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CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN THE BODY OF CHRIST: AN AFRICAN AMERICAN THEOLOGICAL READING OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

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By

Charles V. Gilmer

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Approved March 21, 2024

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ABSTRACT

CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN THE BODY OF CHRIST:
AN AFRICAN AMERICAN THEOLOGICAL READING OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

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Dissertation supervised by Dr. William M. Wright, IV

This study will attempt to facilitate a more helpful reading of the text of John's Apocalypse by placing it in an appropriate literary and historical context, deploying an African American hermeneutic, informed by the work of African American commentators such as Brian Blount, Allen Dwight Callahan, Clarice Martin, and Shanell T. Smith to develop from the text of the Apocalypse its ecclesiological content for a contemporary audience. As the church writ large (Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant and indigenous expressions) wrestles with its increasing global presence and the cultural and linguistic diversity which that expanded presence creates, this study will attempt to discern from the text of Revelation an eschatological perspective on that reality. What does Revelation have to say to us about economic and militaristic imperialism, and the culture-appropriating, culture-erasing, hegemonic dynamics which empires continue to

perpetuate even in our day? *My thesis is that the book of Revelation presents a vision of a church which does not exploitatively assimilate various cultures, as empires have done for centuries, but presents a vision of the kingdom of God encompassing and celebrating cultural diversity as an intended and necessary means by which the full glory of the incarnate Son of God will be revealed and embraced by the nations of the world.*

I write as a fifth-generation inheritor of the Black Baptist tradition. I intend to draw on what Esau McCaulley terms the *Black Ecclesial Tradition*,[1] and modern biblical scholars who represent it, in order to derive how John's Apocalypse should inform our view of and engagement with the ethnic and cultural diversity manifesting in both the global and North American churches. This exploration includes interdisciplinary dimensions, in that the matters at stake touch not only on ecclesiology, but on missiology, theological anthropology, political theology, and Christology, as well as the eschatological emphasis which is appropriately and traditionally understood to be the heart of John's Apocalypse.

[1] Esau McCaulley. *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope*. (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, an imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2020), 183.

DEDICATION

To my parents, the Rev. Paul J. Gilmer, Sr., and Mrs. Anna Evans Gilmer: your sacrificial faith, integrity, perseverance, and genius echo underneath this project. Would that you had lived to see it.

To my adult children, Micah, Jared, Daniel, Karis, Caleb, and Joy: you have made me proud in your respective and distinct paths. I hope this biblical exploration makes you proud in return.

To my beautiful, bold, brilliant wife, Rebecca Guillory Gilmer: you remain the love of my life, best friend, and most exemplary theological practitioner. This reflects your work as well as mine.

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I feel a depth of gratitude to my many academic guides on the path which has led to this document. At Princeton Theological Seminary, Lisa Bowens provided my introduction to Biblical Koine Greek and fueled my love for the riches mined in translating the original language of the New Testament. Clifton Black introduced me to serious exegetical method. Dennis Olson modeled thoughtful pastoral exegesis of the Hebrew texts. George Parsenios oversaw much of my Greek exegetical development. Cleo LaRue encouraged me every step of this journey. Kate Skrebutenas served as a marvelous guide to the wealth of information in the Princeton Seminary library. Dale Allison had the brilliant insight to direct me to Duquesne University.

I owe a posthumous note of thanks to Geddes Hanson, who chose to spend time with my wife and me during his final months "on this side of Jordan." During that one evening, Geddes helped persuade Rebecca to join me on the theological journey at "PTSem."

I remain grateful for the excellent fit of the interdisciplinary approach of the Duquesne Theology PhD program. William Wright has been a constant inspiration and guide. The tutelage of George Worgul, Anna Scheid, and Elizabeth Cochran is reflected in the pages which follow. James Okoye guided my exploration of Jewish apocalyptic literature. James Bailey always had a timely word of encouragement accompanied by a delightful story. He and Elizabeth Vasko encouraged me to publish. Elochuckwu Uzukwu granted me the privilege of assisting him, building on my global awareness, and

expanding my theological world in the process. He helped me interpret some of my pre-academic experiences and observations.

Thanks are due to the McAnulty Graduate School at Duquesne for selecting me for the Dissertation Fellowship. To the staff of the Forum for Theological Exploration (FTE) as well as my FTE mentor, Kimberly Russaw, I cannot describe the benefit I derived from the support, fellowship, and insights you supplied at critical points in the process–none more significant than during the Covid shutdown.

Rodney Sadler introduced me to the theological and biblical studies guild. I cannot imagine a more faithful friend as I entered that space. President Asa Lee and the staff at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary were a wonderful resource. So were Ted Bergfelt and the Duquesne Gumberg Library staff. Rev. Dr. John Welch has been a pastor, friend, and encourager as I entered the final stages of this process. I cannot overstate my abiding gratitude to Jenni Miller who served as an invaluable, faithful, and tenacious aid to me as she proofed and formatted the pages of this work.

Last and most necessary, I must acknowledge my wife and partner in ministry, Rebecca Guillory Gilmer, who left our Florida home of 23 years to allow me to pursue this vision. She urged me to undertake this nearly forgotten aspiration of pursuing an earned PhD. Her steadfast support and roles as my unofficial publicist and primary theological conversation partner energized and inspired me along the way. Rebecca endeared herself in the various communities in which we have sojourned–from the First Baptist Church of Vandalia in Charleston, WV, Bibleway Missionary Baptist Church in New Orleans, Grant Park Community Alliance Church in Atlanta, 19th Street Baptist Church in Washington, DC, Pine Hills Community Church and Mt. Pleasant Missionary

Baptist Church in Orlando, FL to Union Baptist Church in Trenton, NJ and now at Sixth Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church in Pittsburgh, PA. She presses forward determined to consistently live the faith we profess.

Rebecca has impacted my life in every way possible. I am always challenged to stay ahead of her strength as a leader. It remains true that the single most obvious evidence of God's intent to use me is that God gave her to me as an Ezer. May God continue to grant Rebecca grace to extend grace, mercy, and love to this most imperfect servant who sees her as even more beautiful than the day I met her.

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CHAPTER 1 - THE STATE OF THE QUESTION

Introduction

The book of Revelation[2] has engendered controversy from the earliest instances of its reception. In our time, it is possibly the most frequent source of speculative treatments of Christian beliefs about the end of days in popular culture. The sensational depictions in John's Apocalypse have made the task of biblical expositors all the more difficult. Lay audiences are alternatively turned off by the media's varied and sundry deployment and interpretation of these images, are often left confused by the cryptic, otherworldly nature of the text itself, or are enticed into the pursuit of deciphering its presumably coded messages for contemporary audiences, seeking to see in it the "signs of the times" (Matt 24:3).[3] This interpretive chaos is not only manifest in popular culture and among Christian laity, but it can also be observed in the history of Revelation's interpretation by scholars and exegetes through the centuries.[4]

The African American Christian tradition has strong apocalyptic influences which manifest as early as the "slave songs" or "negro spirituals." Kovacs and Rowland note the prominence of Revelation's imagery in African American spirituals, particularly Revelation's "plague sequences" (Rev 8, 9, 11-16), the "new Jerusalem" (Rev. 21, 22), the "suffering Lamb" (Rev 5:1-12; 7:9-17; 12:11; 13:8-11), "white robes" (Rev 7:9-14),

[2] I will alternate between referring to the book as the Apocalypse of John and the book of Revelation.

[3] All scripture quotations are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

[4] Judith L. Kovacs and Christopher Rowland. *Revelation: The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ*. Blackwell Bible Commentaries. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

and the "book of life" (Rev 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12,15; 21:27; 22:19),[5] as well as the anticipated day when the child of God will "cast my crown at Jesus' feet" (Rev 4:10-11).[6] Sarah Melcher identifies abolitionist David Walker's use of the phrase "cup of God's fury" as alluding to both Isaiah 51,[7] as well as Rev 14:10. Melcher also notes famed antebellum preacher Jupiter Hammon's extensive use of allusions from John's Apocalypse, including "those who feared his name" (Rev 11:18),[8] "kings and priests" (Rev 1:6; 5:10), and "reigning with Christ" (Rev 20:6).[9]

Thomas Slater points out the prevalence of Rev 3:20 in evangelistic settings, and the fondness for and frequency of various salvation motifs, such as references to when God will "wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Rev 7:17), in the Black Church tradition.[10] Slater continues to observe two common sermon types from Revelation: firstly, those based on the letters to the seven churches (Rev 2-3), and additionally, fire and brimstone messages intended to frighten hearers into conversion (Rev 19-20).[11] According to Slater, the 1970s saw the emergence of a trend toward predictive analysis of

[5] Kovacs and Rowland. 2004, 32.

[6] Kovacs and Rowland. 2004, 64, citing J.W. Johnson and J.R. Johnson: *The Book of American Negro Spirituals*, vol i. (New York: Da Capo, 1954), 100-3.

[7] Sarah J. Melcher, "'To Give Account': Interpretation of Prophetic and Apocalyptic Motifs in African American Anti-Slavery Pamphlets." *Proceedings* 23 (2003): 109–21, 112.

[8] Melcher, "'To Give Account,'" 112.

[9] Melcher, "'To Give Account,'" 114.

[10] Thomas B Slater, *Interpreting Revelation through African American Cultural Studies*. Oxford Handbook Series. (Oxford University Press, 2020), 485.

[11] Slater, *Interpreting Revelation,* 485-86.

Revelation, in keeping with fundamentalist and conservative influences, focusing on Rev 13.[12]

Malgorzata Ziólek-Sowinska notes that apocalyptic language, particularly that of the book of Revelation, has colored African American culture so deeply that it provides a storehouse of terminology and imagery for blues artists who were raised in the Black church.[13] Allen Callahan cites interpretations of Revelation from African Americans as disparate as 19th Century abolitionist Maria Stewart and W.B. Allen, post-slavery African Methodist Episcopal professor Theophilus Gould Steward, Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad, and Rastafarian Messian Dread, all of whom claim that Revelation declares judgment on America and the Christian West.[14]

This study will attempt to facilitate a more helpful reading of the text of John's Apocalypse by placing it in an appropriate literary and historical context and deploy an African American hermeneutic, informed by the work of African American commentators such as Brian Blount, Allen Dwight Callahan, Clarice Martin, and Shanell T. Smith. The goal of this reading is to develop from the text of the Apocalypse its ecclesiological content for a contemporary audience with a particular consideration of the lived reality of the church in the 21st century.

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[12] Slater, *Interpreting Revelation,* 486.

[13] Malgorzata Ziólek-Sowinska, *Images of the Apocalypse in African American Blues and Spirituals: Destruction in This Land*. Encounters: The Warsaw Studies in English Language Culture, Literature, and Visual Arts, New Americanists in Poland. (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2017), 45.

[14] Allen Dwight Callahan, "American Babylon: Days in the Live of an African-American Idea" in *The Bible in the Public Square: Reading the Signs of the Times*. Editors Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, Ellen Bradshaw Aitken, and Jonathan A. Draper. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 67-82.

As the church writ large (Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant and indigenous expressions) wrestles with its increasing global presence and the cultural and linguistic diversity which that expanded presence creates, I will attempt to discern from the text of Revelation an eschatological perspective on that reality. What does Revelation have to say to us about economic and militaristic imperialism, and the culture-appropriating, culture-erasing, hegemonic dynamics which empires continue to perpetuate even in our day? *My thesis is that the book of Revelation presents a vision of a church which does not exploitatively assimilate various cultures, as empires have done for centuries; but rather, the book presents a vision of the kingdom of God encompassing and celebrating cultural diversity as an intended and necessary means by which the full glory of the incarnate Son of God will be revealed and embraced by the nations of the world.*

I write as a fifth generation (at least) African American Christian, an inheritor of the Black Baptist tradition, which informs my reading of the text. I intend to draw on that tradition, which Esau McCaulley terms the *Black Ecclesial Tradition*,[15] and modern biblical scholars who represent it, in order to derive how John's Apocalypse should inform our view of and engagement with the ethnic and cultural diversity manifesting in both the global and North American churches. This exploration includes interdisciplinary dimensions, in that the matters at stake touch not only on ecclesiology, but on missiology, theological anthropology, political theology, and Christology, as well as the eschatological emphasis which is appropriately and traditionally understood to be the heart of the Apocalypse of John.

[15] Esau McCaulley. *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope*. (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, an imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2020), 183.

State of the Question

African American Hermeneutics have been eruditely discerned by scholars such as Brian Blount, Allen Dwight Callahan, Emerson Powery, Rodney Sadler, Vincent Wimbush, and more recently, Lisa Bowens and Esau McCaulley.[16] Blount describes the emphasis and character of the Book of Revelation in his 2009 historical-critical commentary and addresses it from an African American hermeneutic in 2005's *Can I Get A Witness.* Yet, he fails to fully explore the specific view of cultural and ethnic diversity articulated in the various appearances of such diversity, specifically Rev. 5:9; 7:9, 10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:15. These passages all involve four words, with three remaining constant. Γλώσσης (tongue), λαοῦ (people), and ἔθνους (nation), are consistent in each case. Φυλῆς (tribe), is replaced in 10:11 by βασιλεῦσιν (kings) and in 17:5 by ὄχλοι (multitudes). Blount views each of these four-fold descriptions of a diverse multitude as simple references to universal humanity. Yet I will argue that 5:9 and 7:9 must be viewed distinctively as they describe contingents of the faithful who are gathered in the heavenly throne room offering praise to God and his Messiah, while the other five instances of these four-fold formulae are indeed references to global humanity generally (10:11), whether as an audience under the sway of evil forces (11:9; 13:7; 17:5), or to whom a message is

[16] Brian K. Blount, *Can I Get a Witness?: Reading Revelation through African American Culture*. 1st ed. (Westminster John Knox Press, 2005); Brian K. Blount, *Cultural Interpretation: Reorienting New Testament Criticism*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995); Lisa M. Bowens, *African American Readings of Paul: Reception, Resistance, and Transformation.* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020); Allen Dwight Callahan, "The Language of Apocalypse." *Harvard Theological Review*, 88(4), (1995), 453-470; Allen D. Callahan, "Apocalypse as Critique of Political Economy: Some Notes on Revelation 18," *HBT* 21: 46–65, (1999); Allen Dwight Callahan, *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); McCaulley. *Reading While Black*; Emerson B. Powery and Rodney Steven Sadler, *The Genesis of Liberation: Biblical Interpretation in the Antebellum Narratives of the Enslaved.* Lexington, KY: (Westminster John Knox, 2016); Vincent L. Wimbush, "Introduction" in *Misreading America: Scriptures and Difference*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA. 2013).

addressed (14:6). The earlier references place the latter ones in perspective, as the reader is told from the outset that there will be a spiritual harvest from among all of humanity which will add to the collective witness to God and God's Lamb.

My analysis will rely heavily on Ronald Herms's excellent 2006 study *An Apocalypse for the Church and for the World: The Narrative Function of Universal Language in the Book of Revelation,*[17] as well as the work of Richard Bauckham,[18] and the 2018 monograph by Jon Morales, *Christ, Shepherd of the Nations.*[19] I address other recent commentators, such as Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza ,[20] David Aune,[21] Stephen D.

[17] Ronald Herms, *An Apocalypse for the Church and for the World: The Narrative Function of Universal Language in the Book of Revelation.* Beihefte Zur Zeitschrift Für Die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft Und Die Kunde Der Älteren Kirche: Bd. 143. (W. de Gruyter, 2006).

[18] Richard. Bauckham, *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World*. (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Pr; Baker Academic, 2004); Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation*. (Edinburgh; London; New York: T&T Clark, 1993); Richard Bauckham, "The List of the Tribes in Revelation 7 Again." *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 13, no. 42 (April 1991): 99–115; Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*. New Testament Theology. (Cambridge University Press, 1993).

