

ing "River of Life in God's New Jerusalem: An Eschatological Vision for Earth's Future," in Rosemary Radford Ruether and Dieter Hessel, eds., *Christianity and Ecology* (Harvard University Press, 1999).

### Vítor Westhelle

Professor of Systematic Theology at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, Illinois. He is in demand internationally as a lecturer. Originally from Brazil, he is the author of numerous articles in several languages, including articles on "Liberation," "Liberation Theology," "Religious Socialism," and "Theory and Praxis" for the fourth edition of the encyclopedia *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*.

### K.-K. (Khio-khng) Yeo

Holds the Harry R. Kendall Chair as Associate Professor of New Testament at Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois. He is author of numerous articles and books in Chinese and English, including *What Has Jerusalem to Do with Beijing? Biblical Interpretation from a Chinese Perspective* (Trinity Press International, 1998) and *Chairman Mao Meets the Apostle Paul: Christianity, Communism, and the Hope of China* (Brazos, 2002). He edited *Navigating Romans through Cultures: Challenging Readings by Charting a New Course* (T. & T. Clark, 2004).

## Introduction

### David Rhoads

**The Book of Revelation** offers a passionate critique of the oppressive political, economic, social, and religious realities of the Roman Empire. It also unveils the vision of a world-in-the-making, a vision of justice and peace embodied in a new heaven, a new earth, and a new Jerusalem. And it delivers a rhetorically charged challenge for believers to withdraw from the Empire and to live even now in the worship and service of the God who is making all things new. The writers of the essays in this book share a similar passion. These authors enter into dialogue with the *Book of Revelation* about matters of great consequence. In whatever ways the authors embrace or resist particular dynamics of *Revelation*, they oppose oppression in all its forms in our world and express the longing to create a world free of injustice, racism, patriarchy, destruction of the environment, economic exploitation, and empire. Taken together, these essays present a challenge to create a different world.

The purpose of this book is to put forth that challenge by giving voice to biblical scholars and theologians from different cultural contexts with diverse reading perspectives as they interpret and appropriate the *Book of Revelation* for our time. The title—*From Every People and Nation*—is drawn from the *Book of Revelation*. It alludes to the fact that the earliest Christians came from "every tribe, language, people, and nation." This volume seeks to embody that diverse cultural reality. It offers ten interpretations of the *Book of Revelation* as seen through ten distinct cultural lenses.

Encountering interpretations from diverse cultural/social locations can be a startling experience. It can transform the way people understand the Bible, the way they see their own interpretations, and the way they appropriate the Bible for their own life and cultural context. The experience can also empower people to clarify

their own cultural location and thereby find their distinctive voice in reading and interpreting the Bible. And, most important, it can enable people to find solidarity with others who share passion and commitment for a new world.

The purpose of this introduction is to set the stage for the essays that follow by (1) identifying who we are, (2) introducing cultural interpretation, (3) sharing the format of the essays and our approach to biblical studies, (4) naming some of the cultural and personal factors that shape reading experiences, (5) reflecting on the dynamics of power involved in cultural interpretation, (6) introducing the *Book of Revelation*, and (7) previewing the ways in which the essays in this volume place the *Book of Revelation* in multicultural perspective.

### Who We Are

In this section, I will share my cultural/social location and explain the occasion for this project. Other contributors will share their cultural/social context in their essays.

I am a white male of Anglo-Saxon descent. I grew up in a middle-class family of the 1940s and 1950s in central Pennsylvania, in the United States, where my father was a Lutheran pastor. Like many European American males of my era, I have gone through successive, often wrenching experiences of being disoriented and then slowly reoriented by encounters that have challenged me with other perspectives. These experiences have subverted my identity and led me to embrace new beliefs and values that have changed my life and commitments. Two years of graduate study at Oxford University in England overturned my political, economic, and religious certainties. Participating in the civil rights, anti-war, and feminist movements of the sixties and seventies made them a personal as well as a societal revolution. Foreign travel in the seventies and eighties punctured my ethnocentrism and introduced me to liberation theologies—seeing poverty in the barrios of Peru and Bolivia; visiting a camp of displaced persons in Brazil; preaching in Latvia under the Soviet Union; talking with Palestinians in East Jerusalem; participating in an interfaith conference in Indonesia. I encountered in these places not only rich cultural differences but, more important, tragic manifestations of suffering. As a result, I have grasped more clearly the ways in which I and my country/culture are implicated in the global injustice, indifference, exploitation, and oppression that have contributed to such suffering.

In the last two decades, cultural interpretation of the Bible has opened me up in new ways. In 1992, I attended a biblical conference that featured thirty-some lectures by people from as many cultures around the globe speaking about their way of reading the Bible.<sup>1</sup> This experience changed everything about the field of New

Testament studies for me. I realized the riches that lay outside my present cultural purview, the relative and particular nature of my own efforts at biblical interpretation, and a vision of what the future of biblical studies could be. Furthermore, becoming familiar with the dynamics of colonialism and anti-colonialism through the postcolonial literature of the last decade has profoundly transformed my view of the Bible and its interpretations and led me to realize the complex power dynamics that exist in every aspect of individual and corporate life.

