

political as well as spiritual liberation. They discovered a Jesus who had suffered as they did and whose life, death, and resurrection shattered the principalities and powers of enslavement. Their religion *was* their resistance.

### Methodology

We all read and interpret from our particular context, from the language that expresses the culture of our context. I want to do this kind of reading explicitly and self-consciously. I want to explore the socio-linguistic recognition that John's text, like any other, does not have a single meaning. Rather, it has "meaning potential." That potential will be developed differently by people of different social and linguistic backgrounds.

Unfortunately, however, the Euro-American culture has read the Bible with a domineering, middle-class, white lens that has pushed other culturally determined readings to the interpretive margins. I propose to resist this exegetical trend by seeking out the interpretive margin of the slave narratives (spirituals, autobiographies, oral histories, interviews, etc.) and then by reading the *Book of Revelation* consciously from that margin.

### Correlating the Witness of Slaves and the Book of Revelation

There are important correspondences between the African American slave situation and the circumstance of John's reading community. I do not make these connections in an uncritical way. Obviously, millennia separate them; they were people of vastly different circumstances, needs, and cultural dynamics. Nevertheless, there are also striking parallels between John's prophecy and his audience and the slave songs/narratives and their audiences. John believed that he was writing to a people whose occupied lives were threatened at every turn; the creators of the spirituals and of the slave narratives justifiably believed the same.

### The Suffering of the People

John's language about the suffering of God's people can be striking. Consider the prophecy about the fate of two key witnesses who proclaim the lordship of Christ over against the lordship of Rome.

When they have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the bottomless pit will make war on them and conquer them and kill them, and their dead bodies will lie in the street of the great city that is prophetically called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified. For three and a half days members of the peoples and tribes and languages and nations will gaze at their dead bodies and refuse to let them be placed in a tomb; and the inhabitants of the earth will gloat

## The Witness of Active Resistance: The Ethics of Revelation in African American Perspective

Brian K. Blount

### Introduction

**I am a product** of the African American church. I grew up as a regular attendee and very involved member. Eventually, I became the pastor of a local black congregation. As a pastor, I longed for the kinds of reading material that would support the preparation and presentation of sermons and Bible studies geared to a predominately African American audience. I returned to a Ph.D. program and a career in teaching and writing with the hope that I could help contribute to the production of such research resources. It is for this reason that I enjoy interpreting and engaging New Testament texts through a conscious African American lens. This reading of *Revelation* is one such interpretive effort.

I propose to interpret *Revelation* through the lens of the religious experience of African American slaves. We all know that slavery did not really end with the civil war and the Emancipation Proclamation. Even today, most African Americans experience a "psychological occupation" due to colonization within the United States, where they are disproportionately plagued by circumstances of poverty, inequality, injustice, and deprivation. Focusing in retrospect on the actual experience of slavery as an interpretive lens helps to clarify the ethic of *Revelation*, an ethic of active resistance that I believe sharpens our grasp of a religious resistance to the oppressive reality that fomented such conditions—in John's time and in our own.

### The Religious Response to Slavery

Slaves lived in a context of horrific social and political oppression. Despite this context, when they heard the biblical story, they experienced an exodus God of

over them and celebrate and exchange presents, because these two prophets had been a torment to the inhabitants of the earth. (11:7-10)

Evidently, this was the fate of many who would dare make such a witness:

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given; they cried out with a loud voice, "Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?" (6:9-10)

There is language just as striking in the historical ledgers of the slave narratives. Consider the recounting of one Solomon Bradley who, when he was interviewed in South Carolina in 1863, was a twenty-seven-year-old slave who had recently joined a Union Army regiment.

I went up to [Mr. Farraby's] house one morning from my work for drinking water, and heard a woman screaming awfully in the door-yard. On going up to the fence and looking over I saw a woman stretched out, face downwards, on the ground her hands and feet being fastened to stakes. Mr. Farraby was standing over and striking her with a leather trace belonging to his carriage-harness. As he struck her the flesh of her back and legs was raised in welts and ridges by the force of the blows. Sometimes when the poor thing cried too loud from the pain Farraby would kick her in the mouth. After he had exhausted himself whipping her he sent to his house for sealing wax and lighted a candle and, melting the wax, dropped it upon the woman's lacerated back. He then got a riding whip and, standing over the woman, picked off the hardened wax by switching at it. Mr. Farraby's grown daughters were looking at all this from a window of the house through the blinds. The punishment was so terrible that I was induced to ask what offence the woman had committed and I was told by her fellow servants that her only crime was in burning the edges of the waffles that she had cooked for breakfast. The sight of this thing made me almost wild that day; I could not work right and I prayed the Lord to help my people out of their bondage. I felt I could not stand it much longer.<sup>1</sup>

Similar to *Revelation*, there are also very poignant accounts in the slave narratives that relate a devastating connection between witnessing to the Lord and persecution on account of that witness. The matter of the would-be slave preacher James Smith is a case in point.

