

The Lamb and the Beast, Part 2: Arnion v. Therion
March 17, 2019
by Rev. Dr. Eric Elnes

Scripture: Revelation 5:1-14; Isaiah 53:7; 1 Corinthians 1:25-31; Tao Te Ching 61

1. Arnion

Last Friday during the middle of the online meditation I was leading, my phone exploded with text messages. Part of me wanted to open an eye to peek at what was going on, but I resisted. When the session was over, what I found were scores of messages informing me of the white nationalist attacks on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. Like everyone else, I was sickened. Later that day, I joined a number of Countrysiders, members of Temple Israel, and others from the wider Omaha community at the American Muslim Institute to worship with the Muslim congregation and offer prayers for the dead and suffering in New Zealand.

At the service, Imam Jamal Daoudi offered a moving message about how adversity tests the mettle of believers and invites them to respond with faith and courage. As Rabbi Brian Stoller had done after the Tree of Life Synagogue attack in October, Imam Jamal pointed out that these senseless acts of violence are achieving the opposite of what the attackers hope they will. Instead of widening divisions between people of different faiths, they are bringing us together. In fact, the scale and scope of our "togetherness" is unprecedented in the history of our country.

As Imam Jamal marveled at the support of the Omaha community, I was reminded of how Roman attempts to kill Christianity in the first three centuries of the Common Era utterly backfired on them. The Romans thought that if they could kill enough of the Christians, those who remained would quit their churches and renounce their faith for fear of suffering the same fate.

The Romans made a critical miscalculation, however. They believed that the God of Jesus was not real, or at least not very powerful. So they believed that instilling fear would drive people away from their faith. But the God of Jesus is very real, and very powerful. What happens when people take their fears to such a God? Fear is replaced by courage.

Courage is not the absence of fear, by the way. It is the judgment that something else is more important than fear. Something more powerful than the sum of our fears. So the pressure actually galvanized Christians.

It's amazing what happens to a community of faith that finds courage in their connection to the God of Jesus. A kind of transformation takes place that turns fear into faith, uncertainty into hope, and affliction into love – including love of one's enemies. It's an infectious transformation when it happens. The Romans, in fact, found that they couldn't kill enough Christians to keep up with the pagans who were converting to Christianity.

In this respect, I am reminded of the story of the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste, a city in lower Armenia which is now eastern Turkey. In the year 320 CE, forty Roman soldiers who had openly confessed themselves to be Christian were condemned to death by freezing. On a bitterly cold night, the soldiers were marched naked to the middle of a frozen pond and told that anyone who renounced their faith could jump in a hot bath being maintained in a hut at the edge of the pond. Otherwise, they would be kept there until they died. After an hour, one of the Christian soldiers couldn't stand it any longer. He renounced his faith and jumped in the bath, leaving 39 soldiers on the ice.

The next morning, however, 40 martyrs were counted on the ice, not 39. What happened? One of the Roman guards was so moved by the faith, courage, and joyful radiance of the soldiers who preferred to die as followers of Jesus than live as subjects of the Emperor that he converted on the spot. He stripped himself naked and joined them on the ice!

The show of support that Muslims are receiving in Omaha in light of what happened in New Zealand, like the show of support the Jews received after what happened in Pittsburgh, is part of this same counterintuitive dynamic. When fear is transformed by faith, and hope is found in the heart of affliction, the community grows in love for one another and for God. What was meant to kill a community actually empowers and grows it.

Given this ancient and modern background, we may now understand one of the deep conundrums posed by the Book of Revelation.

In Chapter 5, John of Patmos relates a vision he sees of a scroll inscribed on both sides and fastened with seven seals. A voice calls out like thunder, "Is there anyone who can open the scroll, who can break its seals?" No one is found in heaven, or on earth or in the underworld, provoking John to weep bitterly. Why? Because, like the others, John yearns for God's will to be done "on earth as it is in heaven" and the scroll represents the fulfillment of God's design and intent for the world. With no one powerful enough

to break its seals, God's will would not be done, at least not to the extent it could or should be. That's why John weeps.