In the spring of 2001, I helped to plan the World Mission Institute at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, entitled "The Bible in a Multicultural Context: Reading the Book of Revelation from Your Place." The conference included presentations by Clarice Martin and Pablo Richard and workshops by James Okoye, Barbara Rossing, Vitor Westhelle, and K.-K. Yeo. I contributed by giving a dramatic performance of the *Book of Revelation*. The purposes of the conference were several: to display the various ways people read the Bible from different cultural contexts; to show the relative and contextual nature of each perspective; to demonstrate the insights that come from learning with people who interpret the Bible from cultural locations that are different from one's own; and to see the devastating effects that some interpretations of the Bible have had on people. The process opened up new vistas to Bible study as participants representing many international cultures and United States ethnic groups came to learn from and be challenged by the interpretations of others.

At the end of that conference, the leaders met and decided to produce a book together that would enable a wider audience to experience the same fruits as those who had participated in the conference. We expanded the number and range of contributors to include Brian Blount, Justo González, Harry Maier, and Tina Pip-pin. And we discussed ways in which to frame the book so as to foster intercultural Bible study among readers.

As will be apparent from the following essays, there is much more to the complex social location and reading perspective of the contributors than simply an identification of country of origin, culture, and gender. Yet the following list gives a sense of their diversity. They include (in the alphabetical order in which they appear in this book) African American male, Hispanic, Cuban American male, European Canadian male, African American female, Nigerian male, European American female, Chilean/Costa Rican male, European American female with an ecological perspective, Brazilian male, and Chinese American male. Eight of us have formal training as biblical critics, the other three as theologians. For the most part, the writers of the essays seek to express their point of view out of their native cultures, even though all contributors except Pablo Richard currently reside and teach in the United States and Canada.

## Cultural Interpretation

In the last decade or so, there has arisen a discipline variously called "cultural interpretation," "cultural exegesis," "intercultural criticism," "contextual study," and "scripture criticism."<sup>22</sup> They all deal in somewhat different ways with the dynamics involved in reading the Bible out of one's cultural context. The following explication of cultural interpretation is an approach to the discipline that seeks to provide a framework for the essays in this book. Inevitably, it represents a perspective out of my own cultural/social context, and interpreters in my own cultural/social context are certainly among the many audiences I seek to address here. I share it with an invitation for dialogue and critique.

Cultural interpretation of the Bible includes the theories, strategies, practices, and results of interpreting the Bible self-consciously out of one's cultural location. The goal of cultural interpretation is to foster justice, transformation, and liberation through the process of interpretation. It seeks to do this by reflecting on the ways in which interpreters from diverse cultural and social locations give responsible *interpretations* of biblical interpretations and responsible *appropriations* of those writings for relevant contexts in the contemporary world. It also reflects on the power dynamics of this dialogue with the Bible and of the interactions among interpreters.

Cultural interpretation seeks to make explicit the fact that *every interpretation is a cultural interpretation*. There are no neutral, value-free interpretations. Whether the interpreter is aware of it or not, interpretations are situated in and informed by the interpreter's cultural/social location. Interpretations have ethical dimensions and ethical consequences. Interpretations involve power dynamics vis-à-vis groups that are internal and external to the cultural/social locations from which they originated. Interpretations serve purposes. They are offered by someone, addressed to others, and given on behalf of others—whether those dynamics are explicit or not. As means to explicate all these dynamics, cultural interpretation makes use of cultural studies, historical disciplines, ideological criticism, liberation theologies, and postcolonial studies, along with postmodern theories of reading and studies in the ethics of reading.

Cultural interpretation seeks to locate the place in life from which one interprets the Bible. The concept of "culture" in use here refers to the diverse expressions of particular communities of people in relation to the patterns of life, the values, the beliefs, and the stories/myths that hold a society or ethnic group together.<sup>23</sup> A culture has enough coherence to distinguish it from others, but cultures are not homogeneous. Cultures are living realities that change in relation to internal conflicts and forces and in interaction with external forces. A culture is often but not always coterminous with nationality. Also critical to cultural interpretation is the place people

have within their culture—referred to as the "social location"—in terms of race, gender, age, social class, economic level, political position, education, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, health, and so on. Personal experiences and commitments also inform interpretation. Culture, national identity, social location, and personal perspective are all laden with power dynamics in relation to other groups within and outside the culture.

Cultural interpretation recognizes that all expressions of Christianity are culture specific. There are no Christian beliefs, values, practices, or views of Scripture that are not embodied or embedded in the interests and dynamics of a particular culture. People from dominant cultures are often not aware of the degree to which their understanding of Christianity is culturally conditioned and tend to think their beliefs are universal.<sup>24</sup> For example, dominant cultures in the West often present the idea that "Jesus died for our sins to be forgiven" as *the* fundamental gospel for all people. But this is not the good news that people in suppressed cultures who are primarily "victims" of sin need to hear. They may instead respond to a gospel that proclaims Jesus' death as an event that overcomes the forces causing their misfortune and suffering. Such diverse cultural expressions of Christianity are already present in the New Testament itself.<sup>25</sup> On this basis, cultural interpretation in principle honors diverse cultural manifestations of Christianity in our contemporary world as well.