He was finally received into the church and baptized. Not long after this, he felt loudly called upon to go out and labor for the salvation of souls among the slave

population with whom he was identified. At this conduct his master was much displeased, and strove to prevent him from the exercise of what the slave considered to be his duty to God and his brethren, on the Sabbath day. He was sometimes kept tied all day Sundays while the other slaves were allowed to go just where they pleased on that day. At other times he was flogged until his blood would drip down at his feet, and yet he would not give up laboring whenever he could get an opportunity, on the Sabbath day, for the conversion of souls. God was pleased to bless his labors and many were led to embrace the Savior under his preaching.

At length his master sold him to a slave trader, who separated him from his family and carried him to the State of Georgia. His parting words to his wife were that if they proved faithful to God, He would bring them together again in a more free land than Virginia.<sup>2</sup>

### Visions of the Future

There is also a correspondence between the way John and the spirituals addressed their respective audiences. Both offered powerful visions of hope for world-weary people.

My Lord, what a mornin';

My Lord, what a mornin';

My Lord, what a mornin';

When de stars begin to fall.

You'll hear de trumpet sound,

To wake de nations underground,

Lookin' to my God's right hand,

When de stars begin to fall.<sup>3</sup>

Like John of Patmos, the slave singer-songwriters looked to the future because the present was so abhorrent. In fact, much of the slave imagery about the future is imagery from the *Book of Revelation*: trumpets sound, stars fall, nations crumble, a Lamb arises, an altar appears, and a beaten, bloodied people sit vindicated upon it. Finally!

John saw, Oh, John saw,

John saw the holy number,

Sitting on the golden altar,

On the golden altar.

Worthy, worthy is the Lamb,  
Is the Lamb, Is the Lamb,  
Oh, worthy, worthy is the Lamb,  
Sitting on the golden altar.

Mary wept, an' Martha cried,  
Martha cried, Martha cried,  
Oh, weeping Mary weeps no more,  
Sitting on the golden altar.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps in a world where desperation and death are intimate and where hope keeps promising to visit but never does, all that people have are dreams and visions. Perhaps those dreams are like an opiate. Perhaps what John saw on Patmos had no clear connection to the lives of his people, except to divert their attention. Perhaps the spirituals simply averted the gaze of their listeners for a time without doing anything to change the horrors haunting their historical horizons. Perhaps John spouted painkiller prophecies, and the slaves arranged for artistic, antebellum inoculations. Perhaps.

### Transformation of the Present Time

I do not buy it. And I do not buy it because the people who lived the symbolic language also lived lives of opposition contrary to the political and religious powers in their respective worlds. John was on Patmos because he had himself witnessed to the very cause the visions were now urging upon others. So, too, is the case with the slaves who created and sang the spirituals. Harriet Tubman used them as a signal on the outlawed Underground Railroad. She used them to engage, encourage, and inspire those who risked their lives to flee their enslavement. Nat Turner created and sang spirituals like "Steal Away to Jesus" in order to arouse black anger until they fought back against white oppression. These were not folk given to escapist tendencies; these were folk used to retorting, running, and rebelling.

Both John and the writers of the spirituals employed their visions as weapons in a war of resistance; they unleashed them so as to unbind a people from their fear. A people who are assured of their standing and existence in the world-to-come are more likely to risk their standing in the present in order to secure their future. This, I believe, is what John and the slaves were doing; they were envisioning the future in the hope that their people would be emboldened by the vision they saw of the future to paint that very vision into their present history—to hope, to endure, and, ultimately, to resist now, in the present.

In other words, the visions do not just suggest a new future; they also create the future within the present. Indeed, what George Cummings says about the slaves and their spirituals, he might well say about John and his revelation.

The common black experience of tragic suffering lived in and through the dialectic of hope and resignation is set on a powerful journey in the context of worship, where a qualitative shift in the community's consciousness takes place and serves to liberate momentarily and keep alive the hope of permanent liberation.<sup>5</sup>

It is as though a people occupied by the power and force of Rome can—even now in the present moment of worship when they heard John's *Revelation*—sense the liberation that God's triumph will bring. Just as a people devastated by slavery could, even as they worked the fields, tended the master's home and children, or endured the master's sexual and vindictive fury, be free in imagination in the North at the very moment they were shackled in the South. Both John and the slave singers knew that a *taste* of freedom is a powerful inducement for the solicitation of freedom. That is what those visions and these songs were all about.

### New Age Coming

In both situations, the authors pray not for spiritual escape but for a new age of historically engineered vengeance and transformation. It is clear when we read *Revelation*, for example, that John envisions two powerful world eons. The present eon is controlled by the forces of Satan; the future eon will be controlled by God (chapters 21–22). In this age, Satan had been (and will be) allotted power and rule (12:12; 20:7); in the future, however, the rule of Satan will be forever curtailed. Followers of God who live in the present must take heart in their knowledge of this truth that one day soon Satan and Satan's forces would be overthrown (12:9; 20:1–15). This knowledge was the basis upon which John called upon them to resist those forces and to maintain their allegiance to God.

