

POWER UP FOR GRABS: THE ROD OF IRON, MUSCULAR CHRISTIANITY, AND FORMAL WHITENESS

In 2018, Hyung Jin Sean Moon, the pastor of the World Peace and Unification Sanctuary Church in Newfoundland, Pennsylvania, presided over a ceremonial renewal of wedding vows wherein he blessed all of those present—along with the AR-15s that were required for attendance. He cited his interpretation of the “rod of iron” language of Revelation 2:26-27 as justification for that provocative gesture.¹ In so doing, he echoed the “pro-Second Amendment” rhetoric found in many of today’s “patriot churches,” spaces wherein claims to Christian and white supremacy are freely espoused and underpin both conspiratorial worldviews and eschatological hopes.²

However, this event curiously departs from those ideological staples in at least one regard:

Hyung Jin Sean Moon is Korean, and his church is—at least in public—a vocal proponent of racial unification and colorblind ideology. This raises an important question: can the hegemonic structures of white supremacy continue to function after their apparent decoupling from explicit assertions of white dominance? Moreover, what is the role of the “rod of iron” signifier and its associated verses in maintaining the functioning of that structure and the efficacy of the political discourse that it supports?

The present investigation seeks to answer those questions by tracing the “rod of iron” language in Revelation 2:27 and related passages from its ancient Near Eastern context to the present day.

¹ Hyung Jin Sean Moon liberally cites from instances wherein the phrase “rod of iron” appears within the Bible. Nevertheless, as can be seen in a sermon he gave in 2018, Rev. 2:27 is the first verse from the New Testament that he turns to when he looks to justify referring to the coming kingdom of God—and, not coincidentally, his own ministry—as the “Kingdom of the Rod of Iron”: “And how does Christ define his own Kingdom when he comes back? He defines it as a Kingdom of the Rod of Iron [...] Revelation 2:27, ‘And he shall rule the nations with a Rod of Iron, break them into shivers as a potter’s vessel, as his Father has given authority.’ Like in the end, you don’t get to define the Kingdom. He gets to define the Kingdom. His Kingdom of the Rod of Iron.” Cf. Moon, “Kingdom of the Rod of Iron 20.”

² For examples of that ideology’s representative features, cf. Pulliam Bailey, “Seeking Power.”

A series of examples ranging from 17th-century England to 21st-century America provide a glimpse of the reception history of that phrase and reveals the metonymic indeterminacy and semantic malleability that have made the rod of iron an essential feature of political discourse in widely divergent historical contexts. The investigation then concludes by drawing attention to two points: (1) the metonymic slippage characteristic of the “rod of iron” is what allows that signifier to accommodate Hyung Jin Sean Moon’s recent militant appropriations of that verse; (2) rather than overcoming whiteness, those appropriations instead rely upon a “formal whiteness” that perpetuates the hegemonic structures of white-supremacist, muscular American Christianity despite the apparent absence of explicit whiteness.

BETWEEN SOLDIERS AND SHEPHERDS: THE ROD OF IRON AND METONYMIC SLIPPAGE

The “rod of iron” image occurs in multiple places in the Revelation of John, but no other appearance has the polyvalent potential of Rev. 2:27. At first glance, that verse seems to conjure an image of extreme violence. This should be unsurprising granted its historical context. Revelation’s second and third chapters consist of letters directed to seven churches in Asia Minor, with vv. 2:18-28 having been written to the church in Thyatira (modern day Akhisar, Turkey). As Mitchell Reddish suggests, this epistolary mode of address implies a level of intimate familiarity with its original audience.³ That familiarity hints at the work’s provenance, and that hint is all the more necessary because, despite the work declaring its author to have been “John,” precisely who that John was has been debated since at least the 4th Century.⁴

³ “Even though the identity of John is not known to modern readers, he was apparently well-known to his original audience in Asia Minor. He speaks to them with both authority and comradery, as a respected leader but also one of them.” Reddish, “The Genesis of the Book of Revelation,” 23.

⁴ Ehrman reminds the reader that “even though the book of Revelation was finally included in the New Testament canon because Christian leaders came to think it had been written by Jesus’s

Nevertheless, Revelation's pseudonymity was a standard feature of the apocalyptic genre.⁵ What we can reliably say is that the author was likely writing from somewhere in Asia Minor toward the end of the 1st Century.⁶ This means that the violent imagery on display both in Rev. 2:27 and throughout the rest of the text is probably connected to the political turmoil and persecutions epitomized by Nero's mid-century demonization of Christians.

It is also possible that the combination of the author's pseudonymity and Revelation's violent imagery was a strategic decision. Bart Ehrman mentions that some readers have seen Revelation's bizarre imagery and esoteric symbolism as evidence that it was "underground literature."⁷ This interpretation, however, risks missing the forest for the trees: arguing that a true message has been meticulously encoded and hidden within the work makes it possible to entirely miss the text's polysemic possibilities. That approach posits one message and loses the multiplicity of others that fail to conform to the understanding that it presupposes. The semantic density on the surface of Rev. 2:27 should not be lost in the search for deeper secrets.

disciple, John the son of Zebedee, there were outspoken dissenters," the most prominent of them being Dionysius of Alexandria. Ibid., 475. Dionysius ultimately concluded that "there must have been two different early Christian leaders named John, both of whom were active in Asia Minor, whence both the Gospel and Revelation derived." Ibid. He reached that conclusion in accordance with the opinion of Eusebius: "The one who wrote these things [i.e. the book of Revelation] calls himself John, and we should believe him. But it is not clear which John he was." Cited in Ehrman, *A Historical Introduction*, 470.

