively engage in such events but only endure them. On the other hand, what the outsiders suffer due to the outbreak of God's wrath is infinitely worse than the suffering of the Christ believers (Rev 3:10; 8,13; 9–10). Moreover, eventually, God will intervene vigorously by definitively punishing the evildoers and the devil (Rev 20,7-10.14-15; 21,8) and by introducing the faithful to the new Jerusalem (Rev 21,1-7), while the lamb-Christ will bride the church (Rev 21,2.9).⁵¹

⁴⁵ C. R. KOESTER, *Revelation and the End of All Things*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI–Cambridge, 2001, 30–31.

⁴⁶ Rev 14,8; 16,9; 17,1.5.16; 18,2.10.21; 19,2. On the whore-Babylon symbolizing Rome, see BEALE, *Revelation*, 18–19, 25.

⁴⁷ See Rev 13; 14,9.11; 15,2; 16,2.10.13; 17; 19,20; 20,4.10. On θηρίον and its possible symbolisms, see the relevant discussion in D. E. AUNE, *Revelation 6–16*, WBC 52B, Nelson, Nashville, TN, 1998, 770–771.

⁴⁸ See also Rev 12; 19,7; 21,9.

⁴⁹ Rev 9,7; 11,7; 12,7.17; 13,7; 16,14; 19,19; 20,8. The war “against the saints” in Rev 13,7 is unilateral only on the beast's side, while the saints do not actively participate in it.

⁵⁰ Rev 1,9; 2,2.3.19; 3,10; 13,10; 14,12. See also the relevant analysis in J. A. KELHOFFER, *Persecution, Persuasion and Power: Readiness to Withstand Hardship as a Corroboration of Legitimacy in the New Testament*, WUNT 270; Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, 2010, 143–182.

⁵¹ On the image of marriage in Revelation, especially in its ending, see J. FEKKES III, “His Bride Has Prepared Herself”: Revelation 19–21 and Isaian Nuptial Imagery”, in *JBL* 109 (1990) 269–287.

At least partly, the book of Revelation is intended to function in a consoling and encouraging way for the communities it addresses.⁵² Amid immense dangers, the “saints” are urged to persevere and hope in God by remaining faithful and not giving in or actively responding to external threats, for ultimately, it is God who will justify them. During the first millennium, Revelation was not unanimously accepted as part of the New Testament canon of the Eastern church.⁵³ Indeed, apart from its obscure content, one of the reasons thereof was God’s presentation as a ruthless punisher to those who oppose him and, in particular, to the Roman establishment and its representatives.⁵⁴ However, even this radical early Christian manifesto against Rome does not push its recipients into any kind of violent resistance or insurrection. Quite on the contrary, it urges them to endure unprecedented tortures without any active resistance to be finally vindicated and saved.⁵⁵

4. Concluding Remarks

The above analysis and conclusions also apply to all other texts of the New Testament.⁵⁶ Therefore, it is clear that in the New Testament texts, there is no room for the justification of violence on the part of Christ-followers against those who oppress or assail them. Concretely, Jesus himself does not urge his fellow Jews to revolt against their Roman conquerors. On the contrary, he encourages them to pay their taxes and advocates the purely spiritual character of God’s kingdom. Furthermore, although previously a fanatic Jew, Paul presents Roman power as God-given and asks his recipients to obey it. Of course, Roman persecution against Christ believers was still unknown at that time. However, also in later New Testament texts, such as John’s Revelation, there is never any incitement for Christ-followers to the use of violence, not even by appealing to their inherent right of self-defense. The war that they have to fight is perceived as purely spiritual. In the context of this war, Christ believers ought to become martyrs who will confess Jesus Christ in front of the Roman authorities, and not warriors who will defend their faith by armed struggle.

⁵² Cf. R. BAUCKHAM, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993, 15–16.

⁵³ On the reception history of John’s Revelation in the East, see C. R. KOESTER, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AYB 34A, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2014, 29–42.

⁵⁴ Cf. P. G. R. DE VILLIERS, “The Violence of Nonviolence in the Revelation of John”, in *Open Theology* 1 (2015) 189–203.

⁵⁵ Cf. T. NICKLAS, “The Eschatological Battle according to the Book of Revelation: Perspectives on Revelation 19:11–21”, in DE VILLIERS and VAN HENTEN (eds.), *Coping with Violence*, 227–244.

⁵⁶ See on an overall review of the New Testament’s teaching on nonviolence with regard to ethnic or racial conflict, HAYS, *Moral Vision*, 329–344; contra J. PUNT, “Violence in the New Testament and the Roman Empire: Ambivalence, Othering, Agency”, in DE VILLIERS and VAN HENTEN (eds.), *Coping with Violence*, 23–39.

Besides, according to the New Testament testimony, the world can eventually be identified with the ecclesia. The apostles are sent by the resurrected Lord to the whole world. To fulfill this mission, they have to overcome all ideologies and obsessions, including ethnic ones. As a result, all Christ-followers are understood first and foremost as citizens of God's kingdom and people. Although, at the same time, they also remain subjects and citizens of concrete states and members of particular ethnies, their faith in Christ is the dominating element in shaping their collective identity.⁵⁷

Quite differently, both the Orthodox church's hierarchy and body in Greece have identified themselves with the relatively young Greek nation and state to such an extent that, oftentimes, they tend to forget the New Testament testimony about the church's ecumenical and inclusive nature and function. In such cases, then, in which they accept or even use ethnocentric rhetoric and discourse, they practically alienate some of their Orthodox brethren simply because the latter belong to different ethnicities. At the same time, they often consider members of other Christian denominations or religious communities as enemies and not as potential sisters and brothers in faith. In this way, by both practically and theoretically tending to equate national with ecclesiastical identity, the church in Greece often disorientates its members and Greek society in general by implying or openly supporting the idea of Greeks being the new elect people. Thus, it contradicts the above presented New Testament testimony.

In this context, frequently, members of the church hierarchy and body in Greece tend to overlook the martyrs of the faith while promoting or at least accepting as models of imitation the warrior heroes of the Greek nation. Thankfully, the hierarchy of the Church of Greece avoided canonizing any of the nation's fallen heroes. Characteristically, however, in the case of the 400 years long Ottoman occupation of Greece that has produced a significant number of "neomartyrs," there are still church circles in Greece that rather tend to highlight the Greek revolution heroes who fought against the Turks than the above-mentioned neomartyrs, who denied the use of force and suffered martyrdom willingly, thus, fulfilling Jesus Christ's command to follow him by bearing their cross and peacefully sacrificing their lives for his sake (Matt 16,24; Mark 8,34; Luke 9,23).

Clearly, according to the New Testament testimony, the teaching of the church ought to encompass all human beings without exception. It should never radicalize, divide, or fuel feelings of intolerance, national arrogance, and supremacy towards the "other." It should also never lose its soteriological orientation, which has nothing in common with fighting real or imaginary enemies, and everything to do with bearing the own cross, namely taking the path of self-denial, forgiveness, and unconditional love towards each and every human being.

⁵⁷ Cf. Jesus' saying to Pilate, according to which his "kingdom is not of this world" (John 18,36), as well as Paul's saying: "our citizenship is in heaven" (Phil 3,20); cf. also Diogn 5,1-6,10.

Evidently, in this path, there are no “enemies” but only human beings created in the image of God (Gen 1,26-27) and potential brothers and sisters in Christ.

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