This kind of dualistic worldview also pervaded the thinking of the slaves. They knew that human beings are meant by God to be free, and that God is in control of history, and yet, unbelievably, they were not free. Nevertheless, the present age looked very different in light of the imminently approaching future age.

Children, we shall be free,  
When the Lord [as Messiah] shall appear.  
Give ease to the sick, give sight to blind,  
Enable the cripple to walk;  
He'll raise the dead from under the earth,  
And give them permission to talk.<sup>6</sup>

Just as John expressed his vision for the coming triumph, so too do the narratives of the slaves use powerful visions of the future to induce hope for real transformative

change in the present. As was the case with John, what the slaves see in their minds has implications for what God will soon do in their historical circumstance.

What was anticipated was divine judgment that would transform the human historical landscape. In John's vocabulary, it was the symbolic language of a fallen Babylon (chapters 17–18); in the slave narratives, it was the portent of the Civil War. As monstrous an event as it was in the life of the United States of America, the slaves had prayed fervently for it, believing it to be the only form of judgment that could punish the system that had enslaved them. At the same time, it would wipe that system of slavery out forever. As Dwight Hopkins notes, "Various slave stories, accordingly, attribute the success of the Yankee forces over the Confederates to God's will." He quotes a certain Charles Grandy as a case in point.

Den a gra' big star over in de east come right down almos' to de earth. I seed it myself. 'Twas sign o' war alight. Niggers got glad. All dem what could pray 'gin to pray more 'n ever. So glad God sendin' de war.<sup>7</sup>

As this following interchange between Robert Smalls, a twenty-four-year-old slave interviewed in South Carolina in 1863, indicates, the slaves were most eager to participate with God in this historic enterprise.

Q. Have the colored people any general idea of fighting for their liberation?  
A. They have a great idea. If they had a chance there would be no difficulty in raising a military force. If our headquarters were in Charleston we would have ten or fifteen regiments. The people there have been constantly praying for this day.<sup>8</sup>

This is not the language or imagery of an escapist people who look to otherworldly visions to "drug out" their historical realities. Just as John foresaw a new earth as well as a new heaven (21:1), the slaves believed that God's accomplishments in the heavenly realm could and would lead to liberation on the earthly one. The war and the emancipation of slaves validated the slave's belief that God acts in human history, as the spiritual shows: "Shout the glad tidings o' er Egypt's dark sky/ Jehovah has triumphed, his people are free."<sup>9</sup> This is why they could sing in images that talked about other worlds but in their essence challenged the structures of this world and, even more important, beckoned their participation in that challenge.

Singin' wid a sword in ma han,' Lord,  
Singin' wid a sword in ma han,'  
Singin' wid a sword in ma han,'  
Singin' wid a sword in ma han,'  
Singin' wid a sword in ma han.'

Purtest singin' ever I heard,  
Way ovah on de hill,  
De angels sing an' I sing too,  
Singin' wid a sword in ma han,' Lord.<sup>10</sup>

This is the language of resistance, not escapism. It is the kind of language that I believe characterizes the slave narratives<sup>11</sup> and corresponds with the ethical exhortation that John wanted his visionary imagery to impress upon his first-century hearers. In fact, the lens of the spirituals and the slave narratives helps us to see more clearly the way in which John's apocalyptic language encourages "a witness of active resistance." It is to this that we now turn.

### Reading Revelation through the Lens of the Slave Experience

A Christian believer in one of John's churches might rightly ask: "Who is in control? God? Or the emperor and Rome?" In John's world of Asia Minor (1:4), where the pagan attraction to the emperor cult was at its strongest,<sup>12</sup> the truthful answer appeared to be: "The emperor and Rome." John even acknowledged this "truth" in his portrayal of Rome as the great and mighty "Babylon," whose unrivaled wealth and power were idolized by the entire world.

John's truth, though, is an alternative to this one, a hidden truth amid the mighty claims that Caesar is lord and that Rome rules. Rome's public truth drowns out all other truths and, with the might of the Roman legions, declares them all to be lies. But John offers his visionary prophecy anyway. This is the message his mythology brings: despite what you see in this world, where the powers and forces of chaos and destruction seem to be victorious at every turn, the truth is that *God is in control* (see 1:5, 8; 2:12, 26–27; 3:21; 11:15; 19:15–16) and God is stronger than Rome. To any objective observer the claim is a ludicrous one.

Of course, one would first want to ask: "Whose God? Whose God is stronger than Rome?" John will reply: "It is Jesus' God." That is where it really becomes ridiculous. Jesus' God? Jesus, the same Jesus who died on the cross? His God? Precisely. His God! That is the truth. His God is stronger than Rome. John's vision seems to turn the apparent truth of Roman power on its head. John's vision gives to Jesus the symbolic characteristic of a lamb, a helpless animal used as an offering of sacrifice. Yet it is precisely such a lamb that served as a paschal offering for the liberation of the people from their historical captivity to the apparently all-powerful nation of Egypt.

It is not all that odd, then, that this lamb has the character of a lion. Notice how John opens his discussion of Jesus' role in God's plan: "Then one of the elders said



to me, 'Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.'" The elder points out a Lion, a conquering Lion who wields the power of almighty God. But when John looks, what does he see? "Then I saw . . . a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth."