⁵ Cf. Ibid., 474. Ehrman adds that Revelation's pseudonymity is nevertheless unusual inasmuch as its author claims to be speaking from a period contemporary with his audience. By contrast, "Almost all of the ancient apocalypses were written pseudonymously in the name of a famous religious person for the past" like, for instance, "Moses, Abraham, Enoch, and even Adam." Ibid.

⁶ Ehrman observes that the scholarly consensus situates the writing of some parts of Revelation during "the 60s of the Common Era, soon after the persecution of the Christians under Nero." However, he adds that other textual clues "suggest that it was not completed until somewhat later, probably around 95 C.E., during the reign of Domitian." Ibid., 478.

⁷ Ibid., 474.

The entirety of Rev. 2:18-28 bears a polysemic ripeness that stems from two major sources: the intertextual tension resultant from its allusion to Psalm 2:8-9 and the tension internal to its own imagery. The allusion underlying the first tension is commonplace in the work since, as Steve Moyise observes, “although there are no formal quotations from the Old Testament in the book of Revelation, there are more allusions and echoes to it than in any other New Testament book.”⁸ Nevertheless, understanding that allusion’s referent is especially crucial in this instance because of the ways in which Rev. 2:27 differs from its psalmic counterpart.

Psalm 2 is peculiar even within the Psalms. Scholars often group it along with “so-called royal psalms,” which themselves also bear a special relation to the “enthronement psalms.”⁹ William Brown notes that, while they “exhibit no fixed literary pattern,” all of the first group’s psalms deal “with the earthly king,” while those of the second group, in lieu of “celebrating the earthly king, [...] acclaim God’s kingship.”¹⁰ Whether in their celestial or terrestrial manifestations, the imperial themes of asserted authority, rulership, and conquest encountered throughout Psalm 2, and especially the content of vv. 6-9 from which the “rod of iron” originates, clearly resonate with the language of sovereignty and conquest manifest in the encounter between the “Son of God” and the church in Thyatira. Moreover, in both that psalm and Revelation, the triumph of “God’s ‘son’ [is celebrated] within the boiling cauldron of international conflict.”¹¹

⁸ Moyise summarizes the point well: “The sheer density of allusions and echoes has led some scholars to call it a ‘midrash’ [.]” Moyise, “The Old Testament,” 85.

⁹ Brown, *Psalms*, 56. Brown lists the following as royal psalms: 2; 18; 20-21; 45; 72; 101; 110; 118; 144:1-11. He also names the following as enthronement psalms: 24; 29; 47; 93; 95-99. Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

Like in the letters to the churches in Ephesus, Smyrna, and Pergamum that precede it, the letter to Thyatira echoes the Manichaean sense of division that permeates Psalm 2, where there is neither “neutral territory” nor “middle ground”: here “you are either on the side of the righteous, on the side of YHWH’s chosen king, or you are against [...] the God of Zion.”¹² In the case of Psalm 2, v. 9 unequivocally demonstrates that there is no room for ambiguity when it comes to that division and the divine response to those who fall on the wrong side of it: “you shall break them with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.” Nevertheless, it is precisely in the translation of this clear-cut language to the context of John’s Revelation that a fateful quotient of ambiguity is introduced. Whereas the “rod of iron” is clearly what shatters the nations in the psalmic context, the rod of Revelation is instead partially divorced from that violent action and recast as an instrument of rulership and symbol of “authority over the nations.”

Rather than simply recalling the words of Psalm 2:9, the first clause of Rev. 2:27 also adds language from the verse that proceeds it in the Psalms: “Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession.” Although this might first seem like a mere instance of semantic condensation, this rendering conceals an opening for metonymic slippage that proves decisive for its interpretation going forward. Moyise suggests that the element that provokes that slippage, namely, the rendering of the Hebrew **תַּרְעָם** via the word **πομπανει**, is characteristic of John’s unusual Greek.¹³ As a form of the verb **רָעַע** (to smash,

¹² Ibid., 115.

¹³ Although Moyise remains undecided as to whether this is because John’s Greek is simply “barbaric and full of solecisms” (as per Dionysius of Alexandria), or because the author’s native language was semitic so that “he thought in Hebrew but wrote in Greek” (the opinion held by R.H. Charles), he ultimately concludes that consideration of the peculiarities of instances including that of the “rod of iron” passage ultimately demonstrate that “John’s visionary

shatter), the destructive valence that **תִּרְעַם** lends to the rod of iron's action perfectly accords with the cacophonously onomatopoeic **תִּנְפֹּץ** (a form of **נפץ** - to smash) at the verse's end.¹⁴ That word's transformation into **ποιμανεῖ** (from **ποιμαίνω** – to watch out for other people, *to shepherd*), however, has the opposite result, since the connotations of guidance, care, and attentiveness that accompany idealized notions of rulership in no way match with **συντρίβεται** (from **συντρίβω** – to break into pieces, crush), which word would otherwise be a perfectly suitable replacement for **תִּנְפֹּץ**. The result is an awkward disparity so glaring that it prompts a lexical exception to **ποιμαίνω** that is almost uniquely attributable to the utilization of that word in Revelation generally and in Rev. 2:27 in particular.¹⁵ John's lexical innovations break the connection between the psalmic “break” and its subsequent “shattering.” His **ῥάβδω σιδηρῷ** in Rev. 2:27 thereby restores the polysemy that **תִּרְעַם** lacked in its univocal, flattened state as a tool of violence in Psalm 2:9.