Then, one of the elders standing around God's throne comforts John saying, "Don't weep. Look – the Lion from the Tribe of Judah, the Root of David's Tree, has conquered. He can open the scroll, can rip through the seven seals."

John turns and sees the animal whom the elder has identified as the Lion of Judah – a clear reference to Christ. Instead of a lion, though, a lamb stands before God's throne. Not just any lamb, either. It was an "*arnion*." In Greek, "*arnion*" refers to a tiny, baby lamb – a lambkin. It's just about the last animal you would expect to be powerful enough to open even a lunchbox, let alone a scroll affixed with seven seals that no one else can break.

But it gets more bizarre. This *arnion* – this lambkin – is bearing the marks of slaughter. You can't get any more powerless than this! At least not in the eyes of the world. Of course, a slaughtered lamb is also a metaphor for Jesus – but why not stick with the lion?

Adding bafflement on top of bafflement, according to Revelation, this slaughtered little lambkin will not only be the one to break the seven seals and open the scroll, but this *arnion* will be the one to defeat *therion*. *Therion*, in Greek, means Beast. The Beast is the monster in Revelation whose whole purpose is to make sure its own will (not God's) is done on earth as it is in heaven. The Beast is said to "rise up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and upon his horns ten crowns, and upon his heads the name of blasphemy." (Revelation 13:1). Seven, in this case, is code language for the seven hills of Rome. Ten is the number signifying greatest political power. In other words, The Beast is Rome. The Beast has been given authority and power by a dragon, which represents Satan. In case you missed the fact that this Beast is supremely powerful, John tells us that *Therion* has a sidekick. It's yet another Beast who serves the first Beast by directing the peoples of the earth to worship his master. This other Beast is likely the combined force of Rome's allies.

So, on one side of the ring, weighing in at 33.3 ounces, we have Arnion, the slain lambkin. On the other side, weighing in at 666 million pounds, we have Therion, the Beast. Which contender would you put your money on? Arnion or Therion, Jesus or the Roman Empire?

Of course, we know *in hindsight* that Arnion does conquer Therion. The Lamb conquers The Beast. The faith of Jesus conquers faith in the Roman Emperor and the Empire itself. The amazing thing is that John of Patmos and Christians like him bet their money –

indeed, their very lives – on these things taking place long before it was even remotely evident that the battle would be won by a power other than The Beast.

How, in heaven's name, did they know this – know this enough to bet everything on the outcome, even if it cost them their lives?

II. Arnion v. Therion

According to the *Tao Te Ching* – the primary religious and philosophical text of Taoism, "A great country is like low land." Just as all the water of higher lands flows toward the low land, so it is with true power. True power does not "lord over" others, but "comes under" them. "Therefore," says the *Tao Te Ching*, "if a great country gives way to a smaller country, it will conquer the smaller country. And if a small country submits to a great country, it can conquer the great country. Therefore, those who conquer must yield, and those that conquer do so because they yield."

That's kind of how U.S. foreign policy works, right, by yielding to smaller nations? (!) What the Taoists recognize, like the early Christians, is that spiritual power works in the exact opposite direction as worldly power does. What seems powerful and important in the eyes of the world is actually weak and insignificant in the eyes of God, and what is considered to be of little worth or value in the eyes of the world is both precious and priceless in the spiritual realm.

So, a great nation that is spiritually fine-tuned knows that you win the hearts – and therefore cooperation – of smaller nations when you consider their best interests, not merely your own. You win them over because they realize that it is in their best interest to cooperate with and support that nation than to subvert and fight it. In real terms, therefore, putting "America First" should mean making America a catalyst for the success of other nations, not merely our own. When "America First" simply means getting our way at the expense of other nations, then our energy – and financial resources – become drained by constantly having to overcome their opposition.