The ironic message is clear: *looks deceive*. The Lamb has all the markings of one who was slaughtered. But the slaughtering did not take. For the Lamb apparently rose beyond the slaughtering—but with the markings intact in order that his followers who believed in him might be consoled and in order that his enemies who slaughtered him might become afraid. It is clear, despite how it looks, that this Jesus is a conquering Lion. The fact that he now wields the seven spirits of God is proof of that. This Jesus, along with the God whose plan he represents, is the one in control of human history. The Romans who slaughtered him are not. In using this imagery, John's goal was to show the truth of what his people believed, namely, that despite how it appears on the surface, God rather than Rome is in charge.

To demonstrate this truth, John imagined two key polar oppositions, God and Satan. On the heavenly or mythological level, these two were at war, and, despite how it seemed at times, God was destined to win. In fact, in the future that John foresaw, that victory had already taken place. On the ground, here on earth, that mythological battle had direct human, historical referents. God was represented by Christ, the slaughtered Lamb with the conquering power of a Lion. Satan was represented by the beastly portrayals of Rome and the conquering power of her Caesars. Rome's dominance, however, is only an appearance, an illusion, a mirage. That is the truth *Revelation* says is out there—the truth that the satanic forces who support Rome do not want the believers to find out.

### The Temptation to Accommodation

Why is it so important to Rome that the Christian believers not find out the truth? Because Rome wants the Christian, out of a fearful desire to protect this physical life and the things that go with it, to be willing to compromise his or her beliefs and accommodate them to the belief structure offered by Rome. All of this tells us something important about the community to which John was writing. Socially, politically, and economically, these were people of some means.<sup>13</sup>

John's audience was comprised of people with enough local standing and money to want to avoid losing it. As such, and here is the issue, they were prone to accommodate to Roman rule. This tendency was acute in relation to religion. Rome allowed subject peoples to pay homage to their own gods and goddesses as long as

their worship *also* included appropriate recognition of Roman deities. Refusal to participate in Roman cult worship attracted suspicion and hostility. An impulse to accommodate resulted because people who refused to participate in the cult risked the loss of economic security and political standing.

John realizes that his hearers are coming before a situation where they will have to decide whether to progress socially, politically, and economically or to declare themselves followers of Christ—at the risk of losing everything! He is afraid that the time might come when they would sacrifice their Christian commitment and allegiance to God's future in a futile attempt to conserve their status in the present by buying into the Roman economic way of life, by participating in cultic-social gatherings that may require them to compromise their faith, or even by denying their faith if declaring it would risk loss of property, privilege, or life.

This is why John creates a narrative-symbolic world that presents an alternative truth. In John's eye of faith, as ridiculous as it may seem, the truth is that God and God's Christ are in control. This, John reveals, is not only an alternative truth; this is *the* truth. And it is on the basis of this truth and of the historical circumstances of the hearers that John fashions an ethics of active resistance.

### An Ethics of Active Resistance: Witnessing

John promotes an ethics of active resistance by means of "witness." He does so by witnessing to an alternative truth and by seeking this same witness from those who, like him, follow the Lamb and attest to the truth that the Lamb, by the power of God, is in control of human history. By so doing, believers also witness against the false truth that Rome is lord and master of human history. I turn, then, to the language of witness in several key passages early in John's prophecy as a means to explicate John's ethics.

#### *Revelation* 1:1-3

In this opening passage, we learn how the concept of witnessing is central to John's whole work. This passage is an action text in which a revelation is delivered along a chain of figures from God to Jesus to the angel and then to John. The language John uses to build the chain suggests a literary equivalence between the term "revelation" and the formula "word of God and witness of Jesus Christ." Furthermore, the revelation of God's word is the same revelation as John's written prophecy (1:3). A kind of literary equation has developed: the revelation of Jesus Christ is "the Word of God and witness of Jesus Christ," each of which is also in turn the written prophecy that John's audience is to hear. This audience is to *keep* that witness.

But what is the "witness of Jesus Christ" that the believers are supposed to keep? Here David Aune's translation helps us: "... the message from God, that is, the witness borne by Jesus."<sup>14</sup> In this translation, "the witness of Jesus" expresses and specifies one aspect of the nature of "the word of God."<sup>15</sup> But what exactly is the witness of Jesus Christ, who is the spirit of prophecy? (19:10). We can say that it is not the believer's witness about Jesus, but, as Aune correctly translates, it is the witness "borne by" Jesus himself (cf. 1:9; 11:7; 12:17; 19:10; 10:4). When John talks about the "witness of," he is referring to the "witness borne by." And the prophecy John is now writing is in turn the witness to the truth that was borne by Jesus Christ. John here characterizes his entire work as the witness borne by Jesus.

