

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

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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.

Given that situation, it is not surprising that we tended to shy away from the *Book of Revelation*, with its weird visions, multi-headed monsters, and words of woe. We did not want to be lumped together with people like the apparently mad man who stood at the entrance to our high school and predicted the rolling up of the sky and the coming of the great tribulation. The result was that, besides our knowing that it was a strange book, just about all we knew of *Revelation* were a few phrases taken out of context, such as "Behold, I stand at the door and knock." We also sang many hymns inspired by passages in *Revelation*, although we did not know that!

Then, through a series of circumstances and after some time teaching in Puerto Rico, I came to live in the United States. In my new context, as in my former one, the *Book of Revelation* was often used as the happy hunting ground for people with strange ideas. The Beast was Mao. The Beast was the Soviet Union. The Beast was the European Common Market. The Beast was the Mid-East oil cartel. Much of this was very similar to what I had heard in my own homeland, and it did little to increase my interest in *Revelation*.

And, once again, I was a minority, but now I was no longer a religious minority. Now I was a minority because of my ethnicity, my culture, and my accent. In the dominant culture, I generally belonged, by virtue of being a Protestant, to the religious majority. Yet within my ethnic minority, the Latino community, I was still in the religious minority—again because I was a Protestant. In both the Latino community and the wider society, people who paid much attention to the last book of the New Testament and who sought to decipher its meaning for the present were generally considered to be quite strange and profoundly alienated both from the mainstream of society and apparently also from themselves! I had no desire to be counted among them, and therefore I had little interest in the visions of *Revelation* or in its beasts and cups of wrath.

Those were the years of the so-called Cold War—which may have been "cold" in the United States and in the Soviet Union, but not in Vietnam, in Central America, or in Angola. While generally agreeing with the need to stop the ravages of totalitarianism in various parts of the world, I also became profoundly aware of—and angry pain, and the aspirations of other peoples. When such aspirations challenged the vested interests of large corporations, it sufficed to raise the specter of communism, and all sorts of mayhem seemed to be justified—much as today the specter of terrorism is employed to justify egregious violations of national and international law. Then came the welcome collapse of the "evil empire" of the Soviet Union, with the not-so-welcome implication that the remaining empire (the United States) was good and that it could do no evil—and that therefore any who resisted or criticized it, from Osama bin Laden to Jacques Chirac, were evil.

At a more personal level, it was also during those years that I became deeply and existentially aware of the enormous importance that culture plays in all our lives and

of the difficulties and ambiguities of life in multicultural settings such as the United States. I had always considered myself fairly bilingual and bicultural. Yet I soon discovered that such self-perception was much easier when I saw myself as a visitor in the dominant culture than when I became a more permanent resident within it. I soon learned that the interaction among cultures is a complex and often painful process, that cultures are not fixed realities, that they always exist and develop within the context of encounters with other cultures, that they both require and resist change, and that there is an inherent tribalism in all of us that tends to obscure these realities. The ambiguities of being a Latino in the United States is typically expressed in images such as *mestizaje*¹ and "living on the hyphen."² It then occurred to me that in a way my experience was similar to John's as he was writing *Revelation*. As a Jew, he had had the experience of being a minority in a society dominated by other cultures and other religions. Then as a Christian he had the experience of being marginalized within his own Jewish community. And now, as he is given a word from God, he must deliver to these mostly Jewish Christian congregations a message that transcends the limits of their horizons.

I was working on these issues when the United Methodist Women asked my wife and me to write a study book on *Revelation*. It was to be a simple book, designed for a series of Bible studies.³ But the task of writing it was not so simple, for it became apparent that *Revelation* had much to say to our present situation and that the reasons why so many of us tended to ignore it were subtle and complex. Later, we were asked to write a fuller commentary on *Revelation*, thus continuing a process that had begun long before.³

It is through the lenses of these experiences and concerns that I have come to read the *Book of Revelation*. But I also read it with a particular method, grounded on a theological perspective that I must now clarify.