Triangulating between the terms “rule,” “iron rod,” and “shattered” reveals the space of metonymic slippage wherein resides second aforementioned tension, one that is internal to the message to Thyatira. As Mays signals, the message of Psalm 2 is read in Revelation as eschatological prophecy.¹⁶ This conjures an atmosphere wherein “the warfare of the powers of earth against God and his anointed will reach its climax (Rev. 11:18; 19:19), in which the one

approach is not bound by the wording of particular OT texts.” Cf. Moyise, “The Old Testament,” 86-87.

¹⁴ Cf. Koehler and Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic*, s.v. 8917 **רעע** definition II; *ibid.* s.v. 8974 **רצץ**; *ibid.* s.v. 6279 **נפץ**.

¹⁵ This exception is expressed as follows in entry **γ** of the second definition: “the activity as ‘shepherd’ has destructive results.” The scare quotes are particularly telling in this instance. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. **ποιμαίνω** entry **γ**.

¹⁶ Mays, *Psalms*, 50.

who is King of kings and Lord of lords will gain the victory and rule the nations with a rod of iron (Rev. 19:11,16).”¹⁷ However, for the time being, the audience in Thyatira still lives in the tension between total war and the coming kingdom. They are caught between “the ‘already’ of the Messiah and the ‘not yet’ of his rule [.]”¹⁸ In this way, the community of believers addressed by the text inhabit the space between the two ends of that iron rod, namely, the one that smashes and shatters, and the one that rules and shepherds. This situation of distress and expectant tension makes them a perfect example of many audiences who have embraced John’s Revelation in the ensuing centuries.¹⁹ But with that embrace there also comes a question: whether it is for shattering or shepherding, what is the identity of that rod?

Brian Blount bring this question to the fore in his commentary on Revelation. He argues that the repetition of the passive construction “it was given” throughout Revelation is John’s way of indicating that “God provides the tool that makes his prophetic activity possible. God operates by proxy.”²⁰ While this comment is initially made in relation to the angelic “measuring reed” that appears in multiple passages, Blount also holds that the pairing of that reed with the image of the rod (ῥάβδος) demonstrates that John possesses a “broader theological understanding,” one in which, as intimated in Rev. 2:27, “all who conquer because of their witnessing will be rewarded with an iron rod, which they will use to rule the nations in the same way that a shepherd watches over, guides, protects, and disciplines his flock.”²¹ Blount goes on to note that despite the rod’s

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Citing Mitzi Smith’s understanding of the function of prophecy within apocalyptic literature, Thomas B. Slater writes that “The target audience may be in distress or noncompliant with well-established social norms, practices, and expectations. This type of literature may encourage perseverance, fidelity or hope. Apocalypses often envision a more just society in the near future.” Cf. Slater, “Interpreting Revelation,” 495.

²⁰ Blount, *Revelation*, 202.

²¹ Ibid., 202-203.

having changed possession when the construction appears again at Rev. 12:5—where it belongs to “a child [who] is clearly Christ,”—in both that verse and its later appearance in Rev. 19:15 the rod’s function as an instrument of rulership is nonetheless confirmed to be that of a “shepherding, watchful, though disciplinary role for his prophecy even where the disobedient nations are concerned.”²² Blount accordingly concludes that, when it comes to the rod of iron as an instrument of rulership and judgment, “the terminology suggests that the judgment is reconstructive, not punitive.”²³

Blount’s perspective is well grounded in the polyvalence of Rev. 2:27’s “rod of iron” imagery. Nevertheless, he clearly sets aside much of the explicit violence of both that imagery and its surrounding context, especially the startling violence inflicted on the woman Jezebel immediately prior to the rod’s first appearance in Revelation. Perhaps this is due to the background of cosmic war against which that image is deployed. Indeed, the violence depicted is largely enacted by God, God’s emissaries, or God’s chosen people, for which reason Colleen Conway has argued that it is not surprising that commentators are often hesitant to see the violence as such, and even more so in images that suggest the kind of sexual violence that seems to be involved in the portrayal of Jezebel’s comeuppance.²⁴ Nevertheless, even when deep-seated convictions as to the inerrant justice of divine action remain unshaken within the reader, a fact that Blount himself notes should not be missed: the rod of rulership is in the first instance promised to the people, that is, “to everyone who conquers and continues to do my works to the end.” This may all be well and good as long as the rod thus granted is properly identified as an

²² *Ibid.*, 203.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Cf. Conway, *Behold*, 162.

instrument of guidance and shepherding, but what happens when a group claims that it is the rod's proper inheritor and also thinks that it knows precisely which vessels need smashing?

