

The Lion-Lamb of Lviv (a fantasy in verse). An Exposition

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I. INTRODUCTION & DEFINITION

Let me begin by introducing myself as a third generation American of Ukrainian descent. I am Emeritus Professor of New Testament at Seattle Pacific University. Twenty years ago, I founded and subsequently co-chaired the Ukrainian Studies Endowment Fund at the University of Washington. For thirteen years, I presided over the Ukrainian American Club [now, “Ukrainian Association”] of Washington State. During five trips to Ukraine in ten years, I lectured at State Universities and at seminaries of all major denominations in both Lviv and Kyiv.¹ At the end of last year, I presented a paper during a four-day conference at the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv.² A posting of my published works, including poetry, can be found on Academia.edu. The work under consideration appeared in the November-December issue of *Theology*, 2016.

My poem adopts and adapts symbols from the late first century CE Apocalypse of St. John. Before proceeding further, defining terms is crucial. In general, when people hear the word “apocalypse,” they invariably think about catastrophe on a large, or global, or even cosmic scale. When reactor IV at Chornobyl [Ukrainian spelling] exploded in

¹ Pages 5 and 6 of my CV (cited there) list my activities in the local Diaspora and in Ukraine itself.

² “The Significance of the Deuterocanon for Deepening the Relationship for Christianity and Judaism” (October 27, 2016).

1986. the event was regarded as an “apocalyptic” one. Yet, at its base, the Greek word means “revelation”, “uncovering”, “unveiling”. Applied to Chernobyl and subsequent efforts to expand nuclear energy, one might ask, “Have we learned anything from this tragedy? Have our eyes been opened about what may happen when, during the formation of public or commercial policy, human and environmental factors are relegated to secondary or tertiary orders of importance?” The often bizarre, unnatural symbols of apocalyptic literature are meant to disorient reader-viewers so as to reorient them into a deeper understanding of the issues.

II. BACKGROUND

At the opening of chapter 5 in the Book of Revelation, the author experiences a vision of God’s throne on which appears a scroll sealed with seven seals. A universal search for someone worthy to open the document gets nowhere until the conquering Lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, is found (vv. 1–5). At this point, the Seer turns to discover a Lamb, instead—as if its throat had been slit (but possessing 7 horns and 7 eyes): a victorious victim—an all-powerful, all-seeing creature (v. 6). Next, the entire universe breaks out in ascribing to the slain Lamb power, wealth, wisdom, might, honor, glory, and blessing. Such lavish praise is given for establishing a kingdom and for creating a priesthood out of every tribe, language, people, and nation (vv. 9–12). In so doing, the membership of this “political” community is identified as a nation of bridge-builders, of go-betweens.

Set in the context of the writer’s own Jewish people’s expectation of a messianic king and within the context of Roman imperial power during the reign of Domitian (whose coins proclaimed him as *Dominus et Deus*—“Lord and God”), it is a stunning,

double repudiation of conventional political power and military might and of the religion invoked to give it legitimacy. The State has been deprived of its ultimate weapon for subjugating its people: the ability to exercise control over life and death. In this understanding of power, the victim is the Victor.

Consequently, Christian readers were being prepared for the likelihood of a pushback: resistance from their own Jewish compatriots and retaliation from the prevailing pagan Gentile State. Subsequently, in two and three-dimensional Christian art, the lion and lamb—on those occasions where they appear together—are always congenial. And they are always distinct, separate. Sometimes, they illustrate that universal harmony characteristic of the future, Peaceable Kingdom envisioned by the Hebrew prophet, Isaiah (chapter 11). So far as I am able to determine, never are they joined or come into contact—before my poem.

III. FOREGROUND

Lviv, the unofficial capital of western Ukraine (Halychyna or Galicia) is regarded as the heart of Ukrainian-speaking Ukraine, the center of Ukrainian nationalism. Long under Hapsburg rule (until the end of WW1) and Polish control until 1939, it was joined with the Eastern portion of Ukraine by the Soviets after WW2. Its architecture bears striking similarities to that of Vienna and Zagreb. King Danylo of Halych (13th century) founded the city, naming it in honor of his son (“Lev’s”), whose name is derived from the Ukrainian word for lion, itself stemming from the Greek. The city is indeed saturated with leonine statuary. A Google search of “Lviv Lion” or “Lion Lviv” immediately brings up an astonishing array of visual variations on the theme—from the whimsical to

the deadly serious.³ Lamb imagery remains confined to various ecclesiastical bodies, whether these are in communion with Rome (Greek Catholic and Roman Catholic Churches) or with Constantinople (one of the three Orthodox Churches⁴).