A Method of Interpretation

At this point, I must begin by declaring that my interest in the book of *Revelation* is not merely historical. I am certainly interested in matters such as who wrote the book, why, where, and what the author's sources may have been. But all of this is of secondary importance, since I read *Revelation* first of all as an authoritative book, as part of a canon through which God's will is manifested, not only to me but also to the church at large.

Having said that, I must add that this does not mean that I am siding with the apparently mad fanatic who stood at the door of my school shouting words of doom, nor that I see any value in any of the various readings that today tell us that the beast is Saddam Hussein or Osama bin Laden or that we are now on the sixth trumpet or that the restoration of the state of Israel is a sign of the impending end. Throughout

history there have been many such interpretations, and up to now all have been proven wrong by the mere passage of time!¹

This, however, is not the only reason why I find little value in any such interpretations. Another reason is that they contradict the repeated biblical injunction that the dating of the end-times is none of our business (*Mark* 13:32; *Acts* 1:7). Another is that, in spite of all that we are told to the contrary, we were to be able to date the end; this would not make us any more obedient, but rather less. If I know, for instance, that the Lord is coming ten years from now, I have a few more years before I really have to worry about making things right. (I remember that when I was a child and our parents would leave us at home with a number of tasks, telling us when to expect them, we simply postponed the assigned tasks to the last possible minute.)

A much more important reason to reject such interpretations is that they are based on a misconception regarding the meaning of the word "prophecy." *Revelation* refers to itself as a book of "prophecy" (1:3), and on that basis these interpreters turn it into a sort of crystal ball through which they can look into the future and foretell the order of events to come. But in biblical usage, "prophecy" does not refer necessarily to foretelling the future. A prophet is anyone who speaks for God, and a prophecy is any such speech. Thus, *1 Corinthians* 13 and *Romans* 7 are prophecies as much as *Revelation* 17.

However, the main reason why any such interpretations fall short is that by making *Revelation* into a sort of program for the latter days, they rob the book of any value or relevance for any other time. A *TV Guide* is very useful for a particular week. During that week, we can use it to find out what will be happening next, or where we have to look to see a particular program. But it is practically useless both before and after that particular week. After its date, the best use to be made of it is to tear it up and recycle the paper. Before its date, it is also useless, for the "Thursday" to which it refers is not my "Thursday."

Likewise, when *Revelation* is turned into a sort of program for the latter days and the claim is made that we are living in those latter days, the implication is that when Martin Luther read this book in the sixteenth century and when John Wesley read it in the eighteenth, this book was supposed to tell them only that the end would come in the twenty-first century. Even worse, such interpretations imply that when John in his exile on Patmos wrote to the suffering and perplexed churches in Asia, all he had to tell them was that at some distant point in the twenty-first century the seventh trumpet would sound and the end would come—in other words, John's book was scarcely a word addressed to the very real and immediate needs and concerns of his readers.

How, then, are we to interpret *Revelation*? Simply—just as we interpret the rest of Scripture. When we read, for instance, that God called Moses, that God used him to liberate Israel, and that God gave him the Law, we do not turn these accounts into

an announcement of future events. We read the text as historical narrative. And yet, we read it for more than mere—and even questionable—historical information. We read it as depicting a pattern of the way God relates with God's people. As Christians have read this story of Moses through the centuries, they have come to the conclusion that God calls, that God frees, and that God commands.

It is in this manner that the New Testament frequently uses the Hebrew Scriptures. Thus, for instance, the Gospel writer says that Jesus and his family fled to Egypt and that thus the prophecy was fulfilled, "Out of Egypt I called my Son" (*Matthew* 2:15). The author of *Matthew* is quoting *Hosea* 11:1, which actually refers to the story of the exodus out of Egypt and speaks of the people of Israel as God's "son." The Gospel writer knew that the words of Hosea referred to Israel and to the exodus. But even so, they referred also to Jesus and to his flight to and return from Egypt.