That this twist in the violent rhetoric so recurrent in Revelation is possible should be no more unexpected than the hermeneutical reluctance signaled by Conway. Indeed, here we see a kind of symbolic slippage that is related to but also differs in important ways from the metonymic ambiguity of the "rod of iron." That slippage corresponds to the difficulties inherent in determining the strategy underlying that violence's representation. What is clear from the connection invoked between Psalm 2 and Revelation 2 is that the imperial imagery that appears therein is essential to situating and justifying the violence that it heralds and unleashes. The relation between said violence and that imperial imagery can be understood in different ways. For example, Conway presents David Aune's thesis that the "imperial imagery in Revelation in general" is strategically employed by the author "to polarize 'God/Jesus and the Roman Emperor, who is but a pale and diabolic imitation of God.'"²⁵ Nevertheless, after acknowledging the strategic advantages that would have been afforded by such an approach, Conway instead advocates another "more obvious cultural interaction, and one suggested by several other readers of Revelation," namely, "that the author simply mirrors the emperor in his depictions of God/Jesus."²⁶ As she goes on to signal, this approach seems far more probable inasmuch as it fits with a strategy that is common throughout the whole of the New Testament: "[using] the widespread cultural image of imperial authority to represent the ruling authority of the Christian savior and God."²⁷ However, it is also at this point that Conway drives home the real peril implicit in that rhetorical strategy. On her reading, Revelation reproduces both the trappings of

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

Roman imperialism and the “imperial violence” that sustains and enforces that empire’s dominance. Her reading thereby exposes the danger that is also latent within the “rod of iron” language: if that rod can be entrusted to the people just as well as to God or God’s emissary—and, following the logic of the text itself, to the former *before* the latter—, then might whatever people prove to be a proper claimant of the rod not also have license to wield the violence that it is capable of conveying? Who then is to decide who is shepherded or shattered? Said otherwise, what happens when the rod of iron’s power is up for grabs?

A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE: THE IRON ROD, ITS MEANING, AND ITS CLAIMANTS

Having traced the rod’s transformation from the psalmic רֹדֶף בְּרֹזֶן to John’s ῥάβδος σιδηρᾶ , the emergence of the “rod of iron” into English can now be explored. One might be tempted to begin that exploration with the King James Bible but, as David Crystal notes, the English translation of the Psalter is a peculiar outlier since it already existed in the popular consciousness in the form that it had been given by Miles Coverdale prior to the King James Bible’s appearance.²⁸ It was also in that form that it entered the Book of Common Prayer, a fact which, as Crystal points out, combined with English law to ensure that Coverdale’s translation had an unparalleled impact on the English lexicon: “The Psalter was required by law to be recited once a month in every parish as part of Matins and Evensong. Coverdale’s phraseology thus entered sixteenth-century linguistic consciousness long before the King James Bible arrived; and stayed there even after 1611.”²⁹ It is in this context that the distinction that Crystal draws between quotation and idiom becomes salient, with the former being context-dependent and the latter being decoupled from its

²⁸ Crystal, *Begat*, 88.

²⁹ Crystal notes that the Psalter is also the only portion of the Book of Common Prayer to escape a revision aimed at establishing conformity with the KJV in 1662, a fact which guaranteed the continuity of Coverdale’s language “in the Prayer Book into the twentieth century.” *Ibid.*

original context so that it can be deployed in new contextual situations.³⁰ Having established that distinction, Crystal notes that “Psalms is full of quotations,” but the fact that its sentiments are “expressed in distinctively poetic ways” is also a marker of its language’s general context-dependence and the consequent difficulty of translating it into idiomatic form.³¹ From this Crystal concludes that it is surprising “that Psalms had any general influence on English at all,” but the first exception to that expectation that he offers is precisely the “rod of iron.”³²

Crystal observes that the “rod of iron” appeared as such in the translations of Coverdale, Bishops, and Douai-Rheims (though not in Geneva, which preferred “scepter of iron”), and adds that this specific rendering also benefitted from “New Testament reinforcement” due to its three occurrences in Revelation (2:27; 12:5; 19:15).³³ That phrase’s presence within both England’s public life and its liturgical culture provides some explanation for how it managed to escape the poetic intricacies of the Psalter and ensconce itself as an enduring English idiom. Nevertheless, despite the remarkable versatility of its meaning, structure, and the discourses where it functions, the “rod of iron” has never been completely divorced from its origin in Psalms and Revelation.³⁴

Reviewing its historical usage unearths an ongoing process of contestation wherein both the

³⁰ Ibid., 89-90.

³¹ Ibid., 90. “A genre characterized by so much poetic imagery is unlikely to be one which produces expressions that will be adapted for general use.” Ibid., 90-91.

³² “But a few phrases did nonetheless come to be adopted, such as this one (2:9): *Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron . . .*” Ibid., 91.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Crystal points out how the English language continues to register the popularity of that phrase along with the variability of contexts in which it is used: “Today the phrase has been so frequently used that it has the status of a cliché in some genres, such as football reportage, where it is the routine description for a manager who adopts a hardline approach with his club.” Ibid. A further indication of that signifier’s fungibility can be found in the fact that the idiom’s structure has also now been adapted to new materials, such as a “rod of steel,” or of “rubber,” or “flowers,” or even “irony.” Cf. Ibid.

semantic valence of the rod and the legitimacy and identity of its claimants are repeatedly decoded, asserted, and challenged anew.