[19] Jon Morales, *Christ, Shepherd of the Nations: The Nations as Narrative Character and Audience in John's Apocalypse*. Library of New Testament Studies 577. (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018).

[20] Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza. *Revelation: Vision of a Just World.* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

[21] David E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5*. Word Biblical Commentary: V. 52A. (Nelson Reference & Electronic, 1997); David E. Aune. *Revelation 17-22.* Word Biblical Commentary: V. 52C. (T. Nelson, 1998).

Moore,[22] and Tina Pippin,[23] as well as Roman Catholic scholars Ian Boxall[24] and Francis Moloney[25] to establish both a historical-critical foundation, and explore a postcolonial perspective on empire in the book of Revelation. Yet, to date, most commentators have been preoccupied with the soteriological questions raised by John's visions, recoil at the violent images therein, or react to the misogyny they interpret it to contain. In this rich and varied history of scholarship, little has been written which unpacks the implications of Revelation's depictions of cultural and ethnic diversity to the growing presence of such diversity within every global Christian communion.

Richard Bauckham's 1993 work *The Climax of Prophecy* parallels my concerns closely, in that he deals extensively with the four-fold descriptions of diversity in "The Conversion of the Nations," and addresses imperial economic exploitation in his chapter "The Economic Critique of Rome in Revelation 18." The response of Allen McNichols, [26] as well as the narrative analysis of Morales, focuses on the soteriological controversy engendered by Bauckham's interpretation, while I propose that these texts create a nexus

[22] Stephen D. Moore, "The Revelation to John" in *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings: Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings*. Segovia, Fernando F., and Sugirtharajah, R. S., eds. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2009).

[23] Tina Pippin, "Mapping the End: On Monsters and Maps in the Book of Revelation." *Interpretation* 74, no. 2 (April 2020): 183–96.

[24] Ian Boxall, *The Revelation of Saint John*. Black's New Testament Commentaries: 19. (Hendrickson Publishers, 2009).

[25] Francis J. Moloney, *The Apocalypse of John: A Commentary.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020).

[26] Allan J. McNicol, *The Conversion of the Nations in Revelation. [Electronic Resource]*. Library of New Testament Studies: 438. (T & T Clark, 2011).

which counters the reluctance of 21st century churches to live deeply into the vision cast in the Apocalypse of John.

Jon Morales analyzes various modern commentators on Revelation yet observes a lack of appreciation for the narrative genre of the book. He concludes that John's purpose is to present Christ, and through Christ, the church, as the *Shepherd of the Nations*. He relies on the references to "the shepherd's staff" or "rod" as evidence that while judgment must come for those who align themselves with "the dragon," the relationship between the nations and the church is a benevolent one.[27] My thesis relies on an interpretative lens which prioritizes Revelation's phronetic purpose. I present evidence that the book was written to provide perspective and guidance in light of Jerusalem's fall and the temple's destruction at the hand of the Roman Empire. These events caused questions to arise as to what the return of Jesus would look like with no temple in Jerusalem to provide a locus for that return. In addition, the growing tensions between emerging Rabbinic Judaism and the fledgling Jesus movement exacerbated the anxieties and uncertainties experienced among Jesus followers as they considered the future, and likely increased the temptation to accommodate imperial civic worship which we observe being condemned in the Letters to the Seven Churches (Rev. 2- 3). As such, the visions and dreams which follow are far from a chronological map of the future but are intended to provide the faithful a glimpse of what is taking place in the heavenly realms in their present. Admittedly, there is an eschatological expectation expressed, but the focus is on giving hope and help for their day-to-day life in Christ and their witness concerning Christ.

[27] Morales. *Christ, Shepherd of the Nations,* 162-163.

As a result, this study seeks to develop an ecclesiological interpretation of Revelation, attending to the difficulties many scholars have experienced in understanding how 21:22-27[28] fits into the sweep of the conflict in Revelation itself, and to the canonical witness as to last things. Jarvis Williams's 2021 book, *Redemptive Kingdom Diversity: A Biblical Theology of the People of God* addresses this matter briefly,[29] yet a fuller explication is warranted. Joseph Mangina addresses the inclusion of the "*goyim*" in his 2010 Brazos Theological Commentary, *Revelation*, where he draws on Wannenwetch to highlight the anti-imperial manner in which "the nations" bring their glory into the new Jerusalem, drawing attention to their apparently free access to that divinely crafted city.[30] I intend to build that picture out more fully, exploring the earlier references to those nations in Revelation, and examining canonical references to the eschatological ingathering of the nations in texts such as Ps 102:18-22.[31]

[28] "I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life." (Rev 21:22-27)

[29] Jarvis J. Williams, *Redemptive Kingdom Diversity: A Biblical Theology of the People of God,* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), 145-146.

[30] Joseph L. Mangina, *Revelation*. Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Brazos Press, 2010), 242.

[31] Embedded in this Psalm of lament is a missiological and eschatological declaration, "*Let this be recorded for a generation to come, so that a people yet unborn may praise the Lord: that he looked down from his holy height, from heaven the Lord looked at the earth, to hear the groans of the prisoners, to set free those who were doomed to die, so that the name of the Lord may be declared in Zion and his praise in Jerusalem, when peoples gather together, and kingdoms, to serve the Lord."* Psalm 102:18-22.

Proposed Approach

Having briefly explores the state of the question in this opening chapter, the following chapter outline describes the flow of the rest of this study. Chapter 2 will establish my theological method, based on: 1) an African American Hermeneutic, represented most recently by Lisa Bowens and Esau McCaulley and augmented or clarified by; 2) a distinctively Decolonial lens, applying tools developed by moving beyond Stephen D. Moore's Postcolonial assessment of Revelation, in order to; 3) accomplish an exegetical theology drawing specifically on William Wright's and Francis Martin's view on the mediation of divine realities via scripture, as well as Wright's and Martin's reflections on the significance of the incarnation as recorded in *Encountering the Living God in Scripture: Theological and Philosophical Principles for Interpretation*.[32]

Chapter 3 will address Revelation's use of apocalyptic to respond to the crisis faced by the early Jesus movement as a result of imperial activity, drawing on the works of David Aune, Brian Blount, James D.G. Dunn,[33] Ronald Herms, Francis Maloney,[34] Jon Morales, Pablo Richard,[35] and Leonard Thompson.[36] In the opening section of the chapter, I describe the broadly apocalyptic context of the early Jesus movement. I argue that the use of apocalyptic was particularly appropriate as a response to the 70 CE

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[32] William M. Wright, IV and Francis Martin, *Encountering the Living God in Scripture: Theological and Philosophical Principles for Interpretation*. (Baker Academic, 2019), 196ff, 207-210.

[33] James D. G. Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways: Between Christianity and Judaism and Their Significance for the Character of Christianity* (London: SCM, 1991).

[34] Francis J. Moloney, *The Apocalypse of John: A Commentary*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020).

[35] Pablo Richard, *Apocalypse: A People's Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, The Bible and Liberation (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995).

[36] Leonard L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

destruction of Jerusalem and the loss of the temple as the center of Jewish worship and identity. These were particularly grievous and unsettling developments, which combined with the "parting of the ways" from Rabbinic Judaism created the need for additional perspective and reassurance. John artfully uses the apocalyptic approach to comfort the early Jesus movement, providing more than solace, but a compelling vision of Rome's eventual undoing, the reality of a greater temple in heaven than the one that had been destroyed in Jerusalem, and subverting the homogenizing and totalizing effect of the empire by celebrating the inclusion, not subjection, of the nations. This analysis will involve development of my understanding of the terms "empire," "kingdom," "culture," "nations," and what John is specifically condemning in his vision.

Chapter 3 continues with an excavation of the ecclesiological vision of Revelation. The letters to the seven churches reveal the boundaries which John is demanding must be defended, and the function of *witness*, which must be maintained. As the book moves into more classically apocalyptic mode (Rev 4 and following), the protological and eschatological emphases in the book will be established. This allows us to look at the instances of four-fold diversity in Revelation as recapitulations of at least two pericopes: the Tower of Babel narrative of Gen 11, and the miraculous manifestation of diverse linguistic witnesses in Acts 2. Each of these narratives provide threads in a fabric which culminates in Revelation chapters 5, 7, and 21 to provide an alternative vision to the pre-existing one of messianic conquest in order to expel the empire from Israel, replacing it with a global vision of anti-imperial unity focused on the person of Jesus. The phantasmagoric visions of Rev 4 and following are depictions of the reality which the early Jesus movement was encountering, with a description of history's

movement toward an ultimate victory for Jesus and his followers. That anti-imperial vision incorporates a strong affirmation of the national, cultural, and linguistic diversity among the faithful. The instances elsewhere in Revelation of the four-fold formulae provide counterpoints, demonstrating the contrast between the divine rule of Jesus and imperial hegemonic domination and deployment of "the nations" in the empire's (Babylon's) opposition to heavenly authority.

Additionally, the various descriptions of the 24 elders on their thrones (Rev 4:4, 10; 5:8; 11:16; 19:4) is suggestive of an ecclesiology which is comprised of both Hebrew and Jewish Apostolic leadership. It is not an exclusively Jewish entity, nor a gentile one. The new Jerusalem is, as Mangina points out, characterized by "openness," in which the nations bring "gifts (not tribute)."[37] These issues suggest an approach which is surprisingly reflective of "Cosmopolitanism in Particularity" which Kwame Anthony Appiah has noted characterized the thought W.E. B. DuBois, generating another connection to African American perspectives.[38] Mangina celebrates this as "Spirit-created particularity within a common love and devotion to Jesus Christ."[39] Mangina's position will be more fully developed from the text of Revelation and canonically supported by this study.

Of course, interpreters other than Blount have viewed the four-fold formulae as simple markers of national and ethnic universality. Some, such as Stephen Moore, seems

[37] Mangina, *Revelation*, 242-243.

[38] Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Lines of Descent: W. E. B. DuBois and the Emergence of Identity.* (Harvard University Press, 2014), 50.

[39] Mangina, *Revelation*, 51.

to interpret these references to a variety of national and ethnic constituencies as depicting the subjugation of the peoples of the earth by a vindictively conquering heavenly army.[40] We will look at the various views, utilizing our African American, decolonial, and canonical lenses to discern a faithful interpretation of these textual data for the 21st Century.

Chapter 4 will explore and illumine John's eschatological vision of the fate of the nations, with special attention to the four-fold formulae for global ethnic, cultural, linguisitic, and national diversity. In addressing this vision, attention will be given to the various schools of thought concerning John's Apocalypse. These varying perspectives have been helpfully diagrammed by Michael J. Gorman in "What Has the Spirit Been Saying?" in *Revelation and the Politics of Apocalyptic Interpretation*.[41] A cultural incarnational ecclesiology will be presented as a synthesis of the ecclesiological content of the book of Revelation, particularly when that data is considered in its canonical context. As such, evidence will be presented that the fullest expression of witness to Jesus is only possible when all "the nations" (or languages, or ethnicities) are actively engaged in that witness. I argue that the "glory of the nations" is the witness of those nations via their respective cultural expressions of that witness, or their culturally incarnated witness. This will not sanction nationalistic, exclusionary approaches to witness, but rather, a

[40] Moore, "The Revelation to John," 447-448.

[41] Michael J. Gorman, "What Has the Spirit Been Saying?: Theological and Hermeneutical Reflections on the Reception/Impact History of the Book of Revelation," in *Revelation and the Politics of Apocalyptic Interpretation*, ed. Richard B. Hays and Stefan Alkier (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), 11.

celebration of diversity with a concomitant expectation of exploration, conversation, enrichment, and mutual correction in pursuit of God's glory.

Chapter 5 seeks to answer the question, "What is the glory and honor of the nations?" which is brought into the new Jerusalem. We will conclude by revisiting, summarizing, and further synthesizing the findings of this study. The chapter will begin with a review of recent perspectives on Revelation, addressing issues of culture, empire, and the nature of the Kingdom of God described therein. I will then clarify this synthesis, incorporating elements from various recent treatments of the eschatological and ecclesiological content of Revelation, referencing missiologists, Andrew Walls and Lamin Sanneh,[42] as well as biblical scholars Jarvis Williams,[43] and Vince Bantu.[44] This synthesis will move in the spirit of Willie James Jennings' *Acts: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*,[45] yet provide a clarification which moves beyond his call for an inclusiveness in the kingdom of God. Inclusiveness is indeed necessary to fulfill the divine agenda, yet the inclusiveness Jennings describes must not be allowed to create a homogenizing, assimilationist environment which negates John's vision of nations and peoples joining in a multilingual chorus glorifying God.

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[42] Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture.* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989); Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith*. (Orbis Books, 2002).

[43] Williams, *Redemptive Kingdom Diversity*.

[44] Vince L. Bantu, *A Multitude of All Peoples: Engaging Ancient Christianity's Global Identity*. Missiological Engagements. (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2020).

[45] Willie James Jennings, *Acts: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*, (Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2017).

Our theological conclusions will return to the text of Revelation to highlight its vision of a truly world church. The text emphasizes four indices of diversity: ethnicity, language, culture, and nationality. The description of the ingathering of the nations in Rev 21:24–22:5 echoes Ps 22:27-31 and 102:18-22, as well as Isa 49:22-23; 51:4 and Zech 8:20-23. Those assembling in the new Jerusalem are characterized by conversion, not conquest, in keeping with Richard Bauckham's analysis.[46] The vision of the text of Revelation seems to represent a commonwealth which is truly mutually beneficial, not the exploitative relationships empires create and work to maintain.

This vision beckons the church to "live into" the variegated unity which the text describes. I close this study with three excursus which describe, illustrate, and propose methods for doing so. The increasingly recognized need to embrace the cultural diversity and liturgical variety that is emerging around the world is an appropriate response to John's apocalyptic vision. The hermeneutical fecundity of this emerging variegated ecclesia is only beginning to be fully accepted, examples being the work of political theologian Luke Bretherton and the methods proposed by Bénézet Bujo.[47] The best days of the church will come when scholarly, ecclesial, and popular conversations around the biblical texts are reflective of this diversity. The excursus recommend an agenda for embracing the vision of Revelation via the pursuit of cross-ethnic and cross-cultural communion between churches of divergent Christian traditions. This agenda entails:

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[46] Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy,* 311-313.

[47] Luke Bretherton. *Christ and the Common Life: Political Theology and the Case for Democracy.* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2019), 308-320; Bénézet Bujo. *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality*. Translated by Brian McNeil. (New York: Crossroad, 2001), 146-147.

1) Acknowledging and respecting one another's leaders (Rom 16:1,2; I Cor 16:10-12).
2) Communality expressed in resource sharing and mutual concern (Acts 11:27-30; 1 Cor 16:1–4; 2 Cor 8:1–9:15; Rom 15:14–32; 1 John 4:20-21).
3) Fostering opportunities to express Christocentric unity which places the collective public witness of churches above all other concerns (John 17:20-23).

What this essay will not undertake is the resolution of several difficulties often identified in the book of Revelation. For example, the question of the nature of the millennial reign of Christ disclosed in Rev 20 will not be addressed, nor do I attempt to resolve the tension as to the identity of the two witnesses of Rev 11.[48]

[48] For a fine treatment of this question, see Eke Wilfred Onyema, *The Millennial Kingdom of Christ (Rev 20, 1-10): A Critical History of Exegesis with an Interpretative Proposal*, TGST 198 (Roma: Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 2013).

CHAPTER 2 - ON METHODOLOGY

African American hermeneutics[49] has had a distinct identity since the early days of slave churches and its subsequent development in the emergent assemblies of free persons of color in the Northern states.[50] My analysis of that tradition builds on the work of several generations of African American hermeneuts. Multiple scholars have undertaken the task of analyzing the hermeneutical strategies of African Americans, noting the progression from initial skepticism of the slave master's religion, subsequent appropriation of biblical texts for hope, help and inspiration in the midst of degrading circumstances, to the emergence of a Black Christian tradition which reads, interprets, and applies the texts of the bible in an array of approaches which focus on the flourishing of Black communities.