One of the verses in the Hebrew Scriptures most often quoted in the New Testament is *Psalms* 118:22: "The stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner." This is an ancient psalm in which the people of Israel praised God for the vindication of the weak and the despised. In the Gospels (*Matthew* 21:42; *Mark* 12:10; *Luke* 20:17), Jesus quotes this line in the context of the parable of the wicked laborers in the vineyard. At least in *Matthew* and *Luke*, Jesus quotes these words as a sign that the owner of the vineyard will give it to others; for just as a builder may take a rejected stone and turn it into the most important one, so can the owner of the vineyard take it away from its present keepers and give it to others. In *Acts* 4:11, Peter quotes the same text, but now applying it to Jesus: "This is the stone which was rejected by you builders, but which has become the head of the corner." And in *1 Peter* 2 it is also applied to Jesus, but now with the further purpose of claiming that Jesus' followers, even though themselves rejected and despised, are living stones in God's great edifice. In these various interpretations, the pattern is the same: rejection by the builders, and acceptance and vindication by God.

What we have here is a sort of interpretation that takes history seriously. History is important because it does not repeat itself; it is always new. And yet history is worth studying, because there are patterns that appear repeatedly and because by looking at those patterns we may draw some guidance for our particular moment in history.

It is in this manner that I choose to interpret the book of *Revelation*—not as a sort of *TV Guide* for future events that had nothing to say to John's contemporaries and not just as a specific message for a particular group of churches in Asia Minor at a particular time, but rather as a message that, precisely because it spoke concretely to besieged believers in the late first century, also speaks concretely to believers early in the twenty-first century.

This means that one way to show the relevance of *Revelation* for our day and our setting is to relate the context of *Revelation* to our own context, to see how *Revela-*

tion deals with its own context, and then to see how this may provide guidance for our own life in our present context.

Three Fields of Interest

By relating what I said at the beginning to what I have just said about my method of interpretation, the reader will understand why part of what I find significant in the *Book of Revelation* is its basic attitude in relation to its context, namely, its critique of the existing political order and its resistance of it—even in hope against all hope. The reader will also understand why in most of my work on *Revelation* I focus my attention on three related dimensions of the original context of *Revelation*, which are paralleled by similar dimensions in my context. These have to do with (1) the geopolitical order, (2) the economic order, and (3) cross-cultural encounters. While much could be said about each of these, the limitations of this essay compel me to focus my attention on just a few of the passages that relate to these various contexts.

The Geopolitical Order

The region that John knew as Asia Minor (which today we know as Turkey) had long been torn by the conflicting interests of mighty empires. In the glory days of Greece, it was here, in Ionia, that Persian imperialism most often clashed with Greek culture, traditions, and independence. Now, in John's time, the entire region east, the kingdom of Armenia subsisted with difficulty as a buffer state between Rome and Persia. While clearly within the bounds of the Roman Empire, Asia Minor was sufficiently close to the Persian border that there was always the fear of spies and infiltration. This was one reason why loyalty to the Roman emperor as a goddess had been built, and emperor worship was stressed—as is seen in the correspondence between a regional Roman official by the name of Pliny and the Emperor Trajan, penned just a few years after John wrote *Revelation*.

In such circumstances, any criticism of Rome, her government, or her policies could easily be construed as treason or at least as pro-Persian sentiments, just as overwhelming presence of the United States was labeled communist. From the point of view of Roman authorities, whoever did not support them was clearly an enemy, a subversive element, and most likely an agent of Persian policies and ambitions. Nevertheless, in *Revelation*, John levels major critiques against the Roman Empire and calls for resistance to it.

In *Revelation*, John shows no love or admiration for Persia. Indeed, the first of the famous "four horsemen of the Apocalypse" most likely refers to Persia, whose armies consisted mostly of cavalry armed with bows and arrows: "And I saw, and behold, a white horse, and its rider had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer" (6:2). But then we come to the second rider, which represents a different empire: "And out came another horse, bright red; its rider was permitted to take peace from the earth, so that men should slay one another; and he was given a great sword" (6:4).