One such instance can be found in a manuscript published in London in 1653, i.e. prior to the biblical revision mentioned above, and it already speaks to the ambiguous nature of that phrase's deployment. The author, "one, whom the world calls a Quaker" (the preferred alias of Richard Farnworth), concludes his manuscript, "A Bunch of Grapes, and an Iron Rod," with an invocation of the imagery of Revelation that alternates between its shepherding and shattering valences:

[...] the Lord will bee avenged of his Enemies, and hee will rule all Nations as with an *Iron Rod*, and breake them to pieces as a Potter's Veffell; And there shall be but one Sheepfold, and one Shepherd, the Lord one, and his Name one.³⁵

Echoing the tense duality of Revelation 2, Farnworth's manuscript posits a stark division between the evildoers who will be blasted, cursed, and broken to pieces, and those who will be united as "one sheepfold" under the care of "one Shepherd, the Lord." Nevertheless, there is already a notable change here in the connection between the rod and its shepherding function. The sentence following the semicolon preserves the image of shepherding that was originally tied to the rod, but it also separates it from that instrument. At the same time, the rod's shattering valence is reinforced through its explicit relation with rulership over the nations and their being broken like a potter's

³⁵ The full text of this paragraph follows: "Say unto the wicked it shall be ill with them, and they shall be rewarded according to their doings, the wickednesse of the wicked shall slay them, Come out of Ægypt, Come out of Babilon, Come out of the darke Ministry of the World, least you bee cursed, and blasted, for the curfe is upon the ministry of Antichrift, and the Lord will bee avenged of his Enemies, and hee will rule all Nations as with an Iron Rod, and breake them to pieces as a Potter's Veffell; And there shall be but one Sheepfold, and one Shepherd, the Lord one, and his Name one." Farnworth, "A Bunch," 16-17. That this passage refers to Revelation is clear from the verses indicated in the text's marginalia. It is worth mentioning that this note of divisiveness is followed by a concluding poem in celebration of Christian unity: "Thine in the Vine / Wee cannot be affunder, / I in thee and thou in me, / Rejoyce in our Fathers Love, / *Iohn* 124. and *ver.* the 20." Ibid.

vessel. In this way, the semicolon represents an initial indentation where a wedge will soon be driven between the image of the rod as that which shatters and its shepherding connotations.

A publication from London a century and a half later reveals the culmination of that separation. Written in the context of Britain's involvement in the Napoleonic wars, the author, L. Mayer, presents the rod of iron in a manner that completely dissociates it from any kind of godly authority, reprimand, or guidance. Rather than divinely shepherding the nations, the rod is now an instrument of oppression from which others seek refuge: "the British nation has not only afforded a refuge to the afflicted, distressed and persecuted people of God, and sheltered men from *the iron rod of the oppressor's power*, but supported the truths of the gospel, in the latter age, against infidelity and superstition" (my emphasis).³⁶

Through a brilliant propagandistic sleight of hand, the rod of iron becomes a tool of the author's enemy. At the same time, whatever protective connotations might have existed in the rod's original context are now decoupled from that instrument and reassigned to the British nation, which assumes the mantle of the shepherd and asserts the divinely favored status that it merits for its putative protection of Christians from the "thunders and ravages of war." As if this manipulation were still too subtle, another of the author's pamphlets, "The Important Period and Long Wished for Revolution, Shewn to Be at Hand, When God Will Cleanse the Earth By His Judgments, and

³⁶ Granted the difficulty of obtaining this rare text, I will also cite this passage in its entirety: "As a nation is alluded to by Micah, under the above appellation, and the British nation has not only afforded a refuge to the afflicted, distressed and persecuted people of God, and sheltered men from the iron rod of the oppressor's power, but supported the truths of the gospel, in the latter age, against infidelity and superstition, and where Christians have enjoyed an uninterrupted possession of civil and religious liberty, wholly exempt from the horrid clang of arms, the thunders and ravages of war, and sat down under the smiles of divine love to partake of all the privileges and ordinances of the gospel, it therefore may be said to be the tower of Christ's flock, and the stronghold of the daughter of Zion, and appears evidently alluded to by the prophecy." Mayer, *Bonaparte*, 31.

When All Dominions shall serve and obey the Most High,” literally forefronts its appropriation of the rod of iron by including Psalm 2:10 on the work’s title page.³⁷

The rod then appears again in the same pamphlet, although this time in a citation from Rev. 2:26-27. The shift of referent from Psalms to Revelation well befits the cataclysmic atmosphere of Mayer’s prophetic reading of the moment in which he writes.³⁸ This time, in an even more boldly propagandistic rendering than Mayer’s first. The line that Mayer’s once drew to divide the elect from the damned by separating Britain from the French Empire is there extended to the whole world. On one side there is a divinely sanctioned empire, while the other is an Anti-Christian Empire that somehow incorporates all of the perceived enemies of British Protestantism, including “Bonaparte,” “Mahometanism,” and the Catholic Church.³⁹ Indeed, Mayer presents the latter as a perverse distortion of the unifying rulership and shepherding function of the rod of iron since “popery, attended with all its superstitions, pomp, and pageantry, is not only calculated to amuse the human mind, and keep it in ignorance, but it is admirably adapted to serve as a tool of state, to quench every spark of civil and religious liberty; to prevent combinations against despotism, and to hold men under an absolute subordination to an usurped power.”⁴⁰

³⁷ Mayer, “The Important Period.”

³⁸ “It is also obvious, that the present war is not merely a contest between nation and nation, and kingdom and kingdom, but a struggle between two of the greatest maritime powers in Europe, for universal dominion.” Ibid., 37. The intensity of the writer is also manifest in the words that an unidentified previous owner has inscribed within the cover of this collection of Mayer’s pamphlets: “1807 June Horrible [illegible] An Itinerant Preacher in the urbanity of [illegible] told his congregation on Sunday last, ‘that all the great guns of heaven where [sic] charged up to their Muzzles & would shortly be fired off by the Angel Gabriel against the Devil’s heir at law Napoleon Bonapart.’” Ibid., n.p.