Likewise, all biblical interpretations are culture specific. Cultural interpretation values the contributions to the understandings of the Bible that come from diverse reading perspectives. The experiences people bring to interpretation from diverse places can be tremendously illuminating. However, the purpose of cultural interpretation is not only to expand the range of interpretations. People interpret the Bible in order to make a difference in the world. People who speak from positions of oppression, exploitation, and marginalization, for example, may interpret the Bible in order to claim their dignity, to find the power of God in their world, to develop strategies of survival, to find an empowering vision that will overcome discrimination, domination, injustice, and the harsh realities of empire. People who read self-consciously from cultural positions of dominance in the world may read to overcome their privilege and their part in oppression, to counter materialism and the resulting exploitation of people, to resist complacency and cultural arrogance, and to counter destruction of the environment. All may read in different ways for personal renewal and communal transformation. Cultural interpretation stresses the value of interpreting with purpose and of making those purposes explicit. It also recognizes the importance of countering the appropriation of interpretations of the Bible that contribute to injustice and oppression or that sustain the status quo.

Hence, whether we do it consciously or not, we interpret with interests, dynamics, and concerns specific to our cultural/social context. Being aware of cultural/

social location puts interpreters in a better position to recognize the ways in which their location affects their understanding of the text. Bringing an interpreter's context to awareness also enables interpreters to see more clearly when texts and their interpretations contribute to oppression or to justice. The task of identifying an interpreter's cultural location, therefore, serves a liberating praxis both for dominant and for suppressed cultures.

Cultural interpretation burst onto the European American male world of biblical scholarship in the last decades from the explosion of scholarship coming into that world both from suppressed groups within the West and from scholarship coming into the English-speaking world from countries and cultures all over the world. For centuries, men and women all around the world, including women and men from suppressed groups within the Western world, were excluded from Western biblical studies because white, male, Christian (predominantly Protestant and clergy), European and European American, middle- to upper-class scholars dominated the presses, the teaching positions, the academic journals, and the scholarly societies. Because these scholars all came from the same general cultural/social location and reading perspective, there was a tendency to assume that agreement meant objective truth. Although Western scholarship has historically been aware of the biases of religious doctrine and the presuppositions of a modern scientific worldview,<sup>6</sup> most scholars were generally unaware of the extent to which fundamental factors of cultural and social location had shaped, distorted, and limited their interpretations and their methods. Furthermore, because of the power of Western societies, these situated interpretations have been appropriated to justify conquest, destruction, and domination over cultures, subcultures, and social groups both within and outside the Western world.

Meanwhile, biblical interpretation from other cultural locations has been carried out in many languages for centuries. Nevertheless, it went unnoticed by Western interpreters due to ethnocentrism, arrogance, and language barriers. In the last several decades, however, the introduction of biblical scholarship from many different cultures into the English language has begun to reconfigure the nature of biblical studies in the West. It is the Western world that has needed to learn about cultural interpretation—its own and others. Traditional Western scholars are now beginning to interpret openly out of our cultural location, to see the relative nature and the power dimensions of our interpretations in new light, and to sit at the table with biblical interpreters from many cultures with a common commitment to struggle against scholarly (and societal) hegemony.

The break with cultural hegemony and homogeneity in biblical studies in the West began in the 1950s and the 1960s. Jewish scholars after the Holocaust challenged views about Jews and Judaism in Christian histories of early Christianity. The emergence of European American women into New Testament studies led to

a foundational reconsideration of the history of early Christianity and of traditional interpretations of the New Testament writings.<sup>7</sup> Men and women of color in the West—African Americans, Hispanic/Latino Americans, Native Americans, and Asian Americans—identified racism, oppression, and marginalization in the Bible and its interpretations and have provided fresh and liberating interpretations from perspectives at the margins.<sup>8</sup> All of these groups have brought experiences that raise new avenues of investigation for uncovering the meaning of texts in their original contexts. Even more crucial, their liberating efforts have been counter-cultural, as they have exposed and contested the biases and the hegemony of Christian, white, male, European American scholarship and its impact on society.

Meanwhile, base communities in Central and South America, Africa, and elsewhere were reading the biblical materials from the perspective of the poor and oppressed.<sup>9</sup> It was a revelation to Western scholarship to discover that impoverished, oppressed, and “uneducated” readers could discern dynamics in the biblical materials that had been virtually ignored by generations of scholars—biblical dynamics having to do with solidarity with the poor and marginalized, the condemnation of oppression and elitism, the call for liberation from political domination, the encouragement to resist oppression, and so on. More recently, readers of the Bible from countries and cultures of every continent emerging from colonial domination and suffering under neocolonialism are exposing the imperialistic and anti-imperialistic dynamics in the Bible and condemning the ways in which Western interpretations of the Bible have justified imperial domination.<sup>10</sup>

As a result of all these developments, the biased ways in which cultural/social location has been shaping traditional Western scholarship and the destructive influence of some traditional appropriations upon the larger society/world have become patently clear.

As far as I know, the first formal efforts in English to articulate the overall dynamics of cultural interpretation in the West were addressed at a conference at Loyola Marymount in California in the early 1990s, in which more than thirty scholars from as many countries and social locations shared their respective approaches to biblical studies. Daniel Smith-Christopher published papers from this conference under the title *Text and Experience: Towards a Cultural Exegesis of the Bible*.<sup>11</sup> This event was followed by two conferences at Vanderbilt University organized by Fernando Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, who edited two volumes from these conferences under the title *Reading from This Place*, one volume that included diverse voices from the United States and another comprised of global voices.<sup>12</sup> Many other scholars have now added their contributions to the development of methodologies and critical reflections that comprise the discipline of cultural interpretation.<sup>13</sup> The bibliography on “Cultural Interpretation” at the end of this volume identifies many of these resources.