If the first rider represents Persia, this second rider represents Rome. The "great sword" that this rider carries is not a military weapon. In Greek there are two different names for a sword. One word refers to the short and relatively light sword carried by the legionaries. The other, which is the word used here, refers to the large and fairly unwieldy sword of the executioner, which was also used as a symbol of the higher Roman magistrates' authority to condemn to death—the "authority of the sword" or *jus gladii*. Significantly, while Rome boasted of the great peace it had brought to the world, the famous *Pax Romana*, John tells us that this horseman, the one who wields the sword of imperial authority, goes out to take peace away from the earth. At this point, it is good to remember that the so-called Roman peace was greatly resented by many of the subjugated peoples and that at least every few years rebellion broke out in one province or another—and quite often in more than in one province at a time. These rebellions were crushed by military might and by the wholesale application of the "authority of the sword" represented by this "great sword," which the second rider carries—although death by decapitation was reserved for citizens and other privileged cases, while the rest were often crucified or killed in other cruel fashions.

In short, while John did not believe—as some probably did—that liberation from Roman oppression would come through Persian might, this did not keep him from naming the evil brought about by Roman rule.

Similar reflections are prompted by the much debated "beast from the sea" that first appears in chapter 13: "And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems upon its horns and a blasphemous name upon its heads." There has been much discussion about the meaning of the ten horns and seven heads, which has also led to many a depiction of this beast as having the appearance of a horrible monster. This, however, is a misinterpretation of symbolic imagery; for the Lamb of God is also depicted as having seven horns and seven eyes (5:6). Numbers seven and ten are numbers of perfection. This means that the beast from the sea is depicted as apparently having the fullness of power and of government. It is, therefore, not an unattractive beast. But then, this apparent perfection is contradicted in that it has "a blasphemous name upon its heads." The beast is not frightening in its appearance, but even so, it is blasphemous—it is insulting to God.

Who or what, then, is this beast? For readers in Asia Minor, generally looking out upon the Aegean Sea, Rome and its might came from the sea. By sea came the provincial governors, and by sea came also the legions, particularly when unrest or the threat of rebellion required the rapid movement of troops. By sea came the tax collectors, and the sea seemed to swallow much of the wealth of the land. The beast from the sea is none other than Rome itself and its imperial might, powerful (as with ten horns) and apparently indestructible (as with seven heads), but still carrying a blasphemous name and still opposing the will of God. By such symbolism, John exposes the evil of the Roman Empire.

In addition, John critiques local authorities who collaborate with the Romans. We see this in the beast out of the earth: "Then I saw another beast which rose out of the earth; it had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon" (13:11). This dragon, John makes it very clear that this beast has no real power on its own but is subservient to the beast from the sea, whose power and policies it serves. In Asia Minor, apparently springing out of the earth itself, there was an entire native structure that served Rome. Indeed, much of the area had become part of the Roman Empire through a bequest from the king of Pergamum, making Rome his heir. And thereafter, not only in Pergamum, but also in Smyrna and several other cities, there was a vast cadre of natives who survived and flourished by collaborating with Rome as tax collectors, minor functionaries, and magistrates. (Something similar happens today in many countries subjected to the neocolonialism of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, where a cadre of military, merchants, and others—often called "Herodians" by those who oppose them—prosper as a result of their collaboration with the neocolonial system.)

It is, however, in chapter 17 where John makes it most clear that his symbolism is referring to Rome and to its misuse of its might. This is the well-known depiction of the great harlot, drunk with the blood of the martyrs. As a side note, it is interesting, illuminating, and tragic to observe that, while practically all Christians are aware of the image of the great harlot of chapter 17, the woman clothed in the sun who appears in chapter 11, which is a very positive figure, has been practically ignored in the popular imagery of *Revelation*—except in some traditional depictions of that figure as Mary, the mother of Jesus. I find this interesting, illuminating, and tragic because it shows the degree to which biblical interpretation and the selection of passages to be studied have been marred by stereotypes of gender, such that feminine figures with negative connotations are much more studied than their positive counterparts.

There would have been little doubt for a first- or second-century reader that the image of the great harlot referred to Rome, sitting on seven mountains (17:9) and clothed in imperial purple (17:4).⁵ In addition, "the kings of the earth have com-

mitted fornication" with her (17:2), and she is given the symbolic title of "Babylon the great, mother of harlots and of earth's abominations" (17:5). The point here is so obvious that it needs no further explanation. For John, Rome has become a new Babylon, a harlot drunk on the blood of the martyrs, and a tool of the Dragon. And this does not mean simply the urban center that was called Rome. It is important to remember that in the context of first-century Greek, a *polis* ("city") was both an urban center and a state. Thus, "Rome" is the city itself, but it is also its system of government, its imperial power.