However, so far as I am aware, the double image of my poem is the first attempt in the history of literature or visual art to relate these figures in such a manner. With this work, I explore what would happen were I to transfer my adaptation of the Lion-Lamb configuration from its first century Mediterranean environment regarding Christianity and State at odds with each other to a twenty-first century East European one, where Church and State have achieved a level of co-operation—so much so that serious discussions at both levels are examining the possibility of forming a national church.⁵

IV. THE POEM ITSELF

Before conducting an analysis of the poem's contents, let me briefly identify its technical features. The setting is urban and narrative in form. There is no rhyming, consistent line length, or standard paragraph size. I have adopted and adapted a kind of blank verse, using iambics (stress on the second syllable), which approximates the cadence of spoken

³ Although the Leopolis Hotel exists in Old Town, the Leontopolis Hotel does not—its name originating with a royal and religious center in Hellenistic Egypt. Everything else in the poem is a figment of my imagination.

⁴ The Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Kyiv Patriarchate), and the Autocephalus Ukrainian Orthodox Church. These divisions prevail throughout the country. Halychyna is also home to an energetic, Evangelical Protestantism: especially the Pentecostal and Baptist varieties (which tend to be iconoclastic in outlook, if not in performance).

⁵ See risu.org.ua for the latest on these discussions. One wonders what logo or emblem would be devised to visualize such a union. Familiar is the double-headed eagle that the Eastern (by then “Christian”) Roman Empire adopted and subsequently appropriated by some Eastern European states, principally by Imperial Russia.

English. But unless the visual component of a poem carries its weight, the work lapses into prose. As such, I ask everyone to keep in mind that this is a work of art, not history. It is an act—a leap—of imagination, an exercise of “What-if?”.

What if leonine statuary were discovered that subverted the iconic, omnipresent renditions of the king of beasts and lord of the jungle? How might various sectors of Lviv’s citizens (a microcosm for the entire nation) react? What would their responses signify? The poem as originally written confines itself to the remarks of an academic (a paragon of non-committed objectivity), a pompous critic who seems personally offended by the assignment to comment on the discovery, and—mostly—by clergy of the upper echelons in the Church. But as I prepared for this exercise, I began to excavate other strata within my own subconscious that required exposure. It became clear to me that further commentary required a two-level response if the ironic or paradoxical nature of the sculpture were to be given its due. In other words, whom would the statue offend? Whom would it support?

A. Culture

One would expect scholars to attempt viewing the discovery dispassionately (lines 67–69), with a sense of balance; but their attempts at neutrality and objectivity might be viewed as hedging their bets in this case. That no precedent could be found among the vast troves of the nation’s iconography does not say much. At least no broadside was leveled at the statuary’s execution. It was not done by amateurs. Nevertheless, the subject matter of the figure draws considerable fire from a representative of the openly hostile class of professional critics. He immediately evaluates the statue in classical categories (“Gorgon” in lines 63–66) rather than in Christian ones. The point is not to pit Athens

against Jerusalem. Rather, it is to acknowledge that the latter is our nearer neighbor, our lodestone. Seen against the backdrop of existing renditions of the lion theme, the contrast is too much for this arbiter of taste. So, it elicits his scorn. One can live with either lion or lamb, but not both. Or, if both are to be represented, they should be kept separate—each maintaining its own integrity.

Nevertheless, the very fact that such a dual figure was conceived at all should arouse curiosity, if not awe. It breaks all previous artistic tradition that associates—but does not connect—the two creatures. Surely, both academic and critic could have waited until the question of provenance had been resolved. Might the artist or patron have been none other than Vasyl'ko, the brainy, reclusive, saintly brother of Danylo Halyckyj himself? If so, then the sculpture (or the ideology behind it) hails from the 13th century itself, representing an alternative way of being Ukrainian and Christian at a time when the Khan and the Golden Horde were pressing into Central Europe and beyond via Ukrainian lands.