There is still a very long way to go. Traditional biblical scholarship has indeed gone through changes in response to these developments. Also, a look at publishers' offerings of books and articles on the Bible by diverse contributors and a glance at faculty makeup and course offerings at many religion departments and seminaries show promise. Yet it is profoundly difficult to de-center the traditional ethnocentrism and power dynamics in Western biblical studies. Nevertheless, it may be helpful to keep a vision before us. A vision for New Jerusalem in our midst might be one in which the dominant culture will no longer be European American with multiple subordinate cultures. Rather, the common culture would be the experience of people from many cultures and social locations interacting with each other in new forms of community. Biblical studies would be genuinely intercultural and interclass, with people making their diverse interpretations of the Bible and commonly seeking to dialogue with the Bible and with each other in such a way as to overcome injustice, oppression, and imperialism wherever it occurs and to promote life, health, and wholeness where possible.

The goal of cultural interpretation goes beyond a *multicultural* dynamic to an *intercultural* (and *intracultural*) dynamic. A multicultural dynamic imagines many cultures working side by side, with each culture making its contribution but not necessarily interacting with others. The more challenging image is that of an ethnic roundtable of interpreters where many people are *interacting with each other* around the study of the biblical texts.<sup>14</sup> The goal of such interaction is not just that people accept each other and engage their interpretations but that they are changed by the interaction—seeing the Bible through the eyes of others, having one's own interpretations affirmed and/or challenged, learning the life-giving and dehumanizing effects of different interpretations—so that, as a result, some new configuration of communal sharing and common commitments may emerge from the process.

Ideally, at an ethnic roundtable, no one would be privileged and none would be marginalized. No interpretation of the Bible would be held sacrosanct, and none would be dismissed. Each interpretation would be respected, explored, and weighed in dialogue by diverse critical and ethical norms. In the absence of an ideal situation and in order to move toward some equity in the present, the message for those of us who are Western scholars in dominant positions may be captured by a play on some words of John the Baptist: "They must increase, and we must decrease."<sup>15</sup> This attitude would represent a "preferential option" to listen to voices from cultures and groups that have been suppressed and to learn from them. Such an approach would help to dislodge the (often unconscious) Euro-centric power dynamics of privilege and, at the same time, to counteract the larger societal/global forces that privilege those who have traditionally held power.

## About Our Format and Approach

Our hope is that this volume will make a contribution, however small, to the new intercultural atmosphere by fostering a challenging and transforming experience of the Bible from many cultural perspectives. For the most part, published collections on cultural interpretation have tended to include essays that offer interpretations on cultural different biblical writings. The contribution of the present volume is that it *includes diverse cultural interpretations of one and the same biblical text, namely the Book of Revelation*.<sup>16</sup> In this way, scholars, teachers, and students, pastors and laity who read this book will be able to compare and contrast in one volume the differing ways people from diverse cultural locations approach the same biblical book—thereby enhancing and potentially transforming the reader's engagement with the *Book of Revelation*.

To facilitate comparison and contrast, contributors agreed to a format that included, although not in any set order or with the same weight, the following elements in each of the articles:

1. *Cultural Location and Reading Perspective*: Personal/cultural information about the contributor to help the readers see in what ways the interpretation of each contributor has been informed by their cultural context, their social location, and their personal commitments.
2. *Methods of Interpreting*: An explanation of the primary method or methods that each contributor uses to interpret *Revelation*, how those methods are shaped by their cultural perspective, and what each interpreter is looking for when they read.

3. *An Interpretation of Revelation*: The bulk of each article is an interpretation of some dimension of the *Book of Revelation* in its first-century context as understood through that interpreter's perspective and lens for reading.

4. *The Purpose and Goal of Interpretation*: How each contributor embraces and/or resists *Revelation* as a means to address contemporary issues such as race and gender oppression, economic exploitation, environmental devastation, and colonial/neo-colonial domination. This element represents the challenge that each contributor gives to readers.

The contributors to this volume commonly embrace historical approaches to *Revelation*; that is, we make a distinction between, on the one hand, our constructions of what *Revelation* might have meant for its own time and place and, on the other hand, how *Revelation* might be relevant for contemporary times and places—however fraught with difficulties that distinction may be and despite the fact that in practice the two are never fully separate. As such, the essays here do not include a millenarian approach that would see the *Book of Revelation* directly describing events that are taking place progressively from the time of the first century up until

our time, nor do they take an allegorical approach that would see *Revelation* as referring not to the first century at all but directly to contemporary time. Large portions of the Christian church take millenarian and allegorical approaches to *Revelation*, and by this means they determine meanings for their cultural contexts. By contrast, the scholars in this collection accept to greater or lesser degrees and in different ways a western academic approach and should be read with this social/cultural influence in mind.

While the historical approaches in this volume may differ from each other, they share the point of view that *Revelation* was addressed to people in the first-century. Contemporary readers "overhear" *Revelation* as a vision and a voice of protest in the first century Roman Empire. Potential impacts we discern from *Revelation* for today are drawn in part by analogy from that ancient text and context—as we see how the author depicts God's work and the dynamics of human history in *his* time and as we consider the commonalities and differences of that depiction by analogy to similar situations in *our* time. And we also experience the contemporary impact of *Revelation* when analogy breaks down and something unexpected occurs—through cognitive dissonance, the power of mythic language, ironic insight, openings for reader involvement provided by the author's rhetoric, or the subversion of our cultural constructions of the world—some meanings and challenges may emerge that are genuinely new.