Significantly, the *Book of Revelation* is in a sense a tale of two cities: the city of Rome and the new city that John sees coming down from heaven. These cities are not just urban centers; they represent entirely different ways of organizing life—or, as we would say today, conflicting world orders. *Revelation* is therefore a radical critique of Rome's geopolitical order—and, by extension, of every world order that falls short of John's vision of the heavenly city. This is a word that is particularly relevant for Christians living in any society—including ours—that claims divine sanctions for its socio-political order.

The Economic Order

The second dimension of the context of *Revelation* that I wish to highlight is the economic order. World orders do not exist independently of economic orders. Organizing the world in a particular order implies also distributing its resources in a particular order. Imperial Rome is not just a political empire, in which various nations are now ruled by the center; it is also an economic empire, in which the resources of the conquered lands are made to flow toward the center. Rome's rule over its provinces is also Rome's economic exploitation of its provinces.

In the passage about the great harlot, *Revelation* alludes to this connection between political rule and economic exploitation. The harlot Rome is depicted as "seated upon many waters." This is a traditional image that often depicts a rich and powerful city as standing amid rivers or on the seashore. The reason for this symbolism is that in the ancient world most long-distance trade took place over waterways—rivers and seas—rather than by land. A few luxury items, such as silk from the Orient, did travel overland in caravans, but trade on a large scale was much more feasible over water than across land. It was much more difficult and expensive, for example, to carry tons of wheat to Rome by oxcart over the Apennines than to carry the same load by ship from Sicily or from Egypt. For this reason, one way to say that a city was wealthy was to speak of it as standing among the waters—at the crossroads of trade. Consider, for example, what *Jeremiah* 51:13 proclaims about Babylon: "O you who dwell by many waters, rich in treasures, your end has come."

In *Revelation* 17, this imagery from Jeremiah of a rich and powerful city as living by many waters appears once again, but now with a new twist. The angel tells John

that “the waters that you saw, where the harlot is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues.” In other words, Rome is rich because she sits over the peoples of the earth like so many waters, and the riches of the world flow toward her. John condemns the imperial order of Rome, not only because Rome persecutes Christians and Rome blasphemes against God, but also because Rome has become rich by exploiting the peoples of the earth. The geopolitical system of government is yoked with an economic order in which riches flow from the provinces to the center, from the conquered to the conquerors.

John’s critique of the existing economic order—or disorder—is not limited to this particular passage. Since I referred above to the first two “horsemen of the Apocalypse,” it may be well to refer now to the third. This rider emerges when the third seal is broken. Following the first rider carrying a bow and the second rider carrying a mighty sword, one would expect this rider to carry an instrument of destruction. And he does. But it is a subtler weapon of destruction. This rider carries a balance, a symbol of trade. This does not seem as deadly a weapon as the bow of the first rider or the sword of the second, and this may be why in the case of the third rider a voice is heard that explains how this rider brings about death and destruction. Indeed, as this rider emerges, a voice is heard: “A quart of wheat for a denarius, and three quarts of barley for a denarius, but do not harm oil and wine” (6:6).

To understand the significance of these words—which would have been obvious to John’s readers in Asia Minor—one must take into account what was happening in Asia Minor in terms of agriculture and economics. When this region was annexed by Rome, it was self-sufficient in the production of food. But then Roman capital moved in, and the very fertile lands of the province were bought by senators and other wealthy Romans, who soon discovered that land devoted to vineyards and to olive groves yielded greater profits than land devoted to cereal grains. The result was that very soon, while the rich in the province accumulated wealth, the poor found it very difficult to buy the wheat that was at the center of their daily diet. Domitian sought to remedy the situation by limiting the production of wine and oil and thereby forcing landowners to plant cereals. But the outcry was so great and the influence of the powerful was so strong that the project was abandoned. The result was greater inflationary pressures on the price of cereals—and greater hunger among the population at large. The prices that the voice in *Revelation* quotes represent a twelve-fold rise in the cost of wheat and an eight-fold rise in the price of barley—which in normal times was seldom eaten by people but was used rather for animal fodder. A denarius was the typical daily wage for a laborer, before taxes. Thus, even apart from taxes and other expenses, the most wheat that a laborer could buy in a day was roughly a quart of unhulled grain—just about enough for a rather small loaf of bread.