What does this have to do with John's ethics? The answer lies not in *what* John says but in *how* he says it, namely with the language of blessing: "Blessed is the one who reads (aloud) . . . and blessed are those who hear . . . and keep it (the witness borne by Jesus Christ)."<sup>16</sup> John makes it known that he, along with God and Jesus Christ, considers that the person who reads this witness aloud (so that others may hear it) and the persons who hear and keep this witness are indeed blessed. And this is the action John wants his readers to perform, namely, to proclaim and to keep the witness that is borne by Jesus Christ, a witness so powerful and true that it is, for them, in their circumstance, the Word of God. They may not know yet precisely what that witness is (this becomes clear as the prophecy unfolds), but right from the start they know that they are to keep it by *emulating* it.

Throughout his book, John reinforces the importance of "keeping" this witness (3:3, 8; 14:12; 16:15; 22:9), and he promises eschatological victory to those who do so (2:26-29; 3:10). At the end of the book, John even pronounces the same blessing again on those who hear and keep the witness (22:7).

### *Revelation 1:4-8*

In this passage, we learn that keeping the witness of Jesus will place the believer directly in conflict with Rome. John's language contributes to this conflict. He writes in the symbolic language of apocalyptic, which is characteristically resistance language.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, as Allen Callahan has argued, John deliberately uses grammar that has Semitic features, and he makes Old Testament allusions, both of which demonstrate John's refusal to accommodate his "Greek" to that of the Romans.<sup>18</sup> As such, John's grammar is a symbol of the social and political resistance his people must wage. In addition, as we shall see, John describes God and Jesus in such a way as to be provocative in relation to the claims that Rome makes for itself and its gods.

For example, John writes that the God of Jesus Christ is "the one who is, who was, and who is coming." This is a direct challenge to the gods of the Greco-Roman world, because a similar three-fold formulation was a commonplace way of celebrat-

ing a deity's eternity and immutability: "Zeus was, Zeus is, and Zeus will be."<sup>19</sup> John testifies that this notoriety belongs to God. Furthermore, he claims that God is not only the eternal one, but also the "coming one." And God is coming for a purpose. John hints at that purpose when he adds to this three-fold formulation that God is "the Almighty one." God is the true and supreme power in the cosmos, and God is coming to establish God's power. In the eastern provinces of John's seven churches, where Rome was also making the claim to be the supreme power in the cosmos, an announcement of God's impending arrival as the Almighty One was bound to cause conflict.

John heightens the probability for that conflict in his description of Jesus Christ as "the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth." These phrases allude to *Psalms* 89, where the terms "faithful witness" and "firstborn" are both associated with kingship, with "the unending reign of David's seed on his throne" (cf. also *Psalms* 88:30). John applies the phrase directly to the Messiah's own faithful witness, which has led to the establishment of his eternal kingship.<sup>20</sup> In John's passage, each phrase builds on the previous one. The image of universal kingship clarifies what it means for Jesus to be firstborn of the dead, and, in turn, both these phrases clarify what it means for Jesus to be a faithful witness. By bringing together all these phrases from *Psalms* 89, John fosters the establishment of a secure and abiding kingship.

Indeed, the reference to "firstborn" in the psalm is directly associated not only with kingship in general but with the highest kingship on the earth. That is exactly the kind of kingship John envisions here for Jesus Christ: "I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth." Just as God is the Almighty One (the ruler of all creation), so Jesus is ruler of the entire human realm (the ruler over the kings of the earth). This is the revelation of Jesus Christ.

This is a revelation bound inevitably for conflict, particularly in a context in which Rome already lays claim to ultimate kingship. Indeed, "kings of the earth" is a phrase used throughout *Revelation* to refer to opponents of God's kingdom (6:15; 17:2; 18:3, 9; 19:19; cf. 16:14).<sup>21</sup> Jesus' kingship, by claiming to be the one abiding and universal kingship, necessarily resists the already established kingdoms that are making the same claim. In John's context there is only one kingdom to be resisted, namely, Rome.

This passage commends the characterization of Jesus as the faithful witness to the behavior of his hearers (cf. also 3:14). "The phrase 'the faithful witness' points to Jesus, not only as the revealer from heaven but as the one who also, like the Christians in John's churches, once stood before the Roman authorities. He had borne his witness, even at the cost of his life."<sup>22</sup> This is the part of the description that Christians can emulate. Although they cannot be the firstborn of the dead or the ruler of the kings of the earth, nevertheless they can, like Antipas (2:13) and like

John himself (1:2), be faithful witnesses to the witness that Jesus himself bears—that God is the Almighty One and that Jesus Christ is his coming king. In their cultural context, to bear such witness is also to broker a very dangerous form of political as well as religious resistance.

### Revelation 1:9-11

Here we see how John commends his own witness to his hearers. John declares himself to be on the island of Patmos “on account of the word of God, that is, the witness borne by Jesus.” A clarification of John’s language is important here. The phrase “on account of” could mean either “in order to” (bear the witness borne by Jesus) or “as a result of” (bearing the witness borne by Jesus). Eugene Boring points out that the phrase “on account of” is always used in *Revelation* “for the result of an action, not its purpose. John has been banished to Patmos *because* he had been preaching the Christian message.”<sup>22</sup> That message is Jesus’ own witness to his universal and abiding kingship.