The commitment to formulate plausible historical (re-)constructions of the past involves respect for the text, an attempt to allow the text to speak on its own terms, seeking interpretations that make the best sense of the text, and using history as a key guide to infer the range of interpretive options. Carrying out this commitment involves the use of various methods to formulate scenarios of first-century meaning—textual criticism, linguistic analysis, form criticism, genre criticism, inter-textual studies, rhetorical analysis, narrative analysis, socio-historical reconstruction, and cultural anthropology; among others. Comparing *Revelation* with other similar writings of the time, placing the text in various possible historical contexts, using other (Jewish and Greco-Roman) literature to illuminate *Revelation* and its context, and seeing the text of *Revelation* within developing Christianity—all contribute to the effort to interpret *Revelation* in its original context. In general, cultural interpretation recognizes these methods as valuable results of the Enlightenment. Nevertheless, the choice of methods, the understanding of them, and the application of them differ with each culture and with diverse purposes for reading the Bible.

Cultural interpretation not only adapts historical methods, but also critiques fundamental interpretive assumptions that underlie the use of these methods in the West. Since the Enlightenment, biblical studies have tended to operate on the following assumptions about determining the meanings of a text: a single meaning lies

in the written text; it is possible to be objective about finding this meaning; objectively discerning this one meaning results from an effort to detach oneself and one's presuppositions from the interpretive process; discerning this objective meaning results from the application of methods that assure objectivity; there is only one valid interpretation and it has universal significance; and this interpretation is relevant and appropriate for all people in all times and places. Although Western scholars themselves have differed in their interpretations in relation to each other, nevertheless, the assumed framework for these differences reflects a competition to determine one true objective meaning. Although this list of assumptions is somewhat of a caricature, it does basically reflect the Enlightenment approach to history in general and to biblical studies in particular.

These Western assumptions have inhibited the acceptance of multiple valid readings from diverse cultural perspectives. When those who hold power in academic circles claim that only one interpretation can be correct, then their methods and their interpretations become normative and universal—a situation that thereby grants them the right to impose these views on others. Furthermore, the focus on objectivity by scholars from dominant cultures has obscured the subjective, biased, and interested dimensions of their own interpretations. The exclusive focus on an object (the text) obscures the ways in which cultural context and social location inform the subjectivity of interpretation. The failure to bring these factors to light in the interpretive process has led Western interpreters to marginalize and dismiss interpretations from other cultures and social locations (where these factors are usually made explicit) as having "an agenda" that prevents objectivity—as if having an agenda were something wrong or even avoidable. In so doing, this attitude has also resulted in the rejection of biblical interpretations that challenge the political, economic, social, and religious hegemony both within U.S. society and from the West generally.

Newer understandings of the dynamics of interpretation both challenge and qualify these assumptions.<sup>17</sup> There are three main theoretical reasons why cultural interpretation questions the idea that there is only one objective meaning to a text. The first reason has to do with the nature of texts. Recent linguistic studies have shown that language cannot be easily reduced to one meaning or one valid interpretation. This is because language is polyvalent and often bears the potential, within a certain range, for multiple meanings.<sup>18</sup> Texts have the potential for multiple meanings that transcend even the intentions of the author. There may be much about a text that interpreters can agree upon. Nevertheless, words, sentences, and compositions that comprise a text allow for multiple valid interpretations. This is especially true of a text like *Revelation* with its mythic, metaphorical, and highly symbolic language. Besides, many New Testament writers apparently envisioned complex

audiences in multiple social situations and wrote to address them in different ways by means of the same writing. Consider, for example, the composite audiences of the seven churches in Asia Minor to which John addressed *Revelation*.

The second reason has to do with the dynamic nature of reading. A text does not have meaning embedded within it as though meaning were a "thing" to be excavated or extracted. Rather, the meaning of a text is always a combination of the marks on the page *and* the mind of the reader at work. That is, meaning exists only as readers read. There is nothing else. We cannot read or hear a text apart from interpreting it. And we cannot interpret a text apart from reading it. When a reader sees the words on the page or hears them, each one imagines the meaning of it in different ways as they seek to construct first-century reading/hearing scenarios. Furthermore, authors make assumptions of their readers. And language itself is never adequate to describe or explain something exhaustively. Therefore, there are holes, gaps, breaks, tensions, and contradictions in the language—all of which will be filled by interpreters in different ways as they imagine its first-century meaning. So when interpreters are seeking to determine a valid understanding of the text in its first-century context, there will be multiple interpretations that are supported by a careful and rigorous reading of the text in context.

The third reason has to do with the nature of readers. Because meaning results from the interplay between text and interpreter, different interpreters bring the images, experiences, analogies, and dynamics from their cultural/social location to make the best sense of the text. Even with the use of methods designed to secure so-called objectivity, interpretation inevitably involves an imaginative investment by interpreters out of their own cultural context. If we think we are able to detach or disengage from ourselves and our contexts, we are gravely mistaken. This assumption only blinds us to the ways our culture unavoidably informs our interpretations anyway. The best approach is to bring ourselves and our contexts to consciousness so as to understand how they affect the ways we read—so that we do not remain captive to our biases but grow in critical awareness of them. This will also better enable us to avert the undesirable consequences of our interpretations for contemporary times and places.