Thus, the geopolitical order is not just a matter of world politics, of empires and kingdoms; it is also a matter of people going hungry, of families not being able to

sustain themselves, and of the rich and the powerful making sure that the system continues working for the benefit of those in power, even if it means hunger and starvation for others.

This is why John comes to the point where he is actually calling on his readers to resist the existing economic order by opting out of it: “Come out of her, my people!” (18:4). He explains to them that in order to participate in the Roman economic order, they must have the mark of the beast: “it [the Roman beast] causes all, both small and they must have the mark of the beast: ‘it [the Roman beast] causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, so that no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name’” (13:1-6-17). In other words, the economic order has been organized by the political beast, and it results in exploitation such that a quart of wheat costs a denarius. So, in John’s view, what the faithful are expected to do is to resist by opting out, to refrain from participating in that order.

It is impossible to know what John’s alternative was. Was he actually calling on Christians in Asia Minor to opt out of all exchange, to withdraw into a self-sufficient community, growing all their food and producing whatever else the community might need? It is difficult to imagine how they could do that, particularly since John is writing to urban churches, most of whose members made a living as craftsmen and day laborers. Perhaps what he intended was to have them resist the large-scale economic order by reverting to a barter, limited-scale economy. In any case, what is clear is that his book includes both a vehement protest against the existing economic order and a call to believers to refrain from its apparent benefits—which are really losses when seen within the context of the economy of God’s reign or, in John’s imagery, of God’s city.

Cross-Cultural Encounters

Imperial systems of government and of economy invariably lead to greater cultural exchange and conflict. In the first century of the Christian era, the city of Rome was being flooded with people and ideas from all over the Roman Empire. Tacitus’s complaint is well-known, that Rome had become “that cesspool for all that is base and sordid from every corner of the earth.”⁶ Suetonius comments that during the reign of Claudius, unrest among the Jewish population in Rome reached such a level that the emperor expelled them from the city.⁷ And it was not only humans that were invading the city of Rome; the gods from all over the empire were also coming to the city. Tacitus refers, for instance, to the case of the aristocratic woman Pomponia Gracina, who was accused of “foreign superstition”—whatever that may have meant.⁸ At approximately the same time that *Revelation* was written, the emperor’s cousin Flavius Clemens and a former consul, Acilius Glabrio, were executed for “falling into Jewish practices” and for denying the gods, and Flavia Domitilla, the emperor’s niece, was exiled under the same charges—which some scholars believe

to be an indication that Flavius and the rest had become Christians.⁹ Not only Christianity, but also other religions from the East, such as Judaism, the worship of the Magna Mater from Syria, the mysteries of Isis and Osiris, and others, were criticized by many who considered themselves “true Romans.” And sometimes these religions were banned or placed under severe legal restrictions.

When we look at the persecution of Christians in this light, it is clear that many of those who persecuted Christianity—Trajan, Marcus Aurelius, Decius, Diocletian—saw their actions as measures to restore the classical glory of Rome, to return to the ancient gods and values, and to stop the growth of “foreign superstition.” Even though Eusebius of Caesarea, in his efforts to show the compatibility between the Empire and the church, claimed that most persecutions were the result of evil schemes on the part of misguided authorities, the fact is that the worst persecutions were led by rulers who sought to restore the glories of ancient Rome. In other words, they persecuted Christianity not because they misunderstood this new religion but rather because they understood it all too well—and saw it as subverting the traditional order and culture of the Empire.

At the same time, not all Romans rejected everything that was foreign. The very fact that cults and practices from the East had to be repeatedly suppressed is an indication that these cults and practices held an appeal for many Romans. Emperor Marcus Aurelius, who deplored the “superstition” of Christians, was nevertheless a staunch follower of the maxims of Stoicism—which after all was also an import from Greece. Among the learned in Rome, the Greek language (and culture) was often preferred to Latin. As is so often the case, cultures in apparent conflict influenced and penetrated each other, thus making cultural conflicts at once more bitter and more polarized.