These scholars have undertaken the documentation and analysis of the trajectory and evolution of the variety of hermeneutical strategies employed by African American readers from the time of the bible's introduction to enslaved populations in the seventeenth century. As Vincent Wimbush and Allen Dwight Callahan note, enslaved Africans in America initially rejected the enslavers attempts to use the Bible to "Christianize" and therefore pacify them.[51] In *The Genesis of Liberation: Biblical Interpretation in the Antebellum Narratives of the Enslaved,* Emerson Powery and Rodney Sadler, Jr. also note the ambivalence experienced by enslaved Africans, who

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[49] Hermeneutics is the study or practice of interpreting the text. See Lisa M. Bowens, *African American Readings of Paul,* 3.

[50] Powery and Sadler, *The Genesis of Liberation*, 4-5.

[51] Callahan, *The Talking Book*, 11-22, 21-29; Vincent L. Wimbush, "Reading Texts as Reading Ourselves: A Chapter in the History of African-American Biblical Interpretation," in *Reading from This Place, Volume 1: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 95-108.

were introduced to biblical texts by their enslavers to produce docility, yet found in those texts resources for resistance.[52] The identification of those resources required a different hermeneutic than that of their oppressors, one which discerned in the Bible attributes and acts of God which aligned God with the oppressed, not with those who would subjugate them. Powery and Sadler unearth the oral traditions of the reception of scripture by the enslaved, even as the texts were being manipulated by slaveholders to defend and support slavery. These displaced Africans in America celebrated and interpreted the biblical texts as liberative, doing so surreptitiously and subversively.[53]

While abolitionists like James Pennington undertook scriptural disputations with the defenders of slavery,[54] many African American hermeneuts were developing an independent reading of the biblical texts. In *African American Readings of Paul* Lisa Bowens demonstrates that the *Petition of 1779 by Slaves of Fairfield County* utilized Pauline biblical passages to argue for their freedom,[55] tracing such distinctive readings all the way through Martin Luther King, Jr.'s written and sermonic oeuvre.[56] Similarly, Allen Dwight Callahan documents the transition from the enslaved perceiving the bible

[52] Powery and Sadler, *The Genesis of Liberation*, 1-3.

[53] Powery and Sadler, *The Genesis of Liberation*, 11-12.

[54] Bowens, *African American Readings of Paul*, 142-143.

[55] Bowens, *African American Readings of Paul*, 26-27.

[56] Bowens, *African American Readings of Paul*, 238-264.

as containing "Poison"[57] to recognizing it as "The Good Book" based on their own reading of the bible as oriented towards liberation and flourishing.[58]

Charles Copher, Randall Bailey, and Cain Hope Felder are noted as African American pioneers in the field of biblical studies, identifying the skewed racialized logic of European and European American scholars. Their criticisms highlighted the erasure of Black or African peoples from the biblical text.[59] Renetta Weems added a womanist lens, claiming that many biblical texts are misogynistic in nature, and observing the oppressive expositions of biblical texts by generations of (primarily, but not exclusively white) male interpreters.[60]

Michael J. Brown surveys the history of African American interpretation, concluding that a "hermeneutic of suspicion" needs to be adopted not only to the slavery-accommodating writings attributed to Paul, but towards the gospels themselves.[61] Brown and other advocates of a hermeneutic of suspicion often cite the testimony of twentieth-century scholar and mystic Howard Thurman who reports that his grandmother eschewed

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[57] Callahan, *The Talking Book*, 22.

[58] Callahan, *The Talking Book*, 41-49.

[59] See Charles B. Copher, "Blacks/Negroes: Participants in the Development of Civilization in the Ancient World and Their Presence in the Bible," *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 23, no. 1 (Fall 1995): 3–47; Hugh R. Page and Randall C. Bailey, *The Africana Bible: Reading Israel's Scriptures from Africa and the African Diaspora* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2010); Cain Hope Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class, and Family*, vol. 3 of *The Bishop Henry McNeal Turner Studies in North American Black Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989).

[60] Renita J. Weems, *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible* (San Diego: LuraMedia, 1988).

[61] Michael J. Brown, *Blackening of the Bible: The Aims of African American Biblical Scholarship* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2004), 166.

the writings of Paul, due to her perception that Paul was pro-slavery.[62] That refrain continues, most recently in Love Sechrest's *Race and Rhyme: Rereading the New Testament*.[63]

A Hermeneutic of Trust or One of Suspicion?

Allen Callahan travels a middle way, declaring that while the bible was often deployed as a means of producing docility in the enslaved, it was ultimately embraced as "its own antidote."[64] The "poison" found in the biblical text and wielded as a cudgel by enslavers could be countered by "…more bible, homeopathically administered to counteract the toxins of the text."[65] Two recent scholars have challenged the necessity of a hermeneutic of suspicion for African American interpreters. Lisa Bowens in her study *African American Readings of Paul* points out that, in her study of African American Pauline hermeneutics "An overwhelming number of the interpreters…employed Paul in a hermeneutic of trust."[66] This style of reading is not simple fideism, nor blind to the ways in which the bible has been and continues to be deployed in oppressive ways. Rather, as Bowens notes, "they applied a hermeneutic of suspicion to the white interpreters of the

[62] Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon, 1996), 20; Brown, *Blackening of the Bible,* 92.

[63] Love Lazarus Sechrest, *Race and Rhyme: Rereading the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022), 13-16.

[64] Callahan, *The Talking Book*, 39.

[65] Callahan, *The Talking Book*, 40.

[66] Bowens, *African American Readings of Paul*, 297.

text…not to the text itself." She quotes Frederick Douglass to poignantly support this point.

> For in the United States men have interpreted the Bible against liberty. They have declared that Paul's epistle to *Philemon* is a full proof for the enactment of that hell-black Fugitive Slave Bill which has desolated my people for the last ten years in that country. They have declared that the Bible sanctions slavery. What do we do in such a case? What do you do when you are told by the slaveholders of America that the Bible sanctions slavery? Do you go and throw your Bible into the fire? Do you sing out, "No union with the Bible!" Do you declare that a thing is bad because it has been misused, abused, and made bad use of? Do you throw it away on that account? No! You press it to your bosom all the more closely; you read it all the more diligently; and prove from its pages that it is on the side of liberty-and not on the side of slavery. [67]

Lisa Bowens observes that African American expositors often communicated in a manner to call for "freedom and equality" without alerting their oppressors, also in the audience, to that content.[68]

This study seeks to discern similar tactics in Revelation, in that John makes it clear that he has been exiled to the island of Patmos "because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (Rev 1:9). John's strategy addresses the injustices practiced by empire without explicitly naming Rome. Allen Callahan interprets the grammatical idiosyncrasies of Revelation as an intentional act, terming the author's tactic as "idiolectical peculiarity" and that it is both "intentional and insurgent."[69] Callahan claims

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[67] Bowens, *African American Readings of Paul*, 297, citing Frederick Douglass, "The American Constitution and the Slave: An Adress Delivered in Glasgow, Scotland, on 26 March 1860," in *The Frederick Douglass Papers: Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews*, vol. 3 1855-63, ed. John Blassingame (New Have: Yale University Press, 1985), 362-363. Also quoted in J. Albert Harrill, "The Use of the New Testament in the America Slave Controversy: A Case History in the Hermeneutical Tension between Biblical Criticism and Christian Moral Debate," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation 10,* no. 2 (2000):161.

[68] Bowens, *African American Readings of Paul*, 11.

[69] Callahan, "The Language of Apocalypse," 454.

that "The seer, with strategy and premeditation, transgressed grammatical norms as an exercise of his own discursive power."[70]

Bowens refers to Abraham Smith's term "typological correlation" to describe the manner in which African Americans often identify with the characters of scripture.[71] This is similar to Sechrest's concept of "rhyme" when using the bible to address matters of race in the 21st century.[72] The observation of Bowen concerning the "hermeneutic of trust" notes the way African American Christians have believed the bible to be the word of God and have searched it for help and hope, not secrets and codes.[73] Black people enslaved in the US retained a belief in a world full of spiritual realities, often manifested in evil and oppressive earthly systems and regimes, which coheres with an apocalyptic *Weltanschauung* (worldview).[74] For African Americans who embraced Christianity, the bible became a resource for how to respond to and navigate those systems. These beliefs persist in the descendants of the enslaved.

Esau McCaulley in his 2020 publication *Reading While Black*, acknowledges the tension between perspectives such as that of Bowens and Brown, when he notes the wide range of beliefs which exist in the "Black Christian tradition," yet insists that it is "largely orthodox in its theology."[75] McCaulley additionally asserts that the biblical interpretation

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[70] Callahan, "The Language of Apocalypse," 465.

[71] Bowens, *African American Readings of Paul*, 294.

[72] Sechrest, *Race and Rhyme*, 2-3.

[73] Bowens, *African American Readings of Paul*, 297.

[74] Bowens, *African American Readings of Paul*, 298.

[75] McCaulley, *Reading While Black*, 5.

of the enslaved was "*canonical* from its inception" as well as "*theological.*"[76] African American hermeneutics, in its pursuit of theological truth, often manifests a particular interest in theological anthropology, and an ethically determined soteriology. African American theological anthropology pursues a unique interest in countering interpretations and theological reflections which dehumanize or marginalize those of African descent. The Black Ecclesial tradition frequently manifests a soteriology which demands an ethical test of one's faith. These themes will be reflected in our theological reading of The Apocalypse of John.

This parade of African American scholars have built a multi-generational case that, after encountering the God of the bible, African Americans persistently turned to the bible to: establish their own identity as humans created in the image of God; to argue the deep and inherent injustice of American chattel slavery; to cry out against the deep inconsistency of a "Christian nation" which would tolerate the practice of Jim Crow segregation and lynching; and to contend for civil rights as a means of repairing the damage done by 400 years of exploitative oppression.

A Subversive Element in African American Interpretation

Additionally, African American hermeneuts join a long tradition of speculative or exploratory interpretation. As Judith Kovacs and Christopher Rowland point out concerning biblical texts, "'oracular,' enigmatic words of prophetic and apocalyptic texts are susceptible to new interpretation as hermeneuts seek to 'divine' their meaning."[77] The

[76] McCaulley, *Reading While Black*, 19.

[77] Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, 6.

practice of such creative and adaptive interpretation is evidence of what M. Cooper Harriss coins an "Eirobiblical" approach. He derives the term from "the '*eiron'* of Greek theater," analyzing the biblical allusions in Nat Turner's *Confessions* as exhibiting creative expression of biblical narratives, applying them to the realities of enslaved Africans in America in a manner that "destabilizes the authority" which enslavers were attributing to biblical texts in their justifications of the system of enslavement.[78] The deployment of the Greek term *εἰρω*, "to speak," by Harriss also coheres with the oral nature of early African American engagement with the biblical texts.[79] Harriss also notes the centrality of biblical motifs in the formation of African American identity,[80] as expressed in the spirituals and folklore.[81] One characteristic of this eirobiblical rhetoric is the tendency to communicate in language which sounds biblical but is not a direct quotation.[82] This latter feature is reminiscent of John's Apocalypse, where biblical allusions are stacked one upon another in ways that at times render identification of the sources challenging, and the interpretation of those allusions is a matter of longstanding controversy.[83]

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[78] M. Cooper Harriss, "On the Eirobiblical: Critical Mimesis and Ironic Resistance in *The Confessions of Nat Turner*," *BibInt* 21, no. 4–5 (2013), 476-77.

[79] Harriss, "On the Eirobiblical," 477.

[80] Harriss, "On the Eirobiblical," 471.

[81] Harriss, "On the Eirobiblical," 473.

[82] Harriss, "On the Eirobiblical," 485.

[83] See Steve Moyise, "Models for Intertextual Interpretation of Revelation," in *Revelation and the Politics of Apocalyptic Interpretation*, ed. Richard B. Hays and Stefan Alkier (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), 31-45.

Contemporary African American biblical scholars and theologians find themselves engaged in a dialectical process, negotiating between the findings of historical critical scholarship and the contextual perspectives produced by the African American experience. That contextual matrix includes: a) African vestigial worldviews; b) the experience of oppression; c) the recognition of a therapeutic, theodicy-driven dualism; d) a practical, subversive approach to navigating oppression; and, e) a delegitimization of Oppressor "Christianity."

Peter Paris observes the connections between the ethical framework of African American Christian communities and West African cultures in his 1995 work, *The Spirituality of African Peoples: The Search for a Common Moral Discourse.*[84] James Cone asserts the centrality of the experience of oppression in Black theologizing in *A Black Theology of Liberation*.[85]

The dualism of African American religion has been problematic for many. As James Evans points out, it is "complex." Evans notes the spiritual "I got shoes" reflects an earthiness, in that "shoes" and "white robes" are "juxtaposed with talk about 'crowns and wings.'"[86] The hope for future deliverance from oppression is rooted in things that were the everyday experience of our oppressed ancestors. African American spirituality recognizes a spiritual dimension to the world in which we live, even an unseen realm of

[84] Peter J. Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples: The Search for a Common Moral Discourse* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

[85] James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation: Fortieth Anniversary Edition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 78.

[86] James H. Evans, *We Have Been Believers: An African American Systematic Theology*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 151-152.

principalities and powers.[87] It seeks to invoke those powers to address the difficulties of quotidian inequities and finds succor for the agony of persistently frustrated ambitions in the anticipation of an eschatological day of reckoning. This spiritual perspective inspires readers to work for a better day for one's children and grandchildren, trusting that efforts which remain unrewarded will be recognized "by and by."[88]

Lisa Bowens uses a controversial spokesperson in Jupiter Hammons to make the case for the subversive nature of African American readings of the bible in *African American Readings of Paul*. Bowens points out the subtle condemnation of white slaveholders embedded in Hammon's "An Address to the Negroes in the State of New York." In this much maligned plea for the enslaved to behave peaceably in their enslaved state, Bowens cites Hammon's language as indicating that his kin in bondage must avoid the behavior of their enslavers, lest they be condemned in the final judgement.[89] Such indirect condemnation of slaveholders and their religion, Bowens argues, was characteristic of many antebellum Black preachers, and was persistently, situationally employed by African American orators when the threat of lynching and other consequences of disapprobation were present, even after slavery was abolished in the United States.

The invalidation of "Oppressor Christianity" was never more cogently expressed than by Frederick Douglass, in his lecture, "What to the Negro is the Fourth of July." In

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[87] Albert J. Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African-American Religious History*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 188-190.

[88] Charles Albert Tindley. "We'll Understand It Better By and By." No. 288 in *The New National Baptist Hymnal (21st Century Edition*). Nashville, TN: Triad Publications, National Baptist Convention of America, 2001.

[89] Bowens, *African American Readings of Paul*, 41-48.

this 1852 oration he provides a scathing diatribe against the religiosity of a nation that tolerates the enslavement of other human beings. “The existence of slavery in this country brands your republicanism as a sham, your humanity as a base pretence (*sic*), and your Christianity as a lie.”[90] Numerous examples from other nineteenth-century abolitionists could be cited. This sentiment was not just the conclusion of radical abolitionists but is communicated in the encoded message of the historic slave song (Negro spiritual), “I Got Shoes” in which the chorus declares, “everybody talkin’ ‘bout heav’n ain’t goin’ there.”[91] This view is supported by the parable of the wheat and the tares (Matt 13:24-30).

The aforementioned dynamics fostered among African Americans a distinctive approach to reading and interpreting the bible. This study joins that multigenerational chorus that Bowens identifies which approaches the text of Revelation with a hermeneutic of trust in the text, with a strongly held suspicion of the interpreters of that text. This reality entails a need for discernment to distinguish life-giving meanings of the text from the varied messages which interpreters have attributed to the text.