³⁹ Ibid., 37.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 37.

Nevertheless, in a demonstration of the shifting significance that the rod of iron can take on even in the hands of a single author, a third pamphlet from the same year, “Peace with France, and Catholic Emancipation, Repugnant to the Command of God,” again references the rod of iron in Rev. 2:27-28, but interprets that image as a sure sign that “Success by war is one of the promises of Christ to his church in the latter ages of the world, and the means appointed by him for the destruction of their enemies, that rise up against them.”⁴¹ This recasting of the rod is then followed by its most prominent appearance in all of Mayer’s pamphlets from that year. Having deployed the rod as a hermeneutical tool for the confirmation of his various prophetic theses, the identity of that rod of iron becomes so central to his interpretations that a pamphlet contesting its meaning and opposing the interpretations of other contenders for prophetic authority appears, and it explicitly includes the rod in its title: “The Woman in the Wilderness, or, the Wonderful Woman, with Her Wonderful Seal*, Wonderful Spirit, and Wonderful Child, Who ‘Is to Rule the Nations with a Rod of Iron.’: An Answer to the Blasphemous Assertions of Joanna Southcott, respecting her pretended Visitation of God.”⁴²

That process of contestation, which includes both the identity of the rod’s claimant and the meaning of the rod itself, is exemplified in Mayer’s pamphlets, but it that phrase’s lexical persistence also ensures that extends well beyond them. Indeed, that process crosses the Atlantic and continues in the United States up to present day. It is on full display, for example, in James H. Snowden’s 1919 “Summary of Objections to Pre-Millenarianism.” In a section entitled

⁴¹ Mayer, “Peace with France,” 22.

⁴² The hostility of the interpretative contestation contained in this pamphlet is palpable in the work’s second and third subtitles: “Containing an Explanation of the 7th and 12th chapters of the Revelations, contrasted with some Curious Extracts from Joanna’s Wonderful Publications relative to the application of the above Allegories, and the Author’s last Letter to Joanna which she did not think prudent to Publish.”; “*An exact Copy of Joanna’s Blasphemous Seal is given in this Pamphlet.” Cf. Mayer, “The Woman.”

“Premillenarianism Has Wrong Conceptions of the Kingdom of God,” Snowden argues that premillennialist’s revived vision of chiliastic violent is grounded in a misinterpretation of the meaning of the rod of iron: “It declares that [the establishment of the kingdom of God] is not to be done by the preaching of the gospel and the work of the Holy Spirit through the church, but that it is to be done by cataclysmic power and a rod of iron when Christ comes in his bodily presence.”⁴³ This quotation shows that by the 20th Century the divorce between the shepherding and shattering aspects of the rod had already been consummated. Snowden’s words reveal a conceptualization of the “rod of iron” that is now inseparable from apocalyptic violence. Moreover, Snowden’s conceptualization of the rod of iron shows how readily it can be turned to improper ends, especially when the desire for earthly success and wellbeing supplants the context of cosmic war in which it was first held out as a reward for the endurance of the church at Thyatira.⁴⁴

Another appearance of the “rod of iron” in the 20th Century demonstrates how, following the separation of its shepherding and shattering aspects, the violence of shattering can be returned to the image of the rod in a way that makes shepherding itself into a violent act.⁴⁵ In his 1940 commentary *More than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation*, William Hendriksen deploys the “rod of iron” to interpret the “ascension and enthronement” of Christ in

⁴³ Snowden, “Summary,” 167-168.

⁴⁴ In the same article, Snowden also offers a telling appraisal of the venal preoccupations and opportunism that accompany this interpretation of the rod of iron: “Now this is just the kingdom that premillenarians look for—a material kingdom set up with its splendid capital at Jerusalem, established with a rod of iron, and with offices which they do not hesitate to intimate will be assigned to them for faithfulness in watching for its coming. I would be easy to quote from their writings instances of this hope, and some of them exhibit that gratitude which consists in a lively expectation of favors to come.” *Ibid.*, 170.

⁴⁵ In this way, the image of the rod of iron comes full circle by returning to the problematic definition of destructive shepherding found in *BDAG*. Cf. fn. 18.

Rev. 5. It is telling that his reference to that phrase, which appears a mere three chapters prior to the one being interpreted, is nonetheless wholly stripped of any association with the rod's shepherding function: "Those who oppose Him will be treated to 'the iron rod.' This is true through the entire dispensation."⁴⁶ Taking Hendriksen at his word, it would follow that the rod has the same singular shattering function throughout the rest of Revelation. Indeed, this is precisely what happens in its next appearance in the work, where it is accompanied by sword imagery and is so overwhelmingly associated with violence that in this context shepherding itself is reframed as yet another instance of violence: "Out of His mouth proceeds a sharp sword (Rev. 1: 16; 2: 12, 16). This sword is not the comforting story of the gospel. It is symbolical of destruction, as is clearly indicated by the entire context. He comes to 'smite the nations', and to 'shepherd them with a rod of iron' (2: 27; 12: 5)."⁴⁷ Hendriksen's interpretation further proves that the prevailing meaning of the "rod of iron" is largely dependent on the claimant who victoriously grasps it and wields it for their purposes. As will now be seen in the context of the Unification church, this is true whether that claimant is a specific group of people or an ostensibly depersonalized ideological structure.