The *Book of Revelation* acknowledges the variety of cultures and traditions in its context. Seven times in the book one finds variations of the phrase—ultimately borrowed from the book of Daniel—“every tribe, and language, and people, and nation.” Sometimes this phrase appears in negative contexts, and sometimes in positive ones. For example, the throng who worship the lamb is comprised of people from “every tribe and tongue and people and nation,” but the same is also true of those who worship the beast.¹⁰

A particularly illuminating use of this phrase appears precisely in the passage about the great harlot who sits on many waters (that is, who is rich), for we are told that “the waters that you saw, where the harlot is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues” (17:15). In other words, the great harlot is rich because she sits on many peoples and multitudes and nations and tongues. Rome may believe itself to be rich because of its hard work, its superior skills, or the productivity of its labor force, but the truth is that Rome is rich because it has devised a system to exploit the wealth of other nations and peoples.

That being the case, there is nothing surprising about these various nations and languages and peoples being present in the city of Rome—turning it, as Tacitus would say, into a “cesspool.” There is no doubt that where the rivers of wealth flow, there also flow the rivers of population. Some conservative elements in Britain and France today may deplore the high level of immigration from Africa and may even speak of being “invaded” by Africans, but this is simply the result of a colonial system, and later of a neocolonial system, so devised as to produce a flow of wealth from Africa to Britain and France. Some people in the United States may complain that they are being overrun by immigrants, that the borders are too porous, that their traditional culture and values are being challenged, but this is simply the result of economic and international policies so devised as to produce a constant flow of wealth from Latin America and other poor nations into the United States. It is not surprising that so much of the wealth of Mexico flows into the United States legally over the bridge and, at the same time, many Mexicans cross illegally under the bridge. Where the rivers of wealth flow, there too flow the rivers of population, and it is very difficult to promote one flow while stemming the other.

In this context, what I find fascinating about the *Book of Revelation* is precisely its acknowledgment—and perhaps even its reluctant acknowledgment—that the various peoples, nations, and tribes are part of a single plan of God—and that this is true of these tribes and nations not separately but jointly. There is probably no writer in the New Testament that is as deeply immersed in traditional religion, literature, and culture of Judaism as is John of Patmos. Practically every verse in his book contains at least one allusion to Jewish literature and practices. While all the other New Testament authors quote the Hebrew Scriptures from the existing Greek tradition (the Greek language version called the Septuagint), John uses his own translation.¹¹ The congregations to which he writes must also be mostly Jewish, for otherwise they would find it difficult to follow this book so full of allusions to Jewish traditions—just as we ourselves would find it difficult to understand *Revelation* if we were to ignore the origin and significance of those allusions. And yet this Jewish Christian, writing to congregations that are comprised mostly of Jewish Christians, announces a future in which “a great multitude which no one can number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues” (7:9) will stand singing praise before the throne and before the Lamb.

In this regard, the passage that I find most poignant is the eating of the small scroll in chapter 10. This is clearly patterned after *Ezekiel* 2, where the prophet is also given a book to eat. However, in contrast to Ezekiel, who finds the book sweet, John finds it also to be bittersweet. He finds it sweet because it is God’s promise, but he also finds it bittersweet because God’s promise involves telling his own people that they are not particularly privileged before God, telling them about the many

peoples and nations and languages and kings that have also been made heirs to the promise to Abraham.¹²

Today, many North American readers find themselves in a strangely dual situation. On the one hand, they are citizens of the most powerful and rich nation in the world, and in that nation they belong to the dominant culture. Thus, their experience is similar to Tacitus and many others, enjoying the fruits of empire, but pained by the manner in which the imperial order itself undermines the culture and traditions of the center. On the other hand, in contrast to those early Romans, these North American readers are Christians. As Christians in the dominant culture, they have long stood at the apparent center of the church, providing missionaries, financial resources, teachings, and so on to the rest of the worldwide church. Yet the time has come when the centers of Christian vitality are no longer in the North Atlantic; respect, North American readers must often feel as John must have felt, having to tell his mostly Jewish congregations in Asia Minor (who were benefiting from the dominant Roman culture) about the many tribes and peoples and nations that had also become part of God's people—and that they themselves were no longer privileged or so central. On the contrary, they were being called to a solidarity with these oppressed and persecuted Christians throughout the Roman world. It is not an easy situation to be in. It is a situation that requires great understanding and patience on the part of other Christians.