We can use the awareness of our cultural context, therefore, to construct responsible interpretations. Efforts to construct the meaning of a first-century text from any cultural location will come from a combination of *differentiation* and *engagement*. For example, to understand *Revelation* in its own time and place, we in the West do indeed need, on the one hand, to see the ways in which our modern, individualistic, post-industrial, urban, imperial, economic, political, religious, and psychological assumptions and patterns of life are *differentiated* from first-century life. On the other hand, it is by empathetic *engagement* with the text that our feelings, imagination, and cultural understanding can be enlivened to construct scenarios of mean-

ing for *Revelation* in John's time—based on our careful reading of the text, on our knowledge of the ancient world, on analogies from our cultural experiences, and on our efforts to discern what may be distinctive or novel about *Revelation*.

In this way, a wide range of interpreters from different cultures will enhance the understanding of the Bible. People from diverse cultures with diverse imaginative experiences will notice what others have not seen and configure in a new way what has been seen before. Interpreters from diverse cultures are drawn to distinctive features of a text—themes, passages, lines of argumentation, uses of language, means of persuasion, and so on—as ways to focus and organize interpretation. People who come to the text with cultural experiences similar to the cultural dynamics of the ancient Mediterranean world—cultures with honor as the core value, collectivist societies, societies marked by a spirit world or issues of purity, or economies based on patron/client relationships—are able to gain a better grasp of the text and the way it was received in the first century. People in marginal circumstances similar to the social location of many early Christians may grasp the rhetorical thrust of the text in new ways. Such contemporary experiences will also enable people to discern more clearly the dynamics of oppression and marginalization inscribed in the biblical writings themselves.

Hence, there is no single, "objective" reading. There are differing particular readings that aim to be valid readings. Instead of "either-or" there may be "both-and." We can hold diverse, even mutually exclusive, interpretations in relation to each other—in tension and contradiction with each other—as a way to grasp the text's potential for meaning. Differences in the interpretation of a writing like *Revelation* will be due to many factors: the use of the methods, the criteria of the methods, the way interpreters construct the context of a writing, the choice of other texts as background, the ways of configuring the themes and coherence of the text, the organizing focus they have, the cultural lenses through which they view the text, and their purposes and commitments in reading.

Since interpreters are responsible for giving interpretations that are faithful to first-century texts based on a rigorous analysis of the text in context, how do we determine validity? Cultural interpretation seeks to avoid misuses and abuses of the text. In principle, the text and context constrain interpretation. Therefore, not every interpretation is equally valid. Interpretations can be explored and weighed for their literary cogency and their historical plausibility. Yet the limits or boundaries of what is valid will be contested, partly because they are adjudicated by the same interpreters who propose differing interpretations and partly because interpreters from diverse cultures will negotiate those boundaries in different ways.

But in cultural interpretation there is another level of adjudicating texts that comes into play with cultural interpretation, and that has to do with the evaluation of texts for appropriation in contemporary life.<sup>19</sup> When there are multiple valid



interpretations, other factors become critical, particularly ethical factors. Interpretations may be weighed by their ethical impact on various contemporary contexts—in what ways they may promote justice, respect, and liberation and in what ways they may lead to injustice, exploitation, and oppression. In this sense, again, clearly one interpretation is not as good as another. Interpretations that foster patriarchy, racism, or colonialism, for example, must obviously be renounced in regard to appropriation. Also, an interpretation that is good for one culture/group may be destructive for another. Adjudications about these matters are made by people situated in various cultures and places of power/powerlessness. And those who make these adjudications need to be open about these power dynamics and explicit about the criteria they are using to assess interpretations—and to present them for discussion and critique as well.

Having an explicit purpose for reading a biblical text does not mean that the interpreter will distort the text to serve that purpose. Rather, the explicit purpose gives focus and insight to the effort to interpret responsibly. With regard to appropriation, some interpreters may choose valid historical interpretations of a text that promote life in contemporary contexts—interpretations that are, in the words of *Revelation*, “for the healing of the nations.” Other interpreters may be convinced that the most historically valid interpretation will only foster oppression in contemporary contexts, and they will reject its appropriation. When we consider the *Book of Revelation*, for example, we may question its violence, its stereotypical depiction of female figures, its stark dualistic contrast between good and evil, and its glorification of suffering. In this regard, interpreters may well acknowledge these destructive features, denounce them, and warn against their appropriation for contemporary contexts. Whatever the approach may be, it is ethically important that interpreters take responsibility both for the validity of their interpretations and for their potential impact in contemporary contexts.<sup>20</sup>

### Factors of Cultural/Social Location and Reading Perspective

Identifying cultural, social, and personal factors is designed not to categorize people but to suggest some exemplary and inconclusive hints that will bring to awareness key factors shaping interpretation.

*Culture* encompasses the language, values, beliefs, and patterns of behavior into which one receives primary socialization—whether of a nation or a subculture within or across nations. *Nationality* includes internal dynamics as well as the place of the nation within the larger community of nations—as a first-world or third-world nation, privileged or impoverished; a (neo-)colonial power or a (post-)colonized country. *Geographical location* includes climate, environmental conditions, devas-

tations caused by natural disaster or ravaged by war, a landscape devoid or rich with natural resources. *Historical ethos* also shapes interpretation and may include the characteristics of an era, such as scientific developments and issues of environmental justice. Relevant *historical circumstances* include such conditions as war or peace, civil conflict or stability, political oppression or freedom, terrorism or nuclear threat, discrimination or ethnic cleansing, plagues or epidemics (AIDS).