A Rejection of Relativism with a Decolonial Caveat

Some posit that such a contextual or cultural interpretation entails an inextricable subjectivity. Each interpreter finds “their truth” in the text, denying that there is universal

[90] Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?,” in *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings,* ed. Philip S. Foner (Chicago: Lawrence Hill, 1999), 188-206.

[91] Emilie M. Townes, “Cultural Boundaries and African American Theology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of African American Theology*, ed. Katie G. Cannon and Anthony B. Pinn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 485.

truth therein. An African American hermeneutic of trust denies such relativity. The Black Ecclesial tradition argues that there is absolute, transcendent truth in the text; the problem is that the text can be (and often has been) twisted in such a way that creates interpretations which contradict truths such as that communicated by Acts 17:6 (humans are all of one blood) and which ignore the prophetic tradition condemning exploitation of the poor. Those who defended slavery by attributing a lack of personhood to enslaved Africans in America were deemed "scripture twisters" or "gospel deniers" by enslaved Africans who gained access to the biblical texts and came to trust the liberating truths they found in them. Such an assessment continues to characterize the reflections of the descendants of the enslaved.

The aforementioned task of hermeneutical discernment recommends a decolonial and anti-imperial approach building on the recent postcolonial biblical scholarship of African Americans. Recent studies of Revelation by Womanist scholars Lynne St. Clair Darden and Shanell Smith have drawn on Postcolonial theory to provide analytical tools in the pursuit of such discernment. Postcolonial theory, built on the work of Franz Fanon, inaugurated by Edward Said's *Orientalism*, and advanced by Gyatri Spivak and Homi K. Bhabha, is rooted in the legacy of European colonialism.[92] Spivak and Bhabha reflect primarily on the aftereffects and ongoing influence of the British Raj in India, helpfully identify the challenge faced by the formerly colonized. That challenge involves cultural

[92] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of The Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004); Edward Said, *Orientalism*: *25th Anniversary Edition* (New York: Grove Press, 1979); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

dislocation, and as Bhabha famously argues, *ambivalence*, *mimicry* and *hybridity*.[93] *Ambivalence* is the combined repulsion and attraction of the colonized to the ways of the colonizer. *Mimicry* occurs when the colonized behaves in ways modelled after the colonizer, yet subverts those practices as a form of resistance. *Hybridity* is the recognition that the culture of the colonized will no longer be "pristine" once contact with the culture of the colonizer has taken place. What is produced is a dynamic amalgam of the two cultures, shifting and evolving as contact continues, even in postcolonial relationships.

Spivak's work is particularly helpful in attending to the privileged status of the scholar seeking to speak on behalf of the colonized, or *subaltern*, to use her term. She identifies the manner in which scholars are dependent on the proceeds of capitalism, or neo-imperialism, and are therefore removed from the indigenous population, relating to that population as "extractors" of knowledge.[94] In this way, the formerly colonized postcolonial scholar becomes an instrument of neocolonial exploitation.

Both Darden and Smith follow their doctoral director, Stephen B. Moore, in utilizing postcolonial analysis to conclude that Revelation reinscribes imperial violence.[95] These scholars apply the analytical tools of postcolonial theory to the author of Revelation as well as to its text. Darden describes her hermeneutic as *scripturalization*,[96]

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[93] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (on ambivalence) 145-174; (on mimicry) 121-131; (on hybridity) 277-278.

[94] Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, ix.

[95] Lynne St. Clair Darden, *Scripturalizing Revelation: An African American Postcolonial Reading of Empire* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), 5; Stephen D. Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse: Postcolonialism and the New Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2006), 99, 112-113, 115, 118, 120; Shanell T. Smith, *The Woman Babylon and the Marks of Empire: Reading Revelation with a Postcolonial Womanist Hermeneutics of Ambi*veil*ence* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2014), 15, 104.

[96] Darden, *Scripturalizing Revelation*, 7-10.

adopting Vincent Wimbush's term,[97] while Smith labels hers as *ambi*veil*ance*, combining Bhabha's *ambivalence* with the concept of "the veil" coined by W. E. B. DuBois through which African Americans engage the white (Western) world.[98]

Moore, as well as Smith and Darden, uses Homi K. Bhabha's analysis of the colonized subject to determine that John is ambivalent toward his imperial Roman oppressors, declaring "the Roman imperial order is the ultimate object of imitation in Revelation."[99] Shanell Smith specifically attributes the deployment of violence in John's various visions to be a product of John's ambivalence towards Rome. According to Smith, while John's Revelation is clearly revolted by and resistant to the oppressor, the vision he describes is deeply influenced by and seeks to possess the power which the oppressor has wielded over the oppressed. In this way, Revelation reinscribes imperial violence.

Postcolonial analysis makes a valuable contribution to African American hermeneutics in its caution against adopting the ways and tools of our oppressors. Many quote Audre Lord that one can't "dismantle the master's house using the master's tools."[100] Postcolonial theory's focus on the effects of imperial hegemony on the colonized subject is an important point of self-evaluation for the postcolonial subject, prompting that subject to assess to what degree they are speaking for the oppressed, and

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[97] Vincent L. Wimbush, "Introduction," in *MisReading America: Scriptures and Difference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press USA, 2013), 4.

[98] Smith, *The Woman Babylon*, 19.

[99] Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse*, 112-113.

[100] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984), 112.

to what extent they are engaged in mimicry, while denying their own hybridity. It also prompts one to reckon with their ambivalence by examining the degree to which they are seeking to emulate their oppressors while claiming to champion their culture of origin. Postcolonial paradigms require us to acknowledge our hybridity and be accountable for how well we represent and benefit our cultures of origin, or if we are simply extracting content for which we take academic credit. Postcolonial analysis helpfully encourages the identification of corrupting influences in the minds of the formerly colonized, even as the postcolonial subject seeks to move past the coercive dynamics of imperial authority.

In the case of African American hermeneutics, postcolonial critiques can help identify instances in which hermeneuts have mimicked European and European American theologies. Some African American scholars, Christian or secular, have devalued and mocked African American "folk Christianity," mirroring the attitudes of whites. As described by Willie James Jennings, this is sometimes a product of educational certification pressing African American scholars to be become proxies for the doctrinal, denominational, or theological contests being waged within and between white Christian constituencies, despite these African American scholars having been formed in and resourced by African American ecclesial communities.[101] Jennings goes on to note that even in the 21st century, hegemonic power is wielded to elicit solicitousness from African American scholars in order for them to acquire and maintain the means to

[101] Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 52.

function in the academy, with its dependence on the scions of white supremacist mercantile imperialism.[102]

Decolonial theory suggests that one must move beyond postcolonial analysis to craft a way forward. Pioneered by Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano, a decolonial approach, while acknowledging the insights of postcolonial theory, seeks to identify and remove imperial, colonizing influences in the thought of the formerly colonized, to the end of redistributing power from the colonial center to the colonially marginalized.[103] As further developed by theorists/practitioners Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh, decolonial analysis is anti-imperial, aligning with liberative principles to promote flourishing of all people, not just those in the imperial center.[104] It is not focused on "dismantling Western ideas" but rather "transcending" the hegemony of Eurocentrism and imperialism in order build new "houses of thought."[105] A decolonial approach is particularly relevant to exegesis of Revelation in that the discomfort of many interpreters of Revelation seems to be related to the book's intensely anti-imperial posture. For example, Allan Boesak cites an instance where the interpretation of twentieth-century scholar Robert Grant in *The Sword and the Cross* displays an inherent impulse to defend the idea of empire, given Grant's apparent affinity for the British empire as an Episcopal

[102] Jennings, *After Whiteness,* 47-49.

[103] Anibal Quijano and Michael Ennis, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no. 3 (2000): 533-580.

[104] Walter Mignolo and Catherine E Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts Analytics Praxis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 3.

[105] Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 7.

priest.[106] Additionally, decolonial thinkers acknowledge the influence of the African American intellectual tradition, often citing W. E. B. Dubois as a proto-decolonial thinker.[107] The epistemic inclusivity of decolonial analysis/praxis is an effective way of affirming the African American hermeneutical axiom that "we are all of one blood."[108]

Additionally, African American theological production is often centered on or derived from biblical narratives. African American preaching has long emphasized the dramatic retelling of bible stories, identifying in them their content as to God's character, the nature of human beings, the mystery of Jesus as the Messiah, and the challenge of applying these truths to the lived experience of Black church attendees. Kristoffer Norris identifies this element in both the work of James Cone and that of James Evans.[109]

In light of these things, this study will undertake a theological reading of the book of Revelation which affirms historical critical data, applies a hermeneutic of trust to the text while engaging a hermeneutic of suspicion relative to various Eurocentric, empire-friendly interpreters. This approach is canonical and "eirobiblical," tapping into the narrative of the book of Revelation to find theological meaning. Historical critical data, with its focus on original context and textual integrity, is essential to understanding the meaning of a text. An African American hermeneutic of trust affirms the potential to find life-giving, hope-engendering truth in the text. At the same time, even as our ancestors

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[106] Allan A. Boesak, *Comfort and Protest* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987), 30-31.

[107] Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 17.

[108] Powery and Sadler, *The Genesis of Liberation*, 88, 92. This principle is based on Acts 17:26, a hallmark of anti-slavery rhetoric in the antebellum United States.

[109] Kristopher Norris, *Witnessing Whiteness: Confronting White Supremacy in the American Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 86.

declared that "everybody talkin' 'bout heaven ain't goin' there…" we affirm that interpreters of the scriptures must be viewed with an eye to the oppressive, empire-enabling propensity of some scholars. An initial first line of evaluation is to engage an intertextual analysis, ensuring that other biblical witnesses are considered in our interpretation of this text. Revelation is particularly suited for this dimension of theological analysis in that it is replete with allusions to prior biblical scenes, motifs, and themes. With these boundaries and guidelines, we look to encounter the mind of the living God in this text.

This final thought of our hermeneutical approach is deeply indebted to William Wright, IV and Francis Martin, whose work in *Encountering the Living God in Scripture* makes a compelling case that biblical texts "mediate the Word" of God so that they "put people in living and life-giving contact with the divine realities that it mediates."[110] This mediation involves the disclosure of "mysteries" which defy comprehensive, or definitive human description.[111] These mysteries are ultimately manifested in Jesus Christ, who is the incarnate Word of God, and whose life and ministry, past, present and future, reveal God in God's glory in ways unimaginable to many of the authors of the Hebrew scriptures which testified to him.[112] In other words, there is newness being revealed, even as we explore the ancient texts which are the subject of our study. As we examine the witness of the book of Revelation, its forward-looking elements will be explored via

[110] William M. Wright IV and Francis Martin, *Encountering the Living God in Scripture: Theological and Philosophical Principles for Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 99.

[111] Wright and Martin, *Encountering the Living God*, 202-203.

[112] Wright and Martin, *Encountering the Living God*, 207-209.

assessment of the context of its author and the content of his communication, recognizing that the mysteries revealed are unfolding in history. The African American hermeneutic deployed in this study seeks to discern the presence of God as manifested in the text and demonstrated in the world.

CHAPTER 3 – THE OCCASION FOR THE APOCALYPSE OF JOHN

Having established our African American decolonial hermeneutical framework, we move to the questions which drive this study. What does this hermeneutical lens reveal concerning "the nations" in the Apocalypse of John? Our discussion looks briefly at the provenance of the book, as well as its genre. I will argue that the temple-related imagery in this text, as well as the disclosure of and emphasis on the heavenly temple within it appear to be intended to address the trauma introduced by the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE. Once we have looked at these historical-critical factors in its interpretation, I intend to read it from the position of a historically oppressed community having endured persistent and recurring crises, as well as a general sense of marginalization and exclusion.

As has been discussed earlier, the Apocalypse of John has been one of the most controversial entries in the Christian canon, evidenced by it being one of the last texts accepted as part of that canon, and by the uneven reception it has enjoyed in the traditions of the church. The controversies surrounding the Apocalypse of John include questions of its authorship, when it was written, and what interpretive constructs should be deployed in understanding what it reveals.

Dating and Authorship

Modern scholars continue to disagree concerning the identity of the author of the Apocalypse of John.[113] A variety of theories have been proposed by commentators, from

[113] Moloney, *The Apocalypse*, 4–6.

J. Massyngberde Ford's position that John the Baptist is its originator,[114] to ancient authorities who held that it was authored by John the son of Zebedee, as well as other ancients who attribute it to "John the Elder."[115] Some scholars hold to various theories of it being comprised of multiple sources, or as David Aune argues in his magisterial work, that Revelation evolved through two or more editions, perhaps involving more than one author.[116] In keeping with an African American hermeneutic of trust, this study approaches the text with an operating assumption that while it is not certain its author was John the Beloved Disciple, it was written by a diasporic Jew who considered himself, and seemed to be regarded by others, as a prophet.[117] The marginalized position of this John, whomever he may have been, provides a rich resource of resonation with that of the historic struggle of African Americans with slavery and its afterlives.[118]

Additionally, there have been long-standing divisions of opinion concerning the dating of The Apocalypse of John. Aune summarizes the various positions well. Many 19th century scholars held (and some contemporary scholars continue to hold) that the book was written immediately after Nero's reign circa 64–70 CE, before the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. Nevertheless, as the 20th century drew to a close, a majority of scholars have concluded, in agreement with most ancient commentators, that it was

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[114] J. Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2007), 28–37.

[115] Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, l-liii. Aune provides a brief but rather detailed survey of the various complex positions of a number of scholars on the question of The Apocalypse of John's authorship.

[116] Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, cv–cxxxiv.

[117] Moloney, *The Apocalypse*, 6; Brian K. Blount, *Revelation: A Commentary*, 1st ed., NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 7–8; Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, l.

[118] Saidiya Hartman. "The Dead Book Revisited." *History of the Present* 6, no. 2 (2016): 208–15, 210.

written late in the reign of Domitian, or early in that of Trajan, in the mid-90s CE. Aune proposes that both an early date (before 70 CE) and a later one are correct as part of his theory that the book is a second, expanded edition of an earlier version.[119] The internal evidence of the book presented in this chapter coheres with the ancient view that John's Apocalypse was written after the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple by the Romans in 70 CE.

Apocalyptic as Revelation's Genre

The Apocalypse of John demonstrates the characteristics identified by John Collins as marking apocalyptic literature:

> …a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.[120]

Many scholars also associate a response to persecution or antagonism to their religious identity as characteristic of the genre. While the degree of persecution the recipients of the Apocalypse of John were facing is disputed, Rev 2–3 makes it clear that there is a perceived challenge to the integrity of their religious practice.[121] In this regard, Revelation reflects a common characteristic of

[119] Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, lxix–lxx. Aune takes the position that both datings have an element of truth in that parts of the book demonstrate characteristics consistent with an early composition, while others cohere with a post 70 CE origin.

[120] John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 5.

[121] For a detailed description of this dynamic, and its echo of the concerns articulated in the book of Daniel, see Moloney, *The Apocalypse*, 53–55.

apocalyptic literature, that of being written to address a crisis, or perceived distress.[122] In addition to the varied responses of Roman authorities to the early Jesus Movement, I will argue that the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple is demonstrably a major component of the distress being felt by John's audience.

Issues of Interpretation

Kovacs and Rowland identify various approaches to interpreting Revelation, involving two major distinctions, "decoding" versus "actualization," either of which can focus primarily on the past, the present, or the future.[123] Revelation has often been read as an encoded predictive prophecy,[124] instead of as the Jewish apocalyptic work which genre it defines. Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther have summarized various attempts to decode the book of Revelation, pointing out that the popularity of the "decoding" reading strategy, which is often millenarian, is due to the failure of "mainstream Christianity" to respond effectively and persuasively to the various crises of modern life.[125]

Pablo Richard digs into the history of interpretation, connecting a decoding approach to its interpretation as an attempt to cloud the anti-imperial content of Revelation. He points to such efforts being as ancient as that of Eusebius of Caesarea, who questioned the inclusion of Revelation in the canon. Richard's analysis suggests that

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[122] Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 47.