YOU CAN PRY THE ROD OF IRON FROM MY COLD DEAD HANDS: ON FORMAL WHITENESS

In *Jesus and John Wayne*, Kristin Kobes Du Mez argues that the figures of "Wayne's Sergeant Stryker—and Wayne himself—combined the mythology of the American cowboy with that of the freedom-fighting soldier" to create an "embodiment of heroic masculinity [that] would come to serve as the touchstone for authentic Christian manhood."⁴⁸ It is no coincidence that both of

⁴⁶ Hendriksen, *More than Conquerors*, 140.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 182.

⁴⁸ Du Mez, *Jesus*, chap. 1.

those figures are explicitly presented as wielders of the sort of “iron rod” that figures so centrally in Moon’s interpretation of Revelation. After all, the bearing of firearms is inextricable from the reactionary fantasy of “a time when heroic (white) men enforced order, protected the vulnerable, and wielded their power without apology” that continues to resonate powerfully with white evangelical Christians.⁴⁹ Indeed, that the presence of such a tool of violence is necessitated by the “militant faith” forged by conservative evangelicals can be attributed to the fact that its ideology “required both an ever-present sense of threat” and the means to overcome it.⁵⁰ Hence the ubiquity of gun culture in rightwing Christian circles today. And, then as now, both that presupposed defender and the threat they were destined to oppose needed a face. As for the racial identities of each party, there was little room for ambiguity: the good guys were white, and the enemy wasn’t.⁵¹

The explicit overlap between whiteness, masculinity, and militancy persists in the kind of Christianity which would come to the fore under the auspices of evangelical leaders like Jerry Falwell. Theirs was a Christianity “that was anticommunist, pro-segregationist, and infused throughout with a militant masculinity.”⁵² However, what is most salient for the present investigation is the fact that that pro-segregationist element is seemingly all that separates Falwell’s political ideology from that of Sun Myung Moon, the founder of the Unification

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., Introduction.

⁵¹ “Invariably [...] the heroic Christian man was a white man, and not infrequently a white man who defended against the threat of nonwhite men and foreigners.” Ibid., chap. 2.

⁵² Ibid., chap. 5.

Church and the father of Hyung Jin Sean Moon. It is possible bracketing the former's explicitly racist elements would make the two ideologies impossible to differentiate.⁵³

The synchronicities of those two ideological systems are perhaps best emblemized in the fact that it was Sun Myung Moon who bailed out Falwell's Liberty University when it faced financial crisis.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, Moon's support of imperialist US militancy ("including support for Oliver North during the Iran-Contra investigations") and his "virulent anti-communism" were also on display in a number of well-financed forms.⁵⁵ However, the most obvious symbol of his organization's political influence was and remains *The Washington Times*, a bastion of fringe rightwing ideology that has only managed to survive from its founding in 1982 until today thanks to the Unification Church's seemingly boundless willingness to replenish its hemorrhaging bottom line.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, Moon managed to make his money back through a

⁵³ This would remain true even in spite of the vast differences in their own religious beliefs, including but not limited to Sun Myung Moon's claim to be the "Lord of the Second Advent" and Jesus's chosen successor. Cf. Cowan and Bromley, *Cults*, 78

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁵⁵ It is hard to overestimate the penetration of Moon's influence within the US's governing elites in general and rightwing politics in particular: "However he is portrayed, Sun Myung Moon (1920–2012), [...] was one of the most recognizable new religious leaders of the late twentieth century. He twice addressed the United States Congress, and his wife has spoken before the United Nations. Richard M. Nixon invited him to the White House, and Mikhail Gorbachev to the Kremlin. In 1994, when he inaugurated his Family Federation for World Peace and Unification International, he counted among his guests politicians Gerald Ford and George Bush, Sr., religious leaders Coretta Scott King, Robert Schuller, and Beverly LaHaye, and entertainers Bill Cosby and Pat Boone. He has offered financial assistance to numerous conservative causes, including support for Oliver North during the Iran–Contra investigations and for Jerry Falwell's Liberty University when it faced financial crisis. When Moon celebrated his eightieth birthday, former US vice president Dan Quayle, former British prime minister Edward Heath, and Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid were on hand for the festivities." *Ibid.*, 78-79.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 81. Nevertheless, all of that power and influence was sometimes still insufficient to keep trouble at bay for Moon. Cowan and Bromley report that "throughout the 1970s and 1980s the terms 'Moonie,' 'cult,' and 'brainwashing' were virtually synonymous in the public mind [...] Media coverage was extremely hostile, and in 1978 a congressional investigation linked Moon to Korean intelligence agencies and found that various Unificationist organizations had violated a

number of other lucrative enterprises in both Korea and the US. Not least among them is a company that is guaranteed to warm the heart of any masculine white evangelical, namely, the Kahr Firearms Group.⁵⁷

All of this would seem to fit perfectly well with the rhetoric of the US's rightwing politics and its concomitant religious vision. The only sticking point is also a fact which immediately emerges through even the most cursory exploration of Moon's version of Christianity: Moon is Korean, and his movement was also founded as a decidedly Korean belief system. This is not simply because the Unification Church, like other forms of Korean Christianity and other Korean New Religions alike, grew out of a *mélange* of Korean influences like folk shamanism, popular Buddhism, or Confucianism.⁵⁸ More fundamental was the Moon family's insistence that the study of foundational works like Moon's *Divine Principle* be accompanied by Korean language acquisition.⁵⁹ Although Moon otherwise espoused an ideology of global racial reconciliation and was known for purposely blessing interracial marriages for soteriological ends, the emphasis on Korean language remains a telltale mark of the Korean supremacy lurking just under the surface

range of immigration, tax, and banking laws. In 1982, Moon was convicted of tax evasion and served 13 months in a federal prison." Ibid.