John is here commending his own actions, lifting himself up as a model to be imitated. And therein also lies the text’s ethics. John calls himself his hearers’ partner; in doing so, he also challenges them to live up to the standards of that partnership. As he held to the witness borne by Jesus, despite the consequences, so must world that actively proclaims the lordship of Rome and Caesar is to act obstinately. It is to resist, to refuse to fit in. Even more, if you add to that declaration of witness the belief that God is coming soon to inaugurate Christ’s kingship and to make a kingdom of Christ’s followers, you invite “tribulation.” In such a context, endurance cannot mean passive waiting in the face of what Rome is doing. Rather, it means a continued resolve to keep witnessing even though this witness, by its very nature, provokes an angry Roman response.

### Revelation 2:12-17

John’s letter to Pergamum provides a good example of his call for active resistance. In Pergamum, a hostile response to the witness of Jesus’ universal and exclusive lordship would be expected. Pergamum was the capital city of the Asian province, a hothbed of pagan cults and emperor interest, “a citadel of Hellenistic civilization in Asia”<sup>23</sup> and “the center of imperial worship for the whole region.”<sup>24</sup>

The particular issue at hand was the eating of meat sacrificed to foreign deities. Participation in feasts where such food was available was one of the key ways in which members of a community integrated themselves into the larger populace. John believed that such “integration” came at too high a price. He believed that followers of Christ needed to make a stand. If they truly believed that Jesus was the Lord of history, then they must live in a way that showed it. He therefore demanded

that they refuse to partake of any rite or to eat any food consecrated to any other person’s or power’s lordship—no matter what the consequences.

And so, through his portrayal of Antipas as one who was executed in Pergamum, he commends resistance rather than accommodation. John commends Antipas by describing him, like Jesus, as “that faithful witness of mine” or “the faithful witness of me.” That suggests not only that Antipas witnessed to what Jesus witnessed to (the kingship of Jesus) but that he died “because of” it, and it makes his tragic character worthy of emulation. Indeed, John commends those who have behaved like Antipas (2:13) and condemns those who have not (2:14-16). John celebrates those who have held fast, even though such defiance in such a place can lead to the kind of end that claimed Antipas.

The directive is clear: The community at Pergamum, in spite of the consequences, must be what Antipas had been—a faithful witness to the kingship of Christ. They must resist the temptation to acquiesce to the demands of the Roman cultic/political infrastructure, demands that stemmed from the foundational belief that Caesar is Lord and Rome is the universal and abiding kingdom. In other words, the language of witness, whether it is related to Jesus Christ, John, or one of John’s fellow believers, calls for an active resistance to contemporary cultic and political expectations. Such resistance is so controversial and provocative that it can lead to death. Hence, John is not commending believers to act passively but to act oppositionally—to resist any devotion to the lordship of Rome and its many client deities. He is asking them to testify to the Lordship of another and, in so doing, to put themselves directly in harm’s way.

### Revelation 6:9-11

Here John has a vision of the souls of martyrs waiting beneath the altar in heaven. The formula “the word of God, which is the testimony borne by Jesus,” is repeated here. This time John makes a causal connection perfectly clear; it is “because of” their witness to Jesus’ Lordship that believers have suffered. Witnessing to the Lordship of Christ has caused their physical deaths.

And this is why the souls are crying out for justice. They want God to vindicate their testimony that Christ is King. For as long as justice is delayed, those who deny this witness will continue to believe Rome’s lordship instead. So they wait beneath the heavenly altar for God’s action. However, their passive waiting in heaven does not imply that they had waited passively on earth. They are slaughtered souls in heaven precisely because they had actively witnessed to the testimony that Jesus is the ultimate Lord of human history in a world where Rome laid vicious claim to its own witness of ultimate authority.

Ironically, the witness that caused the deaths of the faithful also participates in the historical transformation that it seeks. Even as the souls cry out for God to act,

their earthly compatriots continue the transformative effort they began. The souls in heaven have but a little while to wait for justice, just until the deaths of witnesses like themselves have come to a completion. In this way, then, the deaths actually contribute to the coming of God's kingdom.

John is not, however, commending death. He is instead commending witness, even though he knows that such witness will inevitably lead to tribulation and perhaps death. A progressive formula becomes clear. The witnessing leads to the death of the witnesses, and the death of the witnesses in turn leads to the coming of God's justice. The active witnessing, not the dying, is in the primary position. It is the witnessing that believers can control. They cannot control whether Rome will respond with censure, appropriation of property, denial of social privilege, exile, or death. But they can control whether they will witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The more who witness, the more intolerable will become the word that is witnessed, and the more belligerently Rome will be forced to act. It is the provocative witnessing that brings on Rome's response, which in turn will result in God's action against it.

It is the witnessing, then, that leads to the coming of God's justice. Dying is a result; witnessing is the cause. It is witnessing that John commends. For it is witnessing that plays a synergistic role with God's own efforts to accomplish the universal and abiding Lordship of Jesus Christ. This is the revelation of Jesus Christ.