[123] Judith L. Kovacs and Christopher Rowland, *Revelation: The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ*, Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 8–11.

[124] Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, 24-25. This view, while ancient, was greatly popularized by the *Left Behind* series authored by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins (1995–2007).

[125] Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now*, The Bible & Liberation (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 3–19.

Eusebius was engaged in Hellenizing the Christian faith in order to make it more suitable as the religion of the Roman Empire in the wake of Constantine's conversion. Revelation was an inconvenient text for the project of Eusebius due to its deeply antagonistic posture towards empire, as we shall demonstrate. Such Hellenization minimized the Jewish roots of Christian faith, distorting the view of the kingdom of God as presented in Revelation.[126]

Francis Maloney largely agrees with Richard's assessment of Eusebius,[127] and cites Corsini as pointing out that before Constantine's conversion, the dominant interpretive approach "was not millenarian but Christological and ecclesiological."[128] Maloney again coheres with Corsini in noting that Augustine's interpretation of the thousand-year reign (Rev 20:1–10) emphasizes Revelation's eschatological content, shifting the focus of subsequent interpretations away from the "realized eschatology" which had dominated the earliest commentaries on the book.[129] While the nature of the eschatological framework of Revelation is not the focus of this study, our working assumption is in accord with Maloney's which posits that the "central message of the Apocalypse is that the death and resurrection of Jesus reveal the meaning of the entire history of God's intervention into the affairs of humankind, recorded in the history of

[126] Pablo Richard, *Apocalypse: A People's Commentary on the Book of Revelation*, The Bible and Liberation (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 20.

[127] Moloney, *The Apocalypse*, 4.

[128] Moloney, *The Apocalypse*, 21.

[129] Moloney, *The Apocalypse*, 23, citing Eugenio Corsini, *The Apocalypse: The Perennial Revelation of Jesus Christ*, trans. and ed. Francis J. Maloney, GNS 5 (Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1983), 21.

Israel and in the period of the early Christian community."[130] Or, to state Maloney's approach more bluntly, the Apocalypse of John is not a sequential record of the events which will unfold leading up to the eschaton, but rather a description of what is taking place "behind the veil" in the supernatural realm in the past and the present of God's dealings with humankind as history moves towards the eschaton. The visions which appear are intended to convey christological and ecclesiological imperatives which are incumbent on the followers of Jesus at all times, not a codebook which imparts secret knowledge of how history will unfold in a seven-year tribulation period immediately preceding the white throne judgment of the nations (Rev 20:11–15).

The Revelation of John utilizes the image of this white throne judgement to express an ultimate accountability of all humans at the end of time, yet the focus of Revelation attends to the present: to give believers insight into the conflict between good and evil; to demonstrate that God is indeed the victor; to instruct believers as to how they should live in the meantime (Rev 2–3), culminating with a description of God's resolution of the cosmic drama which includes clear and evocative rewards for the faithful. The visions presented shed light on God's view of this cosmic drama, as well as the contours and characteristics of God's kingdom as ultimately represented by the new Jerusalem.

The Focus of This Study

I contend that the book of Revelation is intended to offer hope and comfort to early Christian communities who are experiencing: 1) some uncertainty as to doctrinal or

[130] Moloney, *The Apocalypse*, 25.

theological authority as the first generation of witnesses to Christ die off, 2) intermittent persecution, and 3) the troubling reality and consequences of the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. Of these three reasons for the Revelation of John, I propose that the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple is, in fact, the dominant factor being addressed.

While the three aforementioned concerns describe a specific historical context for the book of Revelation, its message redounds through the ages to provide comfort to all who are troubled by the evil observed and experienced by the faithful as they sojourn in the kingdoms of this world. We will examine the book of Revelation in order to discern the ways in which these concerns are surfaced and attended to by the text.

The Occasion for the Apocalypse of John

The question of doctrinal authority in the wake of the progressive loss of the founding generation is particularly relevant if we assume a late 1st century provenance for the book. The concern over the delayed Parousia was apparently manifest in the early Jesus movement as addressed in 2 Pet 3:3–13 and alluded to in the repeated declaration of immediacy for the manifestation of the eschaton in Rev 22:6, 10, 12, and 20. Pablo Richard describes the context in which the New Testament writings (including John's Apocalypse) were written, as an existential crisis.[131]

In recent decades, scholars have increasingly de-emphasized persecution as the provocation for the Apocalypse. The debate over the dating of the book is related to the judgments of various scholars as to the intensity of persecution endured by late first-century Christians. Perceptions of the severity of persecution in the late first century

[131] Richard, *Apocalypse*, 11.

have been both a fueler of that debate, and have been clarified by it.[132] Many modern scholars maintain the view that Revelation was "a response to actual social, political persecution and oppression."[133] Leonard Thompson argues that characterizations of Domitian as vicious towards Christians are unsubstantiated,[134] proposing alternatively that John's worldview perceived the empire as inherently hostile to Christian loyalty (*pistis*), whether or not Christians were being actively or systematically persecuted.[135] Christian loyalty was in ongoing tension with the expectations of Roman Imperial cult worship in the various cities of the Roman Empire. As Steven Friesen has documented, that tension varied greatly, and was not a constant source of persecution, but rather an intermittent and locally driven phenomenon.[136] Ironically, in some instances this tension was fueled by non-Christian members of local Jewish synagogues, who saw gentile Christian refusal to participate in the Imperial cult as a threat to the exemption from that worship (and its attendant taxes) which they had been granted by the empire.[137]

While Thompson persuasively argues that Revelation was not occasioned by "great political and social crises" in the form of widespread systematic persecution, he

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[132] Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, lxiii–lx.

[133] Leonard L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 208.

[134] Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*, 95, 107.

[135] Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*, 132, 167, 174.

[136] Steven J. Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 143–145.

[137] Craig S. Keener, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 38–39. Also see Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting*, The Biblical Resource Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 7–12, 67, 149, 163, 175, 215–216 for observations of this apparent dynamic.

fails to account for the crisis engendered by the destruction of the Jerusalem temple.[138] The internal evidence of Revelation coheres with a paracletic response to this event. The followers of a Jewish Messiah, who was anticipated to restore the throne of David in Jerusalem and attract gentiles to the worship of Yahweh would need to be comforted and encouraged in the wake of the destruction of Jerusalem, the dismantling of the temple, and the deportation of the Jewish people from the land promised to Abraham. The internal evidence of Revelation supports the view that the Apocalypse of John is a paracletic response to these life and worldview-altering developments. The various temple motifs and allusions, the challenges put forth in the letters to the seven churches, as well as the concluding appearance of a "new Jerusalem" all point to the author's intent to encourage his readers in the wake of the loss of Jerusalem and its temple.

One of the prominent points of clarification and comfort reflected in the text of Revelation is that the temple in Jerusalem was only a shadow of the temple in heaven. Additionally, the loss of Jerusalem as the capital of a messianic kingdom is offset by the vision cast in Revelation that *the glory once manifested in the Jerusalem temple and the worship of the biological descendants of Israel is now enhanced by the glory of the testimony of the ingathered nations of the world, who add their glory and honor to that of "the Lamb"* (Rev 21:24, 25). Additionally, the ingathering of the nations in Rev 21 is an inversion of the imperial dynamic of exploitation and oppression as described in Rev 18:13, 24. This point will be demonstrated more fully as we continue this study.

Revelation as an Antidote for Despair over Jerusalem and its Temple

[138] Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*, 175.

James D.G. Dunn's study, *The Parting of the Ways*, while arguing for an early rupture between Hebrew Christianity and Hellenistic Christianity, emphasizes the importance of the temple in Second Temple Judaism. Dunn argues quite thoroughly that this schism grew out of a pre-existing tension between the Judaism of ancient Palestine, with its emphasis on temple cultic worship as a strong marker of Jewish identity, and the "Hellenic Christianity" which was spreading through the Roman Empire, and which held a more complex view of the temple.[139]

Dunn's case acknowledges the deeply Jewish nature of the initial ministry of Jesus, evidenced by his avoidance of the Hellenistic cities of Galilee.[140] Dunn's analysis points out the economic engine the temple must have been,[141] and that the varieties of Judaism which existed at the time (including the Essenes, as well as the early Jesus movement) were focused on the temple, whether by centering their activity there, as was the case with the early Jesus movement (Acts 1–5), or by establishing an alternative site of sacrifice pending the restoration of the spiritual purity of the temple, as in the case of the Essenes.[142] Luke begins and ends his gospel in the temple.[143] Nor does Dunn see anything "*which required or compelled a development out of or a breach with a Judaism focussed [sic] on the Temple of Jerusalem*."[144] In concluding this, Dunn downplays the

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[139] James D. G. Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways: Between Christianity and Judaism and Their Significance for the Character of Christianity* (London: SCM, 1991).

[140] Dunn, *The Parting of the Ways*, 23.

[141] Dunn, *The Parting of the Ways*, 32.

[142] Dunn, *The Parting of the Ways*, 35.

[143] Dunn, *The Parting of the Ways*, 38. (The emphasis here is Dunn's.)

[144] Dunn, *The Parting of the Ways*, 56.

predictions of Jesus concerning the destruction of the temple, recorded in each of the synoptic gospels (Mark 13:2; Matt 24:2; Luke 21:6), which at minimum, portend a time when his followers will not be able to remain focused on the temple.

In *Jesus and the Victory of God*, N. T. Wright posits that the temple was, indeed, central to the hopes of first-century Judaism. Wright notes that while there were differing expectations, ranging from reform and renewal to its destruction and reconstruction, the temple played a prominent role culturally, religiously, and politically in the life of Judea.[145] Wright emphasizes the prophetic pronouncements Jesus is recorded as uttering, arguing that Jesus "cleansing the temple" (Matt 21:12–17; Mark 11:15–19; Luke 19:45–48; John 2:13–16) was a prophetic demonstration of its impending destruction, and a key point of the message of Jesus to his followers.[146]

Despite this record in the gospels, Dunn notes that the first Christians "*remained very much focused on the Temple.*"[147] Immediately after the resurrection and ascension they remained in Jerusalem because "they saw the Temple as the eschatological climax of God's purpose for Israel…the place to which Jesus would return."[148] Their understanding was based on an interpretation of Hebrew prophecy that the gentiles would come to Jerusalem, negating the need to take the gospel out of Jerusalem.[149] Therefore the

[145] N.T. Wright, Bp, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 407–412.

[146] Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 413-418.

[147] Dunn, *The Parting of the Ways*, 57. (Dunn's emphasis)

[148] Dunn, *The Parting of the Ways*, 58.

[149] Dunn, *The Parting of the Ways*, 58.

inaugural gathering of the Jesus movement remained in Jerusalem as is recorded in Acts 1–7.

Dunn sees in Stephen's sermon a caustic critique of the temple cult (Acts 7:48–50), marking the beginnings of the separation which is the topic of Dunn's monograph.[150] From this point in New Testament historiography, Dunn sees an increasing redefinition of where God's presence is manifest as being away from the Temple and centered in the "body of Christ."[151] Stephen's oration seems to imply the inferiority of the earthly temple and declares its inability to contain God's presence, in which he declared, "Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands; as the prophet says, 'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest?" (Acts 7:48-49).[152] While the centrality of Jerusalem, its Temple, and the gathering of believers in that city continue in the decades following Christ's ascension, a growing emphasis on "a heavenly Jerusalem" appears.[153] Dunn underscores that the Epistle to the Hebrews elucidates the replacement of the Temple cult by Jesus. He also argues that the absence of reference to the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE by the writer of Hebrews is consistent with contemporary sources which clearly are dated after that event yet fail to mention it explicitly.[154] While Dunn sees the emphasis of the book of Revelation being the new Jerusalem, he recognizes "the

[150] Dunn, *The Parting of the Ways*, 67–71.

[151] Dunn, *The Parting of the Ways*, 77.

[152] Acts 7:48–50, in which Stephen quotes Isa 66:1.

[153] Dunn, *The Parting of the Ways*, 85.

[154] Dunn, *The Parting of the Ways*, 87.

interweaving of the correlate theme of the Temple."[155] N.T. Wright also notes the strong connection between the temple and the idea of the kingdom of God.[156]

In addition to Wright's and Dunn's arguments, both the Hebrew bible and the Christian scriptures reflect the primacy of Jerusalem and its temple for the early Jesus movement. In the Deuteronomistic History, David conquers Jerusalem after his anointing as king of all Israel, establishing it as his capital (2 Sam 5:6–10). From this point forward, Jerusalem serves as the political and psychological center of Israel.[157] A corollary to the focus on Jerusalem in this history was the Jerusalem temple, built originally by Solomon (1 Kgs 5–8), rebuilt by Ezra after the Babylonian captivity, and embellished by Herod in the era of the emergence of Jesus as a claimant of the messianic office. Jerusalem and its temple were icons of Jewish identity. As noted previously, this anticipation of the temple's central role seems to have perdured despite the clear warnings by Jesus of the temple's demise.

In Rev 3:12 we read in the message of Jesus to the church in Philadelphia, "If you conquer, I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God; you will never go out of it. I will write on you the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name." Such language seems to cohere with a reality in which Jerusalem and its temple lie in ruins after the Roman conquest of 70 CE. This statement provides one of the Apocalypse's first

[155] Dunn, *The Parting of the Ways*, 93.

[156] Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 205.

[157] This centrality is troubled once the Northern Kingdom secedes in the reign of Rehoboam (1 Kgs 12). Yet after the destruction of the northern capitol, Samaria, and the deportation of the northern tribes by Assyria (2 Kgs 17), Jerusalem became the sole focus of Jewish worship and aspiration.

reassurances that faithfulness secures one's presence in God's heavenly temple (as opposed to the defunct, earthly one) and an identification with the new Jerusalem which God will provide.[158]

We see recurring allusions to the temple in the Revelation to John, beginning with a promise that those who endure the "great ordeal" (7:14) will be granted to worship God in "his temple" (7:15), again referencing the heavenly temple which continues to feature prominently in the rest of Revelation. John is commanded to "measure" the temple in 11:2. This act of "measuring" does not appear to take place, causing interpreters to wrestle with the meaning of the command. Aune interprets this statement as symbolizing God's protection.[159] After the explicit introduction of the heavenly temple in 7:15, the reference in 11:2 appears to revert back to the earthly temple, prompting some scholars to assert that this text points to a date prior to 70 CE for the composition of Revelation. Blount reconciles this reference to the temple with a later authorship by asserting that John is invoking the image of the temple to represent the people of God.[160] Aune concludes that this passage is a representation of protection analogous to the 144,000 in 7:3–8. In other words, it is a spiritual vision of God's commitment to sealing, measuring, and protecting those (possibly Jews) who are faithful to him.[161] Bauckham agrees with this understanding, interpreting "the temple and the city as symbols of the people of God"

[158] This text creates a tension with Rev 21:22 where we read, "I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb." This apparent contradiction is yet another evidence for a figurative, allegorical reading of the book of Revelation.

[159] David E. Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, WBC 52B (Nashville; London: Nelson, 1998), 595–598.

[160] Blount, *Revelation: A Commentary*, 204.

[161] Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 595–598.

in this passage.[162] Beale, Boring, Boxall, Caird, Keener, Koester, Mounce, and Schüssler-Fiorenza have all arrived at this interpretation.[163]

Most of the remaining references to "the temple" in John's Apocalypse are explicitly to the heavenly temple (11:19; 14:15,17; 15:6–8; 16:1,17). This begins in 11:19, where the heavenly temple opens, marking a new stage in the heavenly drama having acute effects on earth. Interestingly 15:5–8 includes the language, "the temple of the tent of witness in heaven." Blount concludes that the reference to the "tent of witness" is another indication of the text's intention to point its readers back to the formative period of Israel's history when God led them in the wilderness from Egypt to Canaan, an example of the "protology in eschatology" which we will demonstrate more systematically later in this chapter.[164] The picture in 15:8 of the heavenly temple choked with smoke until God's wrath is expended may be related to the fiery demise of a reported 1,000 zealots who made their last stand in the temple during the Roman conquest.[165] These references all describe the heavenly temple as the launching point for the judgments on unbelieving humanity. This coheres with my view that the book was written in large part to comfort the faithful in light of the destruction of the capital city

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[162] Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, 272.