Interpretation is profoundly influenced by the *social location* of individuals/groups embedded within a culture or nation. Social locations identify the way people experience privilege and power and the way people are exploited, marginalized, or oppressed. Social locations include *race and ethnicity, gender, age, economic level, religious community, political stance, social class, occupation, education* (formal and informal), *sexual orientation, health, disabilities, legal status*, among other things. This list has primarily U.S. society in mind. For people from other cultures, the list will need to be changed and expanded, because structures of social location differ with each culture.

Cultural interpretation also takes account of the fact that many people are *out of place*. The poor, the homeless, those in prison, and the non-literate have no status and no voice in most cultures. And they are usually out of range of most people who do academic interpretation of the Bible, although there is now a movement among some scholars to “read with” those who have no voice in academic circles or in society.<sup>21</sup> People with same-sex orientation, those with alien status, people who do not speak the dominant language, and people with illness or disabilities experience dislocation. Scholars who converse in a second language struggle daily through a sense of displacement from their native tongue. People interpret not only from their “place” but also from their perspective of being “out of place.” Profound insights into the Bible come from people whose dislocation puts them in a position similar to some early Christians, including biblical writers.<sup>22</sup>

We are formed not only by our social location/dislocation but also by our *personal perspectives*—originating from experiences, beliefs, and commitments—which may well run counter to certain aspects of our cultural/social location.<sup>23</sup> Personal experiences (abuse, poverty, illness, friendships, religious experiences, good fortune), ideological commitments (personal morality, justice issues such as feminism, environmentalism, socialism, economic equity), individual abilities and talents (gift for learning languages, fascination with other cultures, community organizing, analytical abilities), and beliefs (religious or non-religious convictions, scientific views, liberation theology) will all influence what one sees in a text, what one misses, and how one configures/interprets in certain ways. We come to reading with our own longings and hopes for ourselves and for our world. Furthermore, readers bring to the text a method of reading shaped by their education, their church experiences, and their views of Scripture. Among scholars and students, the particular train-



ing—disciplines they have studied and the methods within those disciplines—obviously shapes the way they interpret.

Not only do we interpret with certain lenses, but we also communicate our interpretations in relation to *communities of interpretation*—with whom we interpret, to whom we speak, and on behalf of whom we speak—such as an ethnic group, a religious community, base communities, the scholarly academy, a racial or gender group. Some interpreters may establish solidarity with communities of interpretation other than their own, perhaps with those who are oppressed or marginalized.

Identifying factors of cultural location does not imply an “essentialist” approach to readers or their communities. Readings differ among those within the same social location. There may be characteristic African American or Korean approaches to interpretations, but there will be no homogeneous or unchanging approach. There is no one feminist or womanist approach. Similarly, an individual’s perspective cannot be reduced to their cultural/social location or treated as though their communities. Readers change, communities make transitions, cultures go through transformations, and new social and historical circumstances emerge. Hence, while some readings may typify certain groups or communities, the identification of such communities cannot ever serve as a basis to stereotype a person or community in an essentialist or static way.

Moreover, many interpreters have a complex or compound cultural/social location. For example, people interpret at different times with different interpretive audiences in mind, such as a nation or an oppressed group or a religious community or a scholarly association. Many interpreters are oppressors as part of their social location and at the same time are oppressed in another part of their social location. For example, someone may be part of an oppressed group within U.S. society, but to other cultures they are perceived as an oppressor by virtue of being an American—an observation that must not relativize the force of the oppression involved. Many individuals have “hybrid” identities with more than one cultural community, either because they are part of a culture that is hybrid or due to intermarriage or migration. Some groups experience multiple forms of oppression in their social location. African American women, for example, labor under racism, economic classism, and sexism.

All these factors, then, will affect our interpretations, some more than others. We can hardly take any of them for granted. To imagine that they do not exist will give them greater power in the interpretive process, because they will influence us in ways of which we are not aware. People from dominant cultures/groups tend to take their cultural/social location for granted and do not make it explicit. Explicitly identifying the cultural/social traits and personal commitments that shape our inter-

pretation will alert readers that we are conscious of the relative and limited nature of our interpretations. In this way, others can take into account our reading perspective and social location in assessing the validity of our interpretations and the rightfulness of their appropriation for contemporary contexts.

Finally, it is crucial that the awareness of our own cultural location makes us also aware that each writing in the New Testament has its own distinct cultural/social location as well—the author, the audience, and the interests served by the text itself in that culture. Social profiles can be made for the authors, audiences, and writings of the New Testament. We ignore these at our peril. If we ignore *our cultural/social location*, we are in danger of reading the text in terms of social dynamics that do not reflect the first-century realities. Likewise, if we ignore the *cultural/social location of the text*, we are in the same danger of assuming that our social location is similar to that of the author. Responsible interpretation insists that we assess the similarities and differences in the socio-cultural location of the text and our own socio-cultural location. In so doing, we will have a better chance of interpreting a biblical writing plausibly for its own time and a better chance of making ethical appropriations of the text for our time.