### Final Discourses: Completing the Case

Chapter 12 provides another example of witness material that is to be read in light of earlier passages. The reader sees that the key characterization here is neither the divine child, the supernatural woman, nor the aggrieved dragon. It is instead the almost anonymous "them" (12:10) who become the active "they" (12:11). "They" (12:17). Again, the relationship between witnessing and suffering is causal: *because* they keep witnessing, they are continually hounded by the power that denies that testimony. But the passage says something more, something that on the surface seems startling, but for which the reader has been prepared: What they do will have a transformative effect. "They" will conquer the dragon. "They" will break the back of the force that is behind Rome. "They" will shatter its claim to lordship.

Once again John uses the language of instrumentality.<sup>36</sup> The relationship between witnessing and transformative victory is causal. "They" will conquer "because of" the blood of the Lamb. Here, of course, "they" are dependent upon divine action in Jesus that they themselves cannot emulate. Though their blood too will spill, it cannot have the redemptive and victorious effect of the blood of the Lamb. But John

does not stop here. He continues with another "because of" statement that places them in partnership with God: because of their witness, they will conquer. John's language leads to a crucial conclusion: by obstinately proclaiming the Lordship of Christ, they help to bring that Lordship about, *even* in a world that believes in and prosecutes the lordship of Rome. As Walter Wink wrote:

We must not fail to observe the implications of this. If it is right to say that the basis for a new order of society is God's word of judgment pronounced in Christ, then it follows that the witnesses who proclaimed that word to challenge the prevailing political order, were not acting anti-politically at all, but were confronting a false political order with the foundation of a true one. We must claim John for the point of view which sees criticism, when founded in truth, as genuine political engagement.<sup>37</sup>

This is witness that serves not only as active resistance but also as triumphant cultic, social, and political transformation. *This* is the revelation of Jesus Christ.

### Some Concluding Thoughts: Reclaiming the Language of Apocalyptic

For the African American church the apocalyptic language of resistance in the *Book of Revelation* ought to be an integral part of the personal and corporate language of faith in a contemporary way. It is the language of the powerless, the language of future hope presently realized. It is the language of the future because the present often speaks in such destructive ways.

African American churches hear the present destructive news of our collective circumstances—racial profiling, the return of extensive re-segregation of our nation's schools, the revival of hate groups that target people based on ethnicity and race, the pervasive preponderance of the impoverished and the destitute, the cries of the hopeless in our inner cities, and the wave of political conservatism that exerts accommodation to United States society. Because most African Americans in this country still count themselves among the most impoverished and oppressed,<sup>38</sup> John's message to resist, to refuse to accommodate to the present social, economic, and political way of life, is still a necessary message. His language of resistance, as the slaves rightly understood in their time, must remain a vital part of the African American language—if African American Christian language is to remain the language of hope for the future in the midst of an unbearable present.

African American Christians must therefore reclaim the language. Unfortunately, in much of our middle- and upper-class Christian circles, *Revelation* sounds creepy and misguided, violent and deranged. And so, through its lack of use, the language has been surrendered to extremists like David Koresh or fundamentalist groups



who misuse it as a literal plan for their kind of future. The crazier the people who use the book, the crazier the book itself seems to be. That is because we are looking at the book through the lens of *their* realities and issues. We allow those issues to determine how we should understand the book and whether the book should be preached and taught. Like the early Christian search for a canon, many contemporary African Americans are not sure *Revelation* should be a part of our heritage. To be sure, there is some good prophetic imagery there (chapters 1-3, the letters to the churches, talk of a new heaven and a new earth), but all the rest—the sevens and the twelves, the seals and the bowls and the trumpets, the whores and the madonnas, the Lamb and the blood, the lakes of fire and the 144,000 saved from it—all of that seems too far out and too inexplicable except to those who have an extremist or fundamentalist agenda.

But the messages for the African American community are all too relevant. Among middle- and upper-class African Americans who have attained a measure of freedom, there is the danger of accommodation. Like the listeners in the churches of Asia Minor who had much to lose by resisting Rome, so also many African Americans today may be tempted to accommodate to the dominant culture in such a way as to abandon others who continue to suffer the brunt of discrimination and oppression. The question becomes: Are they going to accommodate, or will they choose to resist the oppressor and thereby voluntarily enter a situation in which they too might risk loss and oppression? The perspective and vision of *Revelation* can enable people to see clearly the dynamics of the present oppression and motivate them to embrace solidarity with those who suffer.

I am suggesting that the apocalyptic imagery we find in *Revelation* can be the foundation of a potent social and political ethics, if we will engage its symbolic language of *Revelation* clearly promotes an ethics of social, religious, and political resistance.

John's text, then, has a particular ethical agenda in mind. He wants the hearers and the readers of this text to do something. To endure. To witness. To resist accommodation to the practices and trends of their time and culture, no matter how much it costs them, and to do so in a way that helps precipitate the rushing in of the kingdom. He shows them a future where "what ought to be," God in charge and God's people vindicated, has become "what is."