[163] Beale, *Revelation*, 570–571; M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 143; Boxall, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 161; G. B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine*, 2nd ed., BNTC (London: Black, 1984), 132; Keener, *Revelation,* 287-289; Craig R. Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Yale Bible 38A (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 495; Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, rev. ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 213; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment,* 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 99.

[164] Blount, *Revelation: A Commentary*, 291.

[165] Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 594–595.

and its temple which were so strongly associated with the Jewish Messiah they have decided to follow. This comfort is consummated by the assurance in 21:22 that in the new Jerusalem there will be no need for a temple for "the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb" will be its temple, replacing the mediated presence of God in the earthly temple with the real presence of Almighty God and God's Messiah.

John is provided a vision of a future for the followers of the Jewish Messiah which is no longer bound to the Jerusalem temple. This revelation moves its hearers beyond the previous understanding that gentiles would assemble in the pre-destruction Jerusalem to hail the king of a restored Israel and become adherents to the Mosaic law. This study argues further that Revelation proposes an enhanced understanding of the kingdom of the Messiah as not just a Davidic Jewish kingdom, but the kingdom of God and God's Messiah, populated by a multinational, multicultural, multilingual citizenry whose varied witness represents the fullness of the glory of the incarnate divine messiah. To fully appreciate the evidence for this re-envisioned kingdom, it is important to discern another aspect of the apocalyptic genre demonstrated in the Revelation to John. John's Apocalypse follows other apocalyptic literature in drawing on protology, the study of beginnings, to establish its eschatology, teachings about end things.

Protology and Eschatology in Revelation: An Apocalyptic Tool of Comfort and Reassurance

"Urzeit gliech Endzeit:" The Overarching Theme

Hermann Gunkel coined the phrase "*Urzeit gliech Endzeit*" meaning "beginning-time equals end-time" in establishing that biblical eschatology anticipates a recapitulation of primordial realities in the consummation of history. Bernhard Anderson discusses this "beginning and end" typography in his book "Creation versus Chaos."[166] The book of Revelation revisits the foundational[167] history of the Jewish people in order to address concerns about the end of history. This motif is typical of Jewish apocalyptic literature in general and of biblical eschatology in particular. John Goldingay and David Aune both point out the recurrence of imagery from the foundational biblical tales in the book of Revelation.[168] We see this illustrated in John's Apocalypse at numerous points.

The First and the Last.

At the outset, John reports that God declares "I am the Alpha and the Omega," (Rev 1:8) using the first and last letter of the Greek alphabet to assert his status as beginning

[166] Bernhard W. Anderson, "Creation and Consummation," in *Creation versus Chaos: The Reinterpretation of Mythical Symbolism in the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 114-119.

[167] This study specifies "foundational" as opposed to "primordial" in that this Apocalypse was written to comfort followers of Christ in the wake of the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in 70 CE. See Blount, *Revelation: A Commentary*, 8. As such, there was a need to address the loss of the Temple and their capitol city.

[168] John Goldingay, *Genesis*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Pentateuch (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2020), 14; and David Aune, "An Intertextual Reading of the Apocalypse of John," in *Apocalypticism, Prophecy and Magic in Early Christianity: Collected Essays*, WUNT199 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 120-149.

(Genesis) and end (Eschaton). John goes on to report a vision of the exalted Jesus, "When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he placed his right hand on me, saying, 'Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades'" (Rev 1:17–18). In 2:8, he introduces the words of Jesus by again saying, "These are the words of the first and the last, who was dead and came to life." So at the outset, the book introduces and repeats the theme of the beginning (protology) and the end (eschatology). This foreshadows this theme among the several to be found in John's Revelation, that God is recapitulating and redeeming that which was accomplished in God's creation of the earth and its peoples, and in the election of Israel.

This theme persists until the culminating scenes of the book, where God is depicted declaring, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end" (21:6a). Similarly, as Revelation is ending, Jesus announces, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (22:13). The theme of the end revisiting the beginning is demonstrated powerfully in these declarations. This study will focus on the creation narratives, the tales of national formation, as well as the etiological account of Gen 11:1–9 as the protological context for the eschatological treatment of "the nations" in John's Apocalypse.

The First Creation Account.

Gen 1:26–27 God's creative activity in this account reaches its zenith in the formation of human beings.

> Then God said, 'Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over the cattle and over all the wild animals of the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.'
>
> So God created humans in his image,
> in the image of God he created them;
> male and female he created them.

Human beings were created as bearers of the *imago dei*.

The Fall of Humanity

In Gen 3, we are told of the intrusion of sin into God's good creation via the deceptiveness of the serpent (Gen 3:1–15). He does so by enticing Adam and Eve to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which God had forbidden (Gen 2:9, 16, 17). This results in their being expelled from the garden of Eden, lest they eat from the tree of life and "live forever" (Gen 3:22–24). The tree of life and the serpent factor heavily in the portrayal of the eschaton in John's Apocalypse.

The Tree of Life

In the letter to Ephesus, the very first letter of those to the seven churches, Jesus is recorded as promising "To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God" (Rev 2:7b). The allusion to the creation story

of Gen 2, and the transgression described in Gen 3 with its resultant loss is clear. Jesus is offering eternal life to those who "conquer" by renewing their love for him and doing deeds that align with that love (Rev 2:4–5).

The climax of the book emphasizes the value of the tree of life. In Rev 22:2 we read of the tree of life on either side of the river of life, bearing twelve kinds of fruit monthly, with the leaves of the tree providing "healing of the nations." This emphasis is underscored by the promise in Rev 22:14a, "Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the **tree of life** and may enter the city by the gates" and by the warning of 22:19, "if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away that person's share in the **tree of life** and in the holy city, which are described in this book." The tree of life is part of the ultimate reward of the faithful and the most devastating loss for those who will be condemned.

The Serpent

The Serpent, who in the account of Gen 3 beguiles Eve, is referred to at least four times in John's Apocalypse. As chief and persistent antagonist, he is explicitly identified as the "great dragon" (12:9) who in 12:13–17 pursues the woman who has given birth to the messianic child (12:1–6) and later pursues the people of God (12:17).[169] He is named "the devil" in 12:12, making clear that the contest described in the book is between God

[169] Craig Koester suggests that the sun-crowned woman as the personification of the people of God, both Abrahamic Covenant, and New Covenant, Koester, *Revelation*, 560; Blount sees this woman as a tensive symbol of both Eve and Mary, the mother of Jesus. Blount, *Revelation: A Commentary*, 225. Other scholars consider the woman to be a figure of the church, Israel, or Jerusalem. See Collins, *The Apocalypse,* 88; Catherine Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World* (Boston: Beacon, 1996), 64; Boring, *Revelation*, 152-153; Mounce, *The Book of Revelation,* 231-232; Boxall, *The Revelation of St. John*, 176.

and his Messiah on one side and Satan, the beasts, and the forces of pagan empire on the other.[170] Satan's intent to incite human beings to rebel against God's rule has been constant since the Garden of Eden (Gen 3). The dragon/serpent/Devil will meet his penultimate end in 20:2–3, being bound for 1000 years, before being dealt with for all time in 20:10. As the personification of evil, his role in human history is depicted in violent, vile symbols throughout this apocalypse. The readers/hearers of John's apocalypse are given multiple clues to evil's earthly incarnation in their day—the Roman Empire.[171]

The Incursion of the "Sons of God"

Gen 6:1–4. This episode is dealt with almost in passing in the Genesis account, yet it stands as a reference to heavenly beings invading the earthly sphere, mating with human women, thereby sowing chaos and wickedness in their wake. This tale is given more full expression in 1 Enoch 18–21 and 86.[172] In Rev 9:1–2 we read of a "star that had fallen from heaven." This fallen star, which ancient mythology associates with fallen angels, is given power to open the "bottomless pit," unleashing horrors on the earth. This recapitulation of the incursion of the "Sons of God" is a brief reminder that the legends of the ancient past are active and will be resolved in this eschatological vision.

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[170] Blount, *Revelation: A Commentary*, 229.

[171] Blount, *Revelation: A Commentary*, 213.

[172] I Enoch 19:1 reads, "And Uriel said to me, 'There stand the angels who mingled with the women. And their spirits – having assumed many forms – bring destruction on men and lead them astray to sacrifice as to gods until the day of the final judgment, in which they will be judged with finality.'" George W. E. Nickelsburg and James C. VanderKam, *1 Enoch: The Hermeneia Translation*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2012), 39.

The Exodus

As a founding narrative of the children of Israel, no account is more important than that of their supernatural deliverance from captivity in Egypt, and their conquest of the land of Canaan. There are at least two referents to the exodus which can be observed in John's Apocalypse.

The plagues

Exod 7:14–12:32. The plagues which persuaded Pharoah to let the children of Israel leave Egypt were dramatic and sensational. The redeployment of plagues in Revelation is graphic and unequivocal. The reader encounters an extended description of the seven plagues in Rev 8:6–14:20. There are seven bowls poured out which trigger plague-like effects in 16:1–21. The troubles of these final days of earth's travail are described as "plagues" in Rev 18:4, 8.

1. The fact that there are seven plagues, not ten, has prompted much speculation.[173] Blount and Boesak see it as reflecting a liberation motif, while Keener describes it as deliverance.[174] The parallel to the Egyptian exodus, the catastrophic manifestations which occurred at that time, and the hard-heartedness of Pharaoh (Ex 4:21; 7:13; 9:12, 35; 10:1; 14:8) are revealed in refusal to repent by "the dwellers on earth" in the account of the Apocalypse of John (Rev 9:20–21; 16:9,11).

[173] For an extended discussion of the history of ten versus seven plagues, see Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 494-507.

[174] Blount, *Revelation: A Commentary*, 166; Boesak, *Comfort and Protest*, 76; Keener, *Revelation,* 390.

2. This allusion makes the reader aware of the manner in which God is forging and calling out a new people, albeit one which is grafted into the old one (see Romans 11:17–24).[175] This seems to be a significant clarification of the messianic expectations of much of first-century Judaism.[176] As has been noted by many scholars, some 1st C Jewish thought was focused on Hebrew bible passages that focused on the wealth of the nations being gathered to Israel in a restored kingdom (Isa 45:14; Micah 4:13; Zeph 2:9). Others anticipated gentile nations being subservient to Israel (Isa 49:23; Micah 7:17). Some looked forward to the destruction of the Gentile nations (Isa 54:3; Micah 5:10-15; Zeph 2:10). In the book of Revelation, the destruction of Jerusalem and the dispersion of the people is being likened to the time of bondage under the Egyptian empire, with eschatological restoration being framed as an Exodus from the Roman Empire.
3. As with the plagues of Egypt, the dangers, difficulties, and deaths, are real. The peril to God's people persists, yet faith and faithfulness are presented as resulting in a sure and enduring reward.

[175] The persistence of Israel in God's plans is made clear in the references to the twelve tribes, which will be explored shortly.

[176] E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 1st Fortress Press ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 218-221.

The Twelve Tribes

While the twelve sons of Jacob/Israel are principal characters in Gen 34–50, their descendants only become fully developed clans during the Egyptian captivity. While the leadership of Moses is received by the "elders of Israel" in Exod 3–4, they are not designated as "tribes" until Exod 24:4. The subsequent history describes the loss of the northern tribes to Assyrian conquest in 722 BCE, with no apparent return recorded (2 Kgs 15–17; 1 Chr 5). The southern tribes of Judah, Benjamin, and the remnant of Levi who returned from the Babylonian exile (Ezra, Nehemiah) are ultimately scattered by the Roman destruction of 70 CE. While I contend that this tragedy has come to pass by the time Revelation is written, it records a vision of 12,000 "out of every tribe of the people of Israel" in 7:4–8. While commentators disagree as to whether these are Jewish believers in Jesus or gentiles constituting a "spiritual Israel,"[177] the notion that the twelve tribes still have significance is both visionary and supernatural. There are five scenes in Revelation noting the presence of twenty-four elders sitting on twenty-four thrones in the heavenly court, although the identity of these elders is not specified (Rev 4:4–10; 5:8; 11:16; 14:3; 19:4). Aune notes that this assembly may be a reference to the twenty-four orders of priests which we see delineated in 1 Chr 23:6; 24:7–18, citing Völter, Charles, Beasley-Murray, and Mounce.[178] Yet, as Blount points out, in Rev 21:12–14 the new Jerusalem is described as having twelve gates inscribed with "the names of the twelve tribes of the Israelites," as well as twelve foundations on which the "names of the twelve

[177] Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 460-461.

[178] Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 288-289.

apostles" are found.[179] It is therefore reasonable to conclude that these "twenty-four" elders occupying the thrones in the heavenly court are composed of twelve representatives of the twelve tribes with the remaining twelve representing the apostles. It is of note that the text indicates that all of these representatives are Children of Israel, denying any rationale for supersessionism. Gentile followers of Jesus are grafted into an Israelite kingdom, led by a Davidic messiah.

The Priesthood

Also, we see in John's Revelation the messianic kingdom described as a reconstituted or reconfigured priesthood, in which each member serves as a priest (Rev 1:6; 5:20; 20:6[180]). This renewed priesthood seems to have differentiated roles as the language concerning "angels of the church…" suggest an identifiable leader of each of the seven churches addressed in Revelation (Rev 1:20; 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14), as well as the highly visible role of the twenty-four elders discussed in the previous paragraph. As just discussed, the twenty-four elders suggest that this messianic kingdom is comprised of a reassembled Israel in combination with the persevering church. This coheres with our view that the book of Revelation was written to comfort the early followers of Jesus in the wake of the destruction of Jerusalem, its temple, and the disruption of the priesthood

[179] Blount, *Revelation: A Commentary*, 146.

[180] Revelation 20:4–6 speaks of those who have been martyred, specifically by beheading, due to their testimony of Jesus serving as "reigning" "priests." The identity of these saints is much debated, often as a derivative of the interpreter's view of the 1000 years mentioned in Rev 20:1–6. While this study is not focused on this chapter of John's Apocalypse, I hold to a figurative reading of this scene. See Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1104-1108; and Eke Wilfred Onyema, *The Millennial Kingdom of Christ (Rev 20, 1-10): A Critical History of Exegesis with an Interpretative Proposal*, TGST 198 (Roma: Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 2013), for a fuller description of the challenge of interpreting this chapter.

which had served in that temple—the locus of Jewish worship to which the first believers in Jesus anticipated his return.

Jerusalem and its temple

After his anointing as king of all Israel, David conquers Jerusalem, establishing it as his capital (2 Sam 5:6–10). From this point forward, Jerusalem serves as the political and psychological center of Israel.[181] A corollary to this focus was the Jerusalem temple, which as we noted earlier was constructed by Solomon (1 Kgs 5–8), rebuilt by Ezra and expanded under Herod. Again we emphasize that the city and its temple were central to the identity of the Jewish people. In Rev 3:12, we read in the message of Jesus to the church in Philadelphia, "If you conquer, I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God; you will never go out of it. I will write on you the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name." In light of my premise that Jerusalem and its temple lie in ruins after the Roman conquest of 70 CE, one of Revelation's first reassurances is that faithfulness secures one's presence in God's temple and an identification with the new Jerusalem which God will provide.