B. Society

In a country where losing has been such a part of its history, can one moderate the understandable desire to win again—for a change? Of course, I am not pooh-poohing Ukraine's achievements in popular culture and the arts, nor minimizing her victories in sport, especially at the Olympic level. Nevertheless, some aspects of the latter is an expression of legitimated, ritualized violence, both collective (teams) and individual (boxing). And imagery from sport sometimes carry over into the political arena. For example, Vitaliy Klitchko—retired World Boxing [heavy-weight] Champion—became

Mayor of Kyiv by heading a party called “Ukrainian Democratic Alliance for Reform”, whose acronym (UDAR/УДАР) means “hit” or “punch”.

And what of those macho elements in society where the use of brute force regulates family life, where violence is taken for granted?⁶ My paternal grandmother told of an incident in her village (during the late 1890s—early 1900s) where the girls would mock a young woman whose fiancé was so much shorter than her: “How will he beat you, they protested?” She replied, “I’ll give him a stool!” The lion-lamb symbol would challenge paternalistic, top-down attitudes towards male-female relationships. These are not simply peasant attitudes of a by-gone era. An acquaintance living in Kyiv, who was schooled in the ideology of the “New Soviet ‘Man’”, nevertheless maintained that males made the better university lecturers.

So far as economic development is concerned, can consumerism co-exist alongside the notion that life does not consist in the things that humans possess—this for a population that has been deprived of so much for so long, when memories of waiting in long lines for basic foods are still fresh, at least among the older population? Whatever one thinks message and methods of the radical (now dissolved) feminist movement, “Femen”, this group of women, already vulnerable in a man’s world, made themselves even more so by the exposing their upper bodies, sacrificing themselves to public ridicule and, sometimes, police (male) brutality. They thus became the visible symbols for others on the margins and at risk: children, the poor, the aged, and immigrants. What could be

⁶ In the UK, “Lad Culture” or “laddism” is to be found even within universities (<https://www.nus.org.uk/en/nus-calls-for-summit-on-lad-culture/>), a milder version of which is expressed by “hearties”.

more vulnerable than a lamb—especially one about to be slaughtered. And yet, and yet . . .

C. Politics

Although not all political leaders would put it this crudely, every person in authority espouses a version of “Make Ukraine Great Again”. Centuries of oppression by Poles, Russians, and Soviets have whetted the thirst and appetite for freedom. Having gained a taste of independence after WW1 and having achieved a version of it after 1991 (energized in large part by the Rukh movement centered in Lviv), Ukrainians could understandably be wary of anything suggesting further suffering and sacrifice—most recently after the upheaval of Maidan in late 2013, the loss of Crimea in early 2014, and the current fighting in the Donbas region. The latter two crises have not been about gaining new territory; rather, the conflicts have centered upon maintaining internationally-recognized boundaries by recovering the former and retaining the latter. Memories of Stalin’s artificially-induced Famine (the Holodomor) and the lingering results of the Chornobyl tragedy contribute to the inertia and more subtle malaise. Rule by corrupt corporate oligarchs magnifies the economic stagnation.

But such passivity has its limits: violence to achieve political aims, under the rubric of cleansing the state and economy of corruption, came to expression at the Maidan. It was when the corrupt, Russia-leaning President Yanukovich and his family were physically threatened by far-right leaders that the agreement negotiated between the Head of State and the foreign ministers of Poland, France, and Germany fell apart. And the country’s legally-elected leaders fled, mostly to Russia.

In this kind of an environment, risk-taking is risky business. However, historical precedence and imaginative thinking might provide models for the present. During the 18 chaotic months between the end of WW1 and the communist takeover, the fledgling Ukrainian National Republic printed its paper currency in Ukrainian, Russian, Polish, and Yiddish. Official government documents were printed in these four languages. For the first time ever, a Ministry of Jewish Affairs was established.⁷ Recent signs of creative thinking, both at the political and religious levels, have emerged—significantly—in connection with the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv. On April 21, 2015, Volodymyr Turchynovskyy, Director of the International Institute for Ethics and Contemporary Issues there, delivered a lecture in Kyiv on reconciliation with Russia as Ukraine’s next serious battle.⁸ Perhaps the risk-laden, lion-lamb image would contribute to the discussion.