This is why I say that *Revelation*, like the slave narratives I have used as a lens, is a "historical" apocalypse. Though it envisions the future and the heavenly world, it does not encourage its hearers and readers to escape there. Rather, the visions are encouragement to do the kinds of things that are necessary, in history, to transform the world. That is what the imagery and symbolism are about.

What Zora Neale Hurston said about the spirituals, that they were really only spirituals when sung in the context of the oppression that birthed them, should also be said about *Revelation*. To understand *Revelation*, we must view it from John's perspective, namely, "from below"—from the point of view of the suffering ones who are resisting oppression. Otherwise it sounds vengeful, spiteful, and escapist. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza makes a helpful analogy between *Revelation* and Martin Luther King Jr. She points out that the outcry for divine justice in *Revelation* is borne out of the experience that no Christian who was denounced by his or her neighbors could receive justice from a Roman court. Similarly, she argues, Martin Luther King Jr.'s *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* "addresses experiences and hopes similar to the theology of *Revelation* . . . His indictment of racist White America cannot be construed as 'hatred of civilization' or as 'envy' deficient of Christian love for one's enemies, if the dehumanizing power of racism is understood as evil."<sup>9</sup>

Does *Revelation* have a place in our present world? Absolutely, as long as we understand the book in light of its context and apply it to those current situations that correspond with that context, namely, situations "from below." For in situations "from below," the powerful imagery of *Revelation* may well have the same provocative effect for us as it did for John's first hearers—to encourage endurance and to provoke a transformative witness that can make "what should be" into "what is." Such power is available to us. That is the truth of *Revelation*. That is the truth out there.

## Notes

1. John Blassingame, editor, *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, and Autobiographies*, 372.
2. *Ibid.*, 276-77. The hoped-for reunion took place seventeen years later in Canada.
3. James Weldon Johnson, ed. *The Book of American Negro Spirituals*, 162-63.
4. *Ibid.*
5. George C. L. Cummings, "The Slave Narrative as a Source of Black Theological Discourse: The Spirit and Eschatology," 65.
6. James H. Cone, "The Meaning of Heaven in Black Spirituals," 60, in *Heaven*, edited by Bas Van Iersel and Edward Schillebeeks.
7. Dwight Hopkins, "Slave Theology in the 'Invisible Institution,'" 14-15.
8. Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 378.
9. Cited by Albert L. Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African-American Religious History*, 12.
10. Johnson, *The Book of Negro Spirituals*, 86-88.
11. For further discussion of the spirituals as resistance languages, see Brian K. Blount, *Cultural Interpretation: Reorienting New Testament Criticism*, 55-69.
12. See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, 54. Under the Flavian emperors, particularly Domitian, "the Asian Provinces strongly promoted the imperial cult."

13. Only two of the seven churches are depicted as poor. Note also how this implies their economic non-participation in the wealth described in chapter 18.
14. David Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 6.
15. *Ibid.*, 7.
16. Eugene Boring, *Revelation*, 67.
17. See also Adela Yarbro Collins, "The Political Perspective of the Revelation to John," 241-42, and Pablo Richard, *Apocalypse: A People's Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, 18-19.
18. Allen Callahan, "The Language of the Apocalypse," 453-70.
19. Boring, *Revelation*, 75.
20. Gregory Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 247; cf. 192.
21. *Ibid.*, 191.
22. Boring, *Revelation*, 76.
23. *Ibid.*, 82.
24. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation*, 54.
25. Richard, *Apocalypse*, 57.
26. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 663-64.
27. Walter Wink, "Biblical Theology and Social Ethics," 90.
28. Blount, *Go Preach!*, 199-267; Mark Lewis Taylor, *The Executed God: The Way of the Cross in Lockdown America*.
29. Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation*, 11-12.

## Revelation: Clarity and Ambivalence, A Hispanic/Cuban American Perspective

Justo L. González

### Introduction

#### A Matter of Perspective

When an artist paints a landscape, the resultant piece has much to do with the artist's perspective and interests: Is the artist standing on this hill or on another? Is her primary interest in colors, in shapes, in light, or in textures? The answers to such questions help us to understand the manner in which the artist "reads" the landscape. Likewise, when someone interprets a text, that interpretation is significantly affected by the interpreter's perspective, experiences, and questions. It is for this reason that I begin this essay with a few words about myself, my perspectives, and my method of interpretation.

As I was growing up, the *Book of Revelation* was very seldom read or used in our church. We were Protestants (Methodists) in a country (Cuba) that was, at that point, almost entirely Roman Catholic, at least nominally. There were fewer than ten thousand Methodists in the entire country, which had an overall population of more than six million people. Other "mainline" denominations (Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Baptists, Lutherans) were even smaller, or not much larger than ours. In total, between 5 and 7 percent of the population of Cuba were Protestants. The typical and stereotypical images that my classmates had of Protestants were derived either from the rather conservative Catholic priests and nuns who taught in many schools or from their encounters with radical Protestants who claimed to know exactly when the Lord was coming, who the Beast was, and whether we were on the fifth or the sixth trumpet.