[181] This centrality is troubled once the Northern Kingdom secedes in the reign of Rehoboam (1 Kgs 12). Yet after the destruction of the northern capitol, Samaria, and the deportation of the northern tribes by Assyria (2 Kgs 17), Jerusalem became the sole focus of Jewish worship and aspiration.

The Temple

In keeping with the temple theme we identified in the opening chapter of the book, numerous allusions to the temple percolate to the surface of the narrative visions of John's Apocalypse.

Jerusalem

In the same scene in which the temple is "measured", we read "do not measure the court outside the temple; leave that out, for it is given over to the nations, and they will trample over the holy city for forty-two months" (11:2). This apparent penultimate reference to the "old" Jerusalem portrays its being handed over to the gentiles for three and one-half years, which Aune suggests is "a symbolic apocalyptic number for a divinely restricted period of time,"[182] in keeping with its usage in the book of Daniel (Dan 7:25; 12:7). The message seems to be, "Rome may dominate for a season, but it will not last forever." The old Jerusalem seems to be in view one final time in 20:9, in which a final conflict with Satan and his forces featuring Gog and Magog are described. A supernatural deliverance is foretold, in which the enemies of God are defeated once and for all.

At the end of John's Revelation, the new Jerusalem descends from heaven, massive and beautiful (21:2, 9–27). God's presence will be manifest, as is that of Jesus, and the nations will bring their glory and honor within it. Citizenship in the holy city is the reward of the faithful, while those who refuse God's grace will be excluded (22:14, 18–19).

[182] Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 609.

***The Tower of Babel* (Gen 11:1–9)**

I have placed this tale at the end of our discussion of protology leading to eschatology, as it is pivotal to this study. The story of the origin of the peoples of the world, with their linguistic and cultural diversity, notes the arrogance and rebelliousness of those assembled. God responds, confusing their language so that they no longer understand one another, scattering them over the face of the earth.

The posture of Israel to "the nations" (Greek, τὰ ἔθνη; Hebrew, הַגּוֹיִם) from the time of the patriarchs through the first century is exceedingly complex.[183] For our purposes that which is of primary importance is the variety of eschatological expectations which were regnant in first-century Judaism.

In his 2006 monograph, Ronald Herms takes a deep dive into this question, tracing the apocalyptic traditions which form the backdrop of the composition of Revelation.[184] Herms suggests that Ps 2 had come to be interpreted messianically in *Psalms of Solomon*, as well as in the New Testament.[185] He performs his study with frequent references to Ps 2 as shaping Revelation's visionary world, and interprets Rev 2:27 as defining the "narrative trajectory" of the book.[186] Psalm 2 invokes a vision of

[183] For a detailed discussion of the complexity of Jewish attitudes toward the fate of the nations in the eschaton, see E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 213-218.

[184] Ronald Herms, *An Apocalypse for the Church and for the World: The Narrative Function of Universal Language in the Book of Revelation*, BZNW: Bd. 143 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006).

[185] Herms, *An Apocalypse for the Church and for the World*, 179. Herms sees Ps 2 being interpreted messianically in Matt 3:16–17; Mark 1:10–11; Luke 3:21–22; Acts 4:24–28; Heb 1:5; 5:5; 7:28.

[186] Herms, *An Apocalypse for the Church and for the World*, 37, 38, 61, 125, 276, 178-179, 180, 181, 187, 204, 214, 239, 240, 254, 259, 261.

violent subjection of the nations by "the Lord and his anointed" (Ps 2:2), declaring that this king will "break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel" (Ps 2:9). Herms sees this connection as being declared in Rev 2:26–27, where the NRSV translates the text, "To everyone who conquers and continues to do my works to the end, I will give authority over the nations, to rule them with an iron scepter, as when clay pots are shattered." Herms sees this aspect of the messianic king's relationship to the nations underscored in Rev 12:5 in the account of the sun-crowned women who gives birth to the one "who is to rule all the nations with a scepter of iron."[187] Jon Morales translates the last part of this text "to *shepherd* them with an iron scepter" (my emphasis), making the case that the messianic king of Revelation is providing a benevolent rule over those individuals from (and kings of) the nations who acknowledge his sovereignty.[188]

A lacuna in Herms's treatment of the Hebrew Bible's view of the fate of the nations is Ps 102:18–22, where we read,

> Let this be recorded for a generation to come, so that a people yet unborn may praise the Lord: that he looked down from his holy height, from heaven the Lord looked at the earth, to hear the groans of the prisoners, to set free those who were doomed to die, so that the name of the Lord may be declared in Zion and his praise in Jerusalem, when peoples gather together, and kingdoms, to serve the Lord.

We will return to this text later in our study, but at this point it serves to point out that there is another, more benevolent dimension to the Hebrew Bible's understanding of the destiny of the nations of the world. The record, or testimony, as to God's dealings with Israel is being recorded as a witness for "a people yet unborn" that their praise may be

[187] Herms, *An Apocalypse for the Church and for the World*, 164, 179.

[188] Morales, *Christ, Shepherd of the Nations*, 45. Morales spends the entirety of Chapter 3 (45–69) providing historical critical evidence supporting this translation.

added to Israel's "when the peoples gather together, and kingdoms, to serve the Lord." This supports our thesis that part of what the book of Revelation is communicating is the superiority of the future laid out for the people of God in a new Jerusalem, which has no temple, nor need of one (Rev 21:22). I am arguing that this theme of the nations being gathered to worship God and God's Messiah moves through the text of Revelation alongside the description of the rebellion and ultimate condemnation of the dragon, Babylon, and those whom the dragon deceives. This is powerfully illustrated by the two ways in which four-fold descriptions of diversity are deployed throughout the text of Revelation.

The Four-fold Descriptions of Diversity

On six different occasions John reports seeing visions involving a four-fold adjectival formula for universality and diversity, such as when we read "every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev 5:9; 7:9; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; and 17:15).[189] As we discussed briefly in Chapter 1, the elements of these four-fold descriptions vary, but their purpose remains a matter for interpretation. Aune suggests that this universal language is intended to point out: a) the manner in which, even in the first century, believers in Jesus were drawn from a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, multi-national milieu;[190] b) the reality that the messianic community is receiving adherents from a globally diverse audience,

[189] The descriptors and their order varies from instance to instance, with "kings" substituted for "tribe" in 10:11, and "multitudes" substituted for "tribe" in 17:15. A detailed analysis of this variation will appear in chapter 4.

[190] Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, 361-362.

underscoring a particular component of Jewish messianic expectation and, c) that all on the planet will have the opportunity to accept or reject the gospel (εὐαγγέλιον). [191]

The "Nations"

In Rev 15:4b we read "All nations will come and worship before you." In the description of the new Jerusalem we read, "The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it" (Rev 21:24) And "People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations" (21:26).

In these four-fold descriptions of ethnic, national, linguistic, and cultural diversity, as well as the references to "the nations" the book of Revelation repeatedly alludes to the Babel incident, indicating that a reversal is being worked in the unfolding of the eschaton. While Gen 11 records the scattering of the nations, the miracle of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–13) portends the gospel being proclaimed to every people group, and Rev 5:9 and 7:9 celebrate the diversity generated thereby, and the witness that is created by that diverse multitude's multicultural praise. Later in Revelation these four-fold phrases describe the universality of captivity to the wiles of the serpent and his minions in 11:9, 13:7 and 17:15. Yet, 14:6 makes clear that the opportunity to repent will be extended to this same multinational throng encompassing the entirety of the earth. And ultimately, every nation on earth will worship their creator, according to 15:4, as well as 21:24 and 26.

Herms argues that these four-fold formulae must be viewed in their respective contexts within Revelation in order to ascertain their proper meaning and significance.

[191] Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 827.

Herms also broadens his consideration to include other terms such as "Kings of the earth," and "inhabitants of the earth" with a view to reckoning with the universality of salvation, a topic which Richard Bauckham has famously and controversially addressed in *The Climax of Prophecy*. Herms concludes his study by pointing out the narrative purpose of these instances, which draw heavily on Hebrew scripture for its imagery. He emphasizes the "Universal Constitution of the People of God," and their significance for the "Christological Identity" revealed in Revelation.[192] Jesus is presented as the "King of kings" and "Lord of lords" (Rev 17:14; 19:16), encompassing all the varieties of distinction to be found among humanity. Yet, Herms comes short of highlighting the missional and ecclesiological significance of the four-fold diversity seen in the multitude described in Rev 7:9

Summary

This chapter has sought to support the view that Revelation was written to comfort and encourage the followers of a Jewish Messiah in the wake of the destruction of his capital city, Jerusalem, and the temple which was the expected center of the worship of Yahweh which the Messiah would generate. This analysis is consistent with a later date for its composition (c. 95 BCE) which has become a widely though not universally held view among scholars of the book of Revelation. The temple-related imagery, as well as the disclosure of and emphasis on the heavenly temple appear to be intended to address the trauma introduced by the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. An additional dimension of the Apocalypse of John's strategy to provide reassurance and perspective is the way in

[192] Herms, *An Apocalypse for the Church and for the World*, 259-260.

which it draws on protology in order to elucidate its eschatology. The intent to redeem and reclaim the primordial creation of the diverse peoples of the world becomes a significant reframing of the destiny of the Jewish people and of the ultimate victory of the Messiah. This dimension of John's Revelation will be explored more fully in the following chapters.

A Decolonial African American hermeneutic highlights the liberative potential of an anti-imperial, paracletic reading of Revelation. The devastating loss of Jerusalem and its temple as the center of Jewish identity would have created a crisis of epic proportions. What does it mean to anticipate the return of a Davidic king of Israel without a capital city? How does one worship Yahweh with no temple on which to focus and in which to practice that worship? The dispersion of the Jews by the Roman Empire which followed would have been equally disorienting to the religious, cultural, and spiritual life of the early followers of Jesus. The overwhelming application of imperial power demonstrated in the Roman destruction of the Jewish nation, the geographic dislocation foisted on all Jews, including those who were the core of the early Jesus movement, and once dispersed, the constant pressure to conform to the ways and values of the oppressor understandably created the existential crisis described by Pablo Richard.

The protology repeatedly alluded to in Revelation would call those who hear or read the book to recognize God's creative, electing power. The foundational narratives of humanity and the children of Israel underscore God's ability to deliver his people from oppression, whether that oppressor be ancient Egypt, Babylon, or (for John's audience) the ever-present Roman Empire. Jerusalem may be in ruins, but a new one is being prepared. The temple may be no more, but the true temple is still in operation in heaven.

The nation of Israel may have been dispersed and decommissioned as a political entity, but God is doing a new thing in the nations of the world.

The losses incurred by those early Jewish Christians and their gentile converts to "the Way" (Acts 9:2; 18:25, 26; 19:9,23; 22:4; 24:14,22) are redolent of the catastrophe of American chattel slavery. Perhaps dislocated first-century believers in Jesus echoed their ancestors experiencing the Babylonian captivity, as my ancestors did, "How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" (Ps 137:4) Yet John records a vision repeatedly punctuated with hymns of praise of the God who will one day make things right.[193]

My enslaved ancestors found comfort in the words of John's Apocalypse, with its talk of "streets of gold" (Rev 21:21) and "a land of perfect day" (Rev 21:23–25),[194] often alluding to the scenes John portrays.[195] The hymns of praise and words of comfort recorded in Revelation found a ready audience among those oppressed by the "Christian" civilization into which they were thrust as objects of economic and sexual exploitation. As Allen Callahan documents, the spirituals resound with echoes of the book of Revelation, such as refrains celebrating "the Lamb."[196] In the spiritual "He is King of Kings" we hear the words of John's apocalypse:

King of kings, Lord of Lords, (Rev 17:14; 19:16)

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[193] The hymns of praise to be found in Revelation are Rev 4:8, 11; 5:9-10, 12-13; 7:10-12; 11:15, 17-18; 19:1-2, 6-8.

[194] Charles Tindley, "We Will Understand it Better By and By" (1905) in Hymnary.org. https://hymnary.org/text/we_are_often_tossed_and_driven_on_the#Author, accessed 3/30/2024.

[195] Songs such as "I Want to be Ready" where we find, "John said the city was just foursquare…And he declared he'd meet me there." John Work, *American Negro Songs and Spirituals*. (New York, Bonanza Books, 1940), 50, which is a clear allusion to Rev 21:16.

[196] Callahan, *The Talking Book,* 238.

Jesus Christ the first and the last, (Rev 1:17; 2:8; 22:13)
No man works like Him.
He pitched his tent on Canaan's ground,
No man works like Him,
And broke the Roman kingdom down;
No man works like Him.[197]

Another example is "My Lord, What a Mourning:"

You'll see my Jesus come,
To wake the nations underground, (Rev 20:12)
Look in my God's right hand,
When the stars begin to fall (Rev 6:13).[198]

There are at two additional examples which in their respective cases reflect the yearning for a day when the oppressor will be called to account for his deeds, such as "Judgment:"

King Jesus sittin' in the kingdom, Lord, (Rev 7:17)
Oh, How I long to go there too;
The angels singin' all round the throne, (Rev 5:11; 7:11)
Oh, how I long to go.[199]

And "Oh, the Rocks and the Mountains:"

Oh, the rocks and the mountains shall all flee away, (Rev 6:12-17; 16:20-21).
And you shall have a new hiding place that day.[200]

The book of Revelation casts a compelling picture of the kingdom of God, one which is inclusive of all peoples, radical in its affirming inclusion of national, ethnic, and linguistic differences, and which highlights the potential for each people to add its glory

[197] Callahan, *The Talking Book,* 193, citing "He is King of Kings" in R. Nathaniel Dett, ed., *Religious Folk-songs of the Negro as Sung at Hampton Institute* (Hampton, VA: Hampton Institute Press, 1927), 145.

[198] Callahan, *The Talking Book,* 196, citing "My Lord, What a Mourning" in, *Religious Folk-songs,* 157.

[199] Callahan, *The Talking Book,* 196, citing "Judgment" in Dett, *Religious Folk-songs*, 158.

[200] R. Nathaniel Dett, *Religious Folk-Songs of the Negro as Sung at Hampton Institute*. Hampton, VA: Hampton Institute Press, 1927. Repr., (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1972), 161.

to the revealed glory of the incarnate son of God. This study will delve more deeply into the ecclesiological, christological, and eschatological significance of this particular expression of protology in subsequent chapters. John's Apocalypse presents to his audience a future for their movement which transcends the grief and trauma experienced in the loss of Jerusalem and its temple. Our next chapter will delve into the seminal texts of Revelation concerning "the nations" before we turn to the innovative ecclesiology and the implied theological anthropology of John's Apocalypse.

CHAPTER 4 - EXEGESIS OF THE FOUR-FOLD FORMULAE IN THE CONTEXT OF REVELATION'S MESSAGE

After establishing our African American Decolonial hermeneutic, having described the manner in which the book of Revelation communicates its theological claims, and making the proposal that the book was occasioned by the need to comfort the early Jesus movement in the aftermath of the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, we turn to its content concerning the "nations."[201] To do so it is necessary to set the context of the range of expectations among the Jews of the 1st century concerning an anticipated messiah's dealing with the nations.

Foundational Canonical Texts

As has been stated, the relationship between the inheritors of the promise to Abraham and "the nations" proves to be complex and deeply problematic. At least three postures can be identified in the canonical scriptures.[202] One is seen in those scriptures, as early as the initial promise to Abraham in Gen 12, which declare that the election of what would become Israel (Exod 19:5, 6) is for the purpose of blessing all peoples. God's pronouncement of his intentions for Abraham's descendants is culminated with "…in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Gen 12:3). This aspect of the election of the children of Abraham is clearly and repeatedly stated. (Gen 18:18; 22:18; 26:4) This

[201] For the purposes of this study, "nations" will be assumed to refer to either *goyim* (גּוֹיִם) when quoting the Hebrew scripture or to *ethnos* (τὰ ἔθνη being its plural form) when quoting the Greek Christian scriptures unless otherwise specified.

