Nearly two millennia after its composition, the biblical Book of Revelation continues to insatiably interest many religious believers. In the United States especially, many Evangelical Christians eagerly relate this mysterious book to current world events. They assert that God has revealed his plan for the end of the world in the perplexing images of Revelation, and it is now being unveiled before our eyes in recent Middle East events.

Revelation was written at the close of the first century, when Christian communities lived under the rising threat of persecution from the Roman Empire and Christian martyrdom was becoming increasingly commonplace.

Revelation comprises one example of the popular first-century literary genre we call apocalyptic literature, a literature composed during oppression and persecution. It carried the comforting message that God would eventually conquer the enemies of his people, namely, the persecutors and oppressors. Such a message, naturally, would not sit well with the Roman authorities, so apocalyptic authors resorted to cryptic imagery bordering on lunacy to conceal this message from the Romans.

Thus, Revelation's images of horses, trumpets, flaming swords, blood pouring from the sky, and multi-headed beasts served one purpose: to tell the oppressed and persecuted that despite their present circumstances, God would conquer evil on their behalf. God was in control of history, though present events might not show it.

Revelation's earliest readers did not attempt to decipher every sign to understand how such images correlated to world events. That method of interpretation was popularized only in the modern world and has led to many Christians using the daily newspaper as the key to unlocking Revelation's mysteries. Now, the trick to comprehending Revelation lies in understanding which particular image refers to which particular modern event, not in understanding the first-century world that gave birth to Revelation.

For many modern interpreters of Revelation, the State of Israel takes center stage. Every action of Israel, from its creation after WWII, through its border expansions in 1967, and even to its recent military strikes in Lebanon, have all been prophesied and sanctioned by Scripture.

But such an interpretive method does not end there. Many see a warning that if one opposes Israel, one opposes God, and if one supports Israel, one supports God. Much of Israel's support in the American Christian world comes from people who are not simply interested in just reading about prophecies of the end times but want to take an active role in them. It does not take long to see how such a religious position has only furthered the conflict in the Middle East rather than alleviate it.

In the end, to the detriment of Jews and both Muslim and Christian Arabs (the latter most often neglected in such interpretations), Revelation no longer functions as a comfort for an oppressed and persecuted people. In the hands of conservative Evangelicals, Revelation now serves to justify all of Israel's military and political policies. To some, Israel has now become the good, almost-divine, force that is unmistakably on God's side, while the State's enemies are on evil's side.

Whatever political position regarding Israel and its relations to its neighbors a person may hold, the Book of Revelation, by its very own nature, cannot be used to justify military action, whatever motive may lie behind such action.

It is true: In Revelation, God conquers his enemies; evil is destroyed in almost epic battle scenes. Such motifs have consistently been used to justify violence and war. However, we must take care to understand how God conquers his enemies, or, better yet, through whom God brings victory over evil -- at least according to Revelation.

In Revelation, God's enemies are brutally subdued by Jesus and the army he leads. But Jesus is rarely actually called "Jesus" in Revelation. Rather, he is most often referred to as the "Slain Lamb" - Jewish imagery indicating that Jesus gave his life for his people to free them from the consequences of their sin. The army Jesus leads contains not the powerful and mighty; it is an army of "those who had been slain"; it is an army of martyrs, of those who peacefully gave up their lives rather than fight their enemies.

True victory over one's enemies, according to Revelation, comes not through physical battles, but through self-sacrifice and abasement. Those who seek to model the world and their lives on Revelation's message must become like the paradigmatic figure of Christianity: the Crucified Christ.

According to Revelation, Jesus only conquers his enemies through his cross, not through physical dominance. Revelation is at its heart an exhortation of nonviolent, selfless martyrdom and not an exhortation of violence, whether it be as aggressor or defender.

Currently, hundreds of civilians, including many Christians (40 percent of Lebanon's population is Christian) who value the Book of Revelation, are being killed or injured in Lebanon. The Evangelical interpretations of Revelation that paint these civilians in Lebanon as condemnable enemies of God only harm their fellow Christian believers.

Those who seek to use Revelation as a justification of violence and aggression must choose a different text -- because Revelation's image of the Crucified Christ -- the Slain Lamb -- does not serve. If Revelation is to be used for anyone, it is to be used for the oppressed and persecuted, not the oppressor and persecutor -- for Revelation itself was written on behalf of the former and against the latter.