D. Christianity

Efforts to create a National Church have not yet borne fruit because several dynamics are at work. Orthodoxy in Ukraine is split three ways. The largest, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Moscow Patriarchate, is for all intents and purposes the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine.⁹ Adding to the diversity is the nine million member Ukrainian Greek

⁷ However, such liberal thinking by the elite did not influence the peasantry and lower orders of the military in promoting pogroms against Jews. See Henry Abramson, *A Prayer for the Government: Ukrainians and Jews in Revolutionary Times, 1917-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Series in Ukrainian Studies, 1999).

⁸ <http://ucef.org/news/5214/>

⁹ The other two are the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Kyiv Patriarchate) and the Autocephalous Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

Catholic [Uniate] Church, its population highest in western Ukraine. Although the *de facto* capital is Lviv, its *de jure* headquarters are now centered in Kyiv.¹⁰ An energetic Protestant movement (mainly Baptist and Pentecostal) thrives throughout the country.¹¹ Thus, it is unlikely that the Christian Church in Ukraine will ever enjoy the kind of hegemony that Russian Orthodoxy exercises today.

Yet, these denominations are legal entities in Ukraine; and their leaders have high-level access to the Government via the ecumenical All-Ukrainian Council of Churches and Religious Organizations (AUCCRO)¹². Largely because of their charitable work, religious organizations enjoy higher approval ratings than politicians and business moguls. They are seen not only as the preservers of Ukrainian culture but also as contributing to the stability and security of the state.¹³ Therefore, any threat to such hard-

¹⁰ Although ecclesiastically loyal to Rome, it retains its Eastern/Byzantine traditions. Regarded since 1596 (during the Roman Catholic Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth) by the dominant Orthodox Church as traitorous ecclesiastically and politically, its clergy underwent severe persecution during the Communist occupation, which the prevailing Orthodox hierarchy chose to support. After independence, the Greek Catholics struggled to recoup their confiscated churches and properties. Ugly battles between Christian brothers and sisters gained unwanted media scrutiny.

¹¹ http://risu.org.ua/en/index/expert_thought/comments/58133/. Despite official repression under the communists, Ukraine had been called the “Bible Belt” of the former Soviet Union.

¹² https://risu.org.ua/en/index/all_news/confessional/auccro/65279/.

¹³ Andriy Yurash, an academic from Lviv specializing in this aspect of religion’s role, is the Government’s Director of the Department for Religions and Nationalities to the Ministry of Culture.

http://risu.org.ua/en/index/all_news/community/religion_and_policy/66130/

won visibility and freedom of activity would tend to be resisted. Embracing the double image in question would risk threatening the powers (both civic and clerical) that seek to ensure that Church and State are not seen as enemies or even friendly rivals. On the whole, governments approve the pastoral care exercised by the Church. It's with the latter's exercise of prophetic critique that tensions arise. Taking independent stands that either do not endorse government policies or sometimes oppose them carries with it a price to pay (even if it does not come in the heavy-handed form of earlier eras). Having been out of power for so long, it would not be about to give it up without a struggle.

The Church triumphant—and even militant—has finally come into its own. Sponsoring a “muscular Christianity,” especially among boys and men becomes a temptation, especially as imported by American missionaries of the Evangelical persuasion. The antidote to such a *theologia gloriae*, is to embrace a *theologia crucis*, which the Lamb symbolizes. Although the Church has never encouraged its followers to seek martyrdom, it has reminded them of the road less traveled: the path of suffering. It belongs to the inverted, counter-intuitive way of being and living in the world: winning comes by losing, filling by emptying, and living by dying. In the end, will this apocalyptic symbol from the first century (as applied by the sculptor) sufficiently disorient its viewers so as to reorient them in the twenty-first? Is such a figure's serving as logo for Christianity in Ukraine too much to expect?

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