[202] As Herms notes (Herms, 18), Aune includes a fourth possibility—exclusion of the nations from a restored and ascendant, revengeful Israel, citing Is 11:10–16 and Philo, *On Rewards and Punishments*, 164–172 (Aune, *Revelation* 17-22, 1172). I see Aune's "second strand," as a subset of my third posture.

"blessing" is later defined as the nations coming to worship the one true God, Israel's God. This theme is repeated at least eight times in the Psalms (Ps 18:49; 22:27; 57:9; 86:9: 96:3; 102:15; 117:1). Psalm 67:1–4 is yet another representative passage. "May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, *Selah* that your way may be known upon earth, your saving power among all nations. Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you." It appears at various points in the prophets, as well, (Isa 2:2-5; 42:6; 49:6; Jer 4:2; Mic 4:2; Zech 2:10–12; 8:13; 14:16), with Is 25:6–8 illustrating this theme.

> On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples
> a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,
> of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.
> And he will destroy on this mountain
> the shroud that is cast over all peoples,
> the covering that is spread over all nations;
> he will swallow up death forever.
> Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces,
> and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,
> for the Lord has spoken. (Isa 25:6-8)

A second posture, which emerges in the story of the exodus, the conquest of Canaan, and the Mosaic Law makes clear the call for the children of Israel to avoid intermarriage with "the nations" which they are displacing (Deut 7:3–6), and to studiously avoid the religious practices of those nations (Lev 18:24; 20:23; Deut 12:2, 30; 18:9–14; 29:18; Josh 23:6, 7, 12; Jer 10:2). This admonition is tethered to a promise, explicated as early as Gen 49:10, that the nations will "obey" the Israelites, and Israel will "rule over them" (Deut 15:6). The descendants of Israel will be elevated "above all the nations of the earth" (Deut 28:1). This confidence is reflected in several psalms, the liturgical songbook of ancient Israel (Ps 2:8), as well as in the prophetic tradition (Isa 14:2; 60:3). For instance, Ps 2 reads:

Why do the nations conspire
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the LORD and his anointed, saying,
"Let us burst their bonds apart
and cast their cords from us."
He who sits in the heavens laughs;
the LORD has them in derision.
Then he will speak to them in his wrath
and terrify them in his fury, saying,
"I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill."
I will tell of the decree of the LORD:
He said to me, "You are my son;
today I have begotten you.
Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage
and the ends of the earth your possession.
You shall break them with a rod of iron
and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel."
Now therefore, O kings, be wise;
be warned, O rulers of the earth.
Serve the LORD with fear;
with trembling kiss his feet,
or he will be angry, and you will perish in the way,
for his wrath is quickly kindled.
Happy are all who take refuge in him (Ps 2:1-12).[203]

A third posture, seen in the Psalms and the prophetic traditions, calls for God to judge the nations, or enact revenge upon them (Ps 9:19–20; 59:5; 79:6, 10; 110:6; 149:6–8; Isa 34:1–2; Jer 10:24–25; 35:31; Joel 3:2). Various prophetic oracles seem to weave these three themes into a single fabric. Isaiah suggests that the "servant of the Lord," later interpreted to be Jesus by his followers, will provide justice "for the nations" (Isa 42:1–3). Zeph 3:8–9 suggests both the judgment of the nations by God and the conversion of those nations to "serve him with one accord." In Isa 2 the nations are described as

[203] Ronald Herms sees Psalm 2 as a controlling text in the mind of the author of Revelation. The complexity we are documenting here must be accounted for and leads me to a somewhat different conclusion than Herms.

"streaming to" Mount Zion (Isa 2:2). Yet in Isa 13 we read an oracle which declares, "The Lord of hosts is mustering an army for battle. They come from a distant land, from the end of the heavens, the Lord and the weapons of his indignation, to destroy the whole earth" (Isa 13:4b–5). Zech. 14:3 records "Then the Lord will go forth and fight against those nations as when he fights on a day of battle." The text proceeds to report "And the Lord will become king over all the earth; on that day the Lord will be one and his name one" (Zech 14:9). In 14:14b we read, "And the wealth of all the surrounding nations shall be collected: gold, silver, and garments in great abundance."[204] And yet in Zech 14:16 the oracle predicts that "Then all who survive of the nations that have come against Jerusalem shall go up year after year to worship the King, the Lord of hosts, and to keep the Festival of Booths."

As we will see, this complex picture is reproduced in Revelation, as the primordial tales of the origins of the peoples of the world are revisited, and the final reconciliation of the peoples of the earth is described with a mixture of blessing of the nations by God, judgment of the nations by God's Messiah, and ultimate worship of God and God's Messiah by the nations.

The Hebrew Bible seems to reflect a partial and fleeting fulfillment of the notion of Israel's ascendance relative to the nations during the reign of Solomon (I Kgs 4:34). Yet, Solomon himself violated the prohibition against marrying foreign women and adopting their religious practices, to which is attributed the subsequent decline of Israel

[204] This aspect of the prophetic tradition has strongly influenced many interpreters of Rev 21: 24, 26 as we shall see in chapter 5 of this study, as it touches directly on our thesis.

(1 Kgs 11:1–3). Later kings of both Judah and Israel are cited as failing to abhor the religious practices of the peoples which they had displaced in Palestine (1 Kgs 14:24; 16:3; 2 Kgs 17:8–11, 33; 2 Chr 28:3; 33:2; 36:14; Ezek 5:5–8). The subsequent conquests of the Northern Kingdom of Israel by Assyria followed by Judah's fall to Babylon are similarly attributed to the unfaithfulness of their rulers and their people (1 Chr 5:25–26; 2 Kgs 15:29; 18:11–22; 24:18–20).

Even with those warnings and eventual judgment, the Deuteronomic History points out the irony of God using Israel, "a stiff-necked people" (Exod 33:3, 5; 34:9; Isa 42:21–25), to reveal to the nations the folly of worshipping other gods, which are declared to be false" (Deut 32:21). The judgments being declared against Israel in third Isaiah suggests that these judgments will serve a missionary purpose, as the dispersion of the Jews allows the proclamation of the glory of the God of Israel "among the nations" (Isa 66:19).

The prophet Jeremiah's call is not just to Judah, but as "a prophet to the nations" (Jer 1:5). Deuteronomy proleptically suggests that God's discipline of the children of Israel will involve nations and peoples which were unknown to those who had escaped slavery in Egypt (Deut 28:49–50).

Messianic Expectations

The messianic oracles in the prophetic tradition preserve this complexity. Micah 5 describes a messianic figure who will restore and strengthen the children of Israel. Micah 5:3-4 records,

> Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. And

> he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth,

and continues in verse 7 with, "Then the remnant of Jacob, surrounded by many peoples, shall be like dew from the Lord, like showers on the grass, which do not depend upon people or wait for any mortal." Micah's prophecy continues, describing Israel's ascendance over their historic enemies (Mic 5:5–6, 8–9), yet that ascendance requires faithful worship of Israel's God (Mic 5:10–14), and concludes with the promise that God will "execute vengeance on the nations that did not obey" (Mic 5:15).

Zechariah declares that "Many nations shall join themselves to the Lord on that day and shall be my people, and I will dwell in your midst. And you shall know that the Lord of hosts has sent me to you" (Zech 2:11). The prophet continues by describing other nations as eager to learn of and follow the God of Israel (Zech 8:21–23).

In so called "Second" Zechariah,[205] Zech 9:9–10, to which all four gospels refer when describing the entrance of Jesus to Jerusalem on a donkey, declares that the Messiah will "command peace to the nations" and exercise authority "to the ends of the earth." Yet later in the same text, Zechariah writes "On that day I will make Jerusalem a heavy stone for all the peoples; all who lift it shall grievously hurt themselves. And all the nations of the earth shall come together against it" (12:3), and "I will seek to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem" (12:9).

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[205] Daivd L. Peterson, "Zechariah" in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha: An Ecumenical Study Bible* Coogan, Michael David, Marc Zvi Brettler, Carol A. Newsom, and Pheme Perkins, eds. Fully revised fifth edition. (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 1357.

Zechariah concludes his oracle by describing a final confrontation in which "the Lord will go forth and fight against those nations as when he fights on a day of battle" (14:3). In the verses that follow a dramatic and phantasmagoric scene is painted in which those opposing God and his armies (14:5) are subjected to a supernatural plague (14:12), resulting in the conversion of "all who survive of the nations" to worship of the true God and the gathering of their wealth to Jerusalem (14:14, 16), and curiously, the extension of ceremonial purity to the entirety of Judah (14:20–21).

Similarly, Isaiah describes a final confrontation with the "kings of the earth" (Isa 24:21–23). Later "the wealth of the nations" is depicted "coming" to a regathered Israel in the context of worship by the nations (Isa 60:4–6, 10–12). Isaiah 61, from which Jesus reads at the inauguration of his public ministry (Luke 4:16–19), revisits the theme of economic blessing of a restored Israel, declaring "you shall enjoy the wealth of the nations, and in their riches you shall glory" (Isa 61:6). As we shall see, Revelation revisits these canonical oracles in its vision of the future for the followers of "the Lamb" of Revelation.

Apocalyptic Visions of the Nations in the Eschaton

Ronald Herms surveys four apocalyptic works from the intertestamental period, as well as the book of Tobit. He deems Tobit to be focused on the restoration of a faithful Israel, with gentile inclusion a possibility, but not a certainty.[206] Herms read the Similitudes of Enoch as similarly emphasizing the judgment and mercy of Israel's God, without

[206] Herms, *An Apocalypse for the Church and the World,* 76–77.

inferring universal salvation,[207] while 4 Ezra is characterized as a theodicy which actually truncates universal language in order to project the salvation of a quite limited "remnant."[208] Of the texts Herms reviews, only the Animal Apocalypse seems to suggest a form of universal salvation, incorporating "the nations" in its eschatological conclusion.[209]

The Animal Apocalypse, found in the collection of apocalyptic intertestamental period literature, 1 Enoch, recounts human history in the form of an allegory featuring various animals as representatives of humans and human populations. Ironically, these animals are depicted as taking human form at various points, yet the events of biblical history are identifiable in the tale. Many connections to Revelation are to be found within it, suggesting that at points in the text of Revelation, John was alluding to the Animal Apocalypse in addition to the canonical scriptures we have identified. These include a reference to "stars" falling from heaven (Rev 8:10; 9:1; 1 Enoch 86:1-3; 88:1), being cast into an abyss (Rev 20:3; 1 Enoch 88:1; 90:24), a throne room scene with sealed books (Rev 5:1-9; 6:1-12; 8:1; 1 Enoch 90:20), and a final scene in which "the wild beasts and all the birds of heaven" representing gentile nations are transformed to "white cattle" representing those who worship the "Lord of the sheep," the God of Israel (1 Enoch 90:37-38; Rev 21:24-26). In other words, as in the Animal Apocalypse, Revelation contains a message of eschatological conversion of a remnant or portion of the nations who previously opposed Israel.

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[207] Herms, *An Apocalypse for the Church and the World,* 98.

[208] Herms, *An Apocalypse for the Church and the World,* 120.

[209] Herms, *An Apocalypse for the Church and the World,* 134–135.

In the intertestamental period, it is interesting to note that most apocalyptic literature seems to support a militaristic interpretation of Messiah's rule.[210] Yet, Bauckham notes the juxtaposition to be found in the throne room scene in Rev 5:1-7.

> Then I saw in the right hand of the one seated on the throne a scroll written on the inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals, and I saw a mighty angel proclaiming with a loud voice, "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it. And I began to weep bitterly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. 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."
>
> Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered, with seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. He went and took the scroll from the right hand of the one who was seated on the throne. (Rev 5:1-7)

Here we read of "the Lion of the tribe of Judah" (Rev 5:5) being a slaughtered Lamb (Rev 5:6) combining the image of a conquering king with that of a ceremonial sacrifice, creating, in Bauckham's words "*conquest* by sacrificial death."[211] As such, Jesus is depicted and forecasted as forging a different relationship with the non-Jewish peoples of the world. Our study will overview the book of Revelation with a focus on those texts which utilize a four-fold formula for diversity to discern what meaning they hold for the followers of one whose conquest comes via his crucifixion particularly as it concerns the non-Jewish world.

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[210] Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, 210–213.

[211] Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 215.

The Four-fold Formulae in Canonical Perspective

As Ronald Herms has pointed out, the four-fold formulae are, along with "the nations" designation, ones which are "flexible and ambiguous."[212] There are multiple appearances of these four-fold descriptions of diversity (Rev 5:9; 7:9; 10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:15).[213] Four-fold formulae are used at various places in the book to denote a universal audience, sometimes in the context of judgement. They vary in their formulations in the following ways:

Verse	Greek	English
5:9	φυλῆς καὶ γλώσσης καὶ λαοῦ καὶ ἔθνους	tribe and language and people and nation
7:9	ἔθνους καὶ φυλῶν καὶ λαῶν καὶ γλωσσῶν	nation and tribe and people and language
10:11	λαοῖς καὶ ἔθνεσιν καὶ γλώσσαις καὶ βασιλεῦσιν	peoples and nations and language and kings
11:9	τῶν λαῶν καὶ φυλῶν καὶ γλωσσῶν καὶ ἐθνῶν	peoples and tribes and languages and nations
13:7	φυλὴν καὶ λαὸν καὶ γλῶσσαν καὶ ἔθνος	tribe and people and language and nation
14:6	ἔθνος καὶ φυλὴν καὶ γλῶσσαν καὶ λαόν	nation and tribe and language and people
17:15	λαοὶ καὶ ὄχλοι εἰσὶν καὶ ἔθνη καὶ γλῶσσαι	Peoples and multitudes and nations and languages

In the case of 5:9 and 7:9, the context makes it clear that these instances of four-fold formulae refer to God's faithful. While three of the four words in these formulae are consistent, the fourth varies.

[212] Herms, *An Apocalypse for the Church and the World,* 38.

[213] Herms, *An Apocalypse for the Church and for the World*, 176-177.

This pattern seems to be drawn from the book of Daniel, where we see three-fold[214] formulae for universality deployed (Dan 3:4, 7; 4:1 [3:31MT]; 5:19; 6:25; 7:14).

Verse	**Aramaic (BHS)**	**Greek (from the LXX)**	**English**
3:2 LXX only		τὰ ἔθνη καὶ φυλὰς καὶ γλώσσας	nations, tribes and languages
3:4	עַמְמַיָּא אֻמַיָּא וְלִשָׁנַיָּא	ἔθνη καὶ χῶραι, λαοὶ καὶ γλῶσσαι	Peoples, nations, and languages (MT) nations, lands, peoples, and languages (LXX)
3:7	עַמְמַיָּא אֻמַיָּא וְלִשָׁנַיָּא	τὰ ἔθνη, φυλαὶ καὶ γλῶσσαι	peoples, nations, and languages (MT) nations, tribes, and languages (LXX)
4:1	עַמְמַיָּא אֻמַיָּא וְלִשָׁנַיָּא (3:31MT)	πᾶν ἔθνος καὶ πᾶσαι φυλαὶ καὶ πᾶσαι γλῶσσαι (3:96 LXX)	To all peoples, nations, and languages (MT) To each nation, and all tribes, and all languages (LXX)
4:37a LXX only		ὁ λαός μου, τὸ ἔθνος μου καὶ αἱ χῶραί μου	my people, my nation, and my land
4:37b LXX only		ἔθνεσι καὶ χώραις καὶ γλώσσαις	Nations, lands, and languages
5:19 MT only	עַמְמַיָּא אֻמַיָּא וְלִשָׁנַיָּא		peoples, nations, and languages
6:25	עַמְמַיָּא אֻמַיָּא וְלִשָׁנַיָּא	τοῖς ἔθνεσι καὶ χώραις καὶ γλώσσαις (6:26 LXX)	peoples, nations, and languages nations