⁵⁷ The Kahr Firearms Group includes several subsidiaries who manufacture custom small arms as well as custom long guns. Surprisingly, their inventory does not currently include an Ar-15 equivalent of the sort preferred by Hyung Jin Sean Moon for his blessing ceremony. They have instead focused their line of long guns around different bolt action rifles and several reimaged versions of the classic Thompson semi-automatic rifle (the "Tommy gun"). Cf. Kahr Firearms Group. The current owner and CEO of Kahr Firearms Group is Justin Moon, the brother of Hyung Jin Sean Moon. Cf. Cult Education Institute, "Rev. Moon son made gun."

⁵⁸ Chryssides 83-84.

⁵⁹ In a letter uncovered by Washington periodical *The City Paper* and published in 1987, another of Moon's sons, Heung Jin-Moon—who has now been posthumously deified—, "informed members that Jesus was standing by him, and he encouraged members to liberate the human race, warning them against homosexuality, asking them to pray for him, and to study *Divine Principle* and the Korean language." Ibid., 125. Hyung Jin Sean has also been vocal about his opposition to LGBTQ rights in multiple public forums.

of the Unification Church. The founder's own words are all too clear on this point: "When you go to the Kingdom of Heaven, you will discover that its language is Korean. English is spoken only in the colonies of the Kingdom of Heaven!"⁶⁰ Koreanness is undeniably next to godliness for the Unification Church, so how is it that Hyung Jin Sean Moon has managed to claim the "rod of iron" for himself and achieve such success merging with the otherwise white supremacist hegemonic ideology of America's masculine Christianity?⁶¹

The success of Hyung Jin Sean Moon's merger with the rightwing demands a reappraisal of the whiteness that composes the masculine-militant-white structure of American muscular Christianity as theorized by Du Mez. Having inherited his father's reconciliatory racial rhetoric, the younger Moon has successfully managed to continue to insist that "there are no races except the human race"⁶² despite the ongoing emphasis on Koreanness within his movement. Oddly enough, this has allowed him to decouple explicit whiteness from that structure while both preserving and assuming for himself the standpoint of what might be referred to as "formal whiteness." By this I mean the kind of standpoint described by Amadou Korbinian Sow, one "that claims universality and neutrality for itself without necessarily doing so consciously. It simply takes up the mantle of normalcy."⁶³ From this perspective, Hyung Jin Sean's embrace of reconciliatory language regarding race and suppression of the Korean fundamentals of

⁶⁰ Ibid., 151.

⁶¹ There can be no doubt as to the centrality of Koreanness for the Unificationist spiritual understanding. As Chryssides shows, "The Pledge," which faithful Unificationists are to recite every Sunday morning at 5 am, clearly states that "humankind's ideal is to have a single heavenly citizenship under God, and hence we are a single people in a single land (the world) unbounded by national frontiers, in which the *lingua franca* will be Korean, and in which one's divine lineage will be restored with the inheritance of the True Family tradition (the Four Position Foundation, centred on God)." Ibid.

⁶² Moon, "In This Crisis."

⁶³ Korbinian Sow, "How to Orient."

Unificationist doctrine place him in a position that is homologous to the position of whiteness since “this very prohibition to assert their particular identity makes [whiteness] into a universal medium.”⁶⁴ And yet, as Slavoj Žižek is careful to insist, assuming that position really only means adopting a façade of universality because that very universality is grounded in the repression of particular, historical acts of violence. It is an instantiation of the “Hegelian ‘determinate negation’ where the negation (of a particular identity) bears the mark of what it negates.”⁶⁵ Hyung Jin Sean also participates in whiteness, but only inasmuch as he and his movement continue to lend valuable support to an ideology grounded in the erasure of the historical struggles of all who are not white and allow for rightwing hegemony to “shift the narrative” that might otherwise be wielded to oppose their continued dominance of the political field.⁶⁶

When approached from this angle, Hyung Jin Sean Moon’s reimagining of the biblical “rod of iron” as an AR-15 and the curious incorporation of the Unificationist movement into the rightwing ideological bedrock of American white supremacist Christianity suddenly makes perfect sense. Hyung Jin Sean, like many who have gone before him, may have successfully managed to appropriate the rod imagery of Rev. 2:27 for his own purposes. Nevertheless, those purposes are also in perfect alignment with the pro-gun, masculinist, militant, anti-Communist, anti-LGBTQ rhetoric of white American Christianity. All that is missing is whiteness, and that too can be formally granted—while still being susceptible to instant cancellation—as long as one proves their usefulness to the perpetuation of the narrative and concrete reality of white supremacy. Beyond the shock value of Moon’s ballistic blessings and bullet crowns there lies a

⁶⁴ Žižek, “Foreword.”

⁶⁵ Cf. Žižek, “Foreword.”

⁶⁶ Cf. Žižek, “Foreword.”

difficult truth: even the marginalized can grasp the rod of iron for their own purposes as long as their doing so means that the power of the ones who truly wield it is never up for grabs.

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