While most empires try to harness the power of Therion in order to hold onto their power, they only really last or become truly great if they adopt the power of Arnion.

The power of Arnion also works for the "little guy," not just the big ones. Mahatma Gandhi knew this power. He knew that if the Indian people were to try to throw off the yoke of the British Empire by using the power of Therion, as the British had, they would lose the battle before it began. Instead, he and others adopted the power of Arnion. To Gandhi and his followers, this meant refusing to use physical force against physical force, but rather using what Gandhi called *Soul Force*, which operates according to the Law of Love, not the Law of the Jungle. This is how Gandhi described it:

*Fear and love are contradictory
Love is reckless in giving away,
oblivious as to what it gets in return.
Love wrestles with the world as with the self
and ultimately gains mastery over all other feelings.
My daily experience ... is that every problem
lends itself to solution if we are determined
to make the law of truth and non-violence the law of life.
For truth and non-violence are, to me,
faces of the same coin.*

***The law of love will work,
just as the law of gravitation will work,
whether we accept it or not ...***

*The more I work at this law
the more I feel the delight of life,
the delight in the scheme of this universe.
It gives me a peace and a meaning of the mysteries of nature
that I have no power to describe.¹*

The power of Arnon versus Therion was also known to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in his struggle for racial justice. King was a devotee of both Jesus and Gandhi, often explaining that "Jesus gave me the message, Gandhi gave me the method."

Writing in his book, The Jesus I Never Knew, Christian author Phillip Yancey describes the effects of King's message and method on both himself and our nation:

Martin Luther King Jr. had some weaknesses, but one thing he got right. Against all odds, against all instincts of self-preservation, he stayed true to the principle of peacemaking. He did not strike back. Where others called for revenge, he called for love. The civil rights marchers put their bodies on the line before sheriffs with nightsticks and fire hoses and snarling German shepherds. That, in fact, was what brought them the victory they had been seeking so long. Historians point to one event as the single moment in which the movement attained a critical mass of public support for its cause. It occurred on a bridge outside Selma, Alabama, when Sheriff Jim Clark turned his policemen loose on unarmed black demonstrators. The American public, horrified by the scene of violent injustice, at last gave assent to passage of a civil rights bill.

I grew up in Atlanta, across town from Martin Luther King Jr., and I confess with some shame that while he was leading marches in places like Selma and Montgomery and

¹ From "The Law of Love" by M.K. Gandhi

Memphis, I was on the side of the white sheriffs with the nightsticks and German shepherds. I was quick to pounce on his moral flaws and slow to recognize my own blind sin. But because he stayed faithful, by offering his body as a target but never as a weapon, he broke through my moral calluses.

The real goal, King used to say, was not to defeat the white man, but "to awaken a sense of shame within the oppressor and challenge his false sense of superiority ... The end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the beloved community." And that is what Martin Luther King, Jr., finally set into motion, even in racists like me.

The power of Therion may be impressive in the eyes of the world, but those who are connected with the true power of Life know that the power of Death is not defeated by the instruments of Death, but the power of Life; the power of Hate is not defeated by more hate, but the power of Love.

In the words of Scripture, "God is Love." (1 John 4:8). When you connect with the power of Love, you connect with the power of God. And when you pit worldly power against God's power, you can bet who wins. For, in the words of the apostle Paul, "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength." (1 Corinthians 1:25-31)

This is why those who seek to destroy mosques, synagogues – or churches – can never ultimately win, provided those who worship in such places remain true to their Source of power and the methods that wielding such power requires.

Wouldn't it be amazing if, in the face of so much hatred, fear, and animosity in our world, people of sincere faith learned once again that our surest source of strength lies not in building higher and higher walls to protect ourselves from our enemies and the weapons they bring but in taking them down?

In this corner, weighing in at 33.3 ounces we have Arnion, the slain lambkin. In this corner, weighing in at 666 million pounds we have Therion, the Beast. Which contender will you put your money on, and your life?