Indeed, it is in many ways this strangely dual situation in which I too find myself, for I am very much a part of the dominant culture, and I benefit greatly from being part of that culture. Yet as a Christian, I stand at odds, in many ways, with the dominant culture. I am part of a church that has long had the support of the surrounding dominant society but that is now having to learn how to live and how to be obedient without such support—a lesson long ago learned by poorer churches in poorer countries. My location at the “center” of the church is being relativized by the emerging churches in many impoverished and colonized parts of the world, a situation that is placing me in radical solidarity with them. So I am being torn between the benefits I have as a result of being part of the dominant culture and my solidarity with a worldwide Christianity that challenges the political and economic policies of the dominant, imperial society.

It is this strangely dual situation that stands at the root of our ambivalence toward *Revelation*. The problem is not really that the book is too difficult to understand. The problem is rather that we use its difficult imagery and our perplexity over the meaning of this or that metaphor to hide from its message—which is altogether too clear. We are ambivalent about *Revelation* because we are ambivalent about our citizenship. We are ambivalent about our discipleship because we are quite comfortable in the present order—and yet claim to yearn for another. As a scholar, I benefit from an economic and social order that gives me the means and leisure to analyze

texts and to write books. As a Christian, I know that there is much wrong with this order. As an American citizen, I benefit from the riches of our libraries and enjoy delving into the literary background of the *Book of Revelation*. As a Christian, I am challenged by its vision. I do not wish to bear the mark of the beast, and yet I am challenged by its vision. I pray “thy kingdom come,” and “come, Lord Jesus!” Yet with *Revelation*, I pray “thy kingdom come,” and “come, Lord Jesus!” Yet with many Christians through the ages, and even today, I also add “but not just now!”

Notes

1. A *mestizo* is a person of mixed breed—usually the descendant of Spanish and Indian forebears. The *mestizo* is neither Spanish nor Indian, and yet is both. In Latino theology in the United States, the classic discussion of this subject is Virgilio Elizondo, *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise*.
2. Catherine Gunsalus González and Justo L. González, *Vision at Palmos: Studies in the Book of Revelation*.
3. Catherine Gunsalus González and Justo L. González, *Revelation*.
4. There is a review of a number of such “prophecies” in Arthur W. Walnwright, *Mysterious Apocalypse: Interpreting the Book of Revelation*. See also my essay, “Los últimos tiempos en la historia de la iglesia,” 87–110.
5. J. Massingberde Ford, *Revelation*, in the series *The Anchor Bible*, has argued that most of the *Book of Revelation* did not originate among Christians, but rather in the circle of John the Baptist, and that the great harlot is not Rome, but Jerusalem. This theory has found little support among New Testament scholars.
6. *Annals*, 15.44.
7. *Life of Claudius*, 25.4.
8. *Annals*, 13.32.
9. Dio Cassius, *Epitome*, 67.14.
10. I have discussed this quite fully, as well as how the encounter of cultures relates to the economic and geopolitical order, in *For the Healing of the Nations*. What is said above regarding the relationship between cultural encounters and economic orders is for the most part a summary of what I explored in that book.
11. It is commonly said that John is using a translation that is unknown to us. I am more inclined to think that he is simply translating from memory as he goes. I find myself doing this quite often when speaking extemporaneously in English. A Bible reference comes to my mind, and, since I know it by heart in Spanish but not in English, I simply translate it in my mind. The result is a quotation that my English-speaking listeners will recognize but that is not quite the same as any existing English translation.
12. For a fuller argument showing this to be the case, see *For the Healing of the Nations*, 85–91.