## Dynamics of Power

Dimensions of power have been integral to every part of our exploration of cultural interpretation. Because of their importance, a brief restatement of them is in order. At an ethnic roundtable, dimensions of power include the power of the text, the power of interpreters in relation to the text, the power among interpreters in relation to their culture/audience, and the power dynamics between interpreters from differing cultural/social locations.

Cultural interpretation employs ideological criticism to make explicit (often obscured) power dynamics by asking: What is the cultural/social location of the interpreter? Of the audience? Whose interests does the interpretation serve? What cultures/groups in society will benefit from it? In what ways? What cultures/groups may be ignored or diminished or marginalized or oppressed or harmed by this interpretation? In what ways? What cultures/groups are challenged by the interpretation? These and other questions assess the power of an interpretation and its potential impact.

1. The biblical writings have power, especially in their status as scripture—as moral compass, source of religious experience, vision for society, insights into life, an experience of solidarity, empowerment for liberation, place for healing and inspiration, among other things. Because of the status we give to them, these writings

have the power to affect and shape individuals, churches, and society. Furthermore, the Bible can interpret—illuminate, critique, challenge—those of us who are interpreters and our cultures. By doing ideological analysis of these writings in their first-century context, we can better discern the power—for good and for ill—that a biblical text may have exerted in its own time and that it might exert today.

2. Interpreters have power in relation to the text. Entering imaginatively into the world of the first century is a *cross-cultural* experience. Interpreters are “immigrants” or travelers into ancient times in their efforts to discern the author’s social construction of the world and the potential impact that the writing may have had on hearers.<sup>41</sup> In such a cross-cultural experience, interpreters have an ethical responsibility not to distort or dominate or control the text but to use their power respectfully in discerning potential meanings of the text in its original context.

3. Interpreters have power in relation to other interpreters in the cultural/social communities of interpretation out of which and with whom they may speak. As people with positions of status in a culture, academic interpreters have the responsibility to promote interpretations that are life-giving. Sensitive to these power relationships, some academic interpreters are intentional about “reading with” (rather than “speaking to”) those who have no voice in their culture and then writing on behalf of (rather than “speaking for”) them—so that their insights and cries can be brought to the table.<sup>42</sup>

4. There are complex power dynamics between representatives of different cultural/social locations, particularly in conversations about differences between interpretations, adjudications of validity of interpretations, and criteria for assessing them. In these interactions, there comes into play the power dynamics between empires and nations, between dominant cultures and subcultures, between men and women, and between people of different races and ethnic groups. The goal of these interactions is to interpret and appropriate the Bible so as to overcome destructive power dynamics and to promote an empowerment ethic for liberation and justice both among biblical interpreters and in the world.

Again, if the model of cultural interpretation is an ethnic roundtable, we are naïve to think that we are on a level playing field. With the history and background, the assumptions and presuppositions, the power differentials in the influence and voice of the diverse groups represented, a level field is not possible now. Therefore, there is a need to unpack the complex dynamics that exist between individuals and groups. If we ignore these dimensions, we diminish the validity of our interpretations, we jeopardize the possibilities for reconciliation that may come in the very act of interpreting together, and we risk losing the opportunity for interpreters of the Bible from every people and nation to work cooperatively for a just world.

## Introducing the Book of Revelation

My own Lutheran tradition gave little attention to *Revelation*. Martin Luther generally dismissed *Revelation* and counted it, along with the *Letter of James*, as one of the “other writings” of the New Testament. Teaching *Revelation* gave me some familiarity with it. But in the mid 1990s, when I decided to get serious about understanding the meaning and rhetoric of *Revelation*, I memorized it and began performing it dramatically. That has proven to be an astounding experience for me. What follows is a brief accounting of some key features of *Revelation* as I have come to understand them.

More than any other New Testament writing, *Revelation* is a cosmic drama of conflict between God and the Roman Empire. It is, on the one hand, about the imperial domination over nations, economic exploitation, and political idolatry and, on the other hand, political protest, a religious determination to stand resolutely against injustice, and the call for people from every culture under heaven to join the resistance. It is filled with larger-than-life mythic language that sweeps over the hearers until they are caught up in a drama that brings them through an apocalyptic transformation and shows them a new vision to live for. It is obvious why the *Book of Revelation* has attracted so many interpreters from cultures around the world. Doing cultural interpretation in relation to *Revelation* makes for a powerful combination.

Although views about the *Book of Revelation* are contested, there seems to be general agreement among contributors to this volume that *Revelation* was probably written in the mid-nineties of the first century, late in the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian (81–96), at a time when he was claiming divinity. It was composed by an early Christian prophet named John who wrote to seven churches in seven different cities of Asia Minor—“seven” being a number of completeness symbolizing the whole church. Presumably because of his Christian testimony, John himself had been exiled by regional agents of the Roman Empire to Patmos, an island off the coast of Asia Minor. John reports that while on Patmos he saw in a series of visions a great conflict emerging between the God of the spreading Christian movement and the colonial power of the Roman Empire—a conflict that would result in many people martyred for Jesus Christ by the Romans but with the ultimate victory belonging to God.

In John’s view, the worldwide Roman Empire had seduced (by its wealth) the kings of the earth and coerced (with its armies) the nations of the world to give to Rome an idolatrous allegiance that rightfully belongs only to God. By such means, Rome had oppressed and exploited people from many nations and cultures. In addition, Rome had suppressed all who stood in opposition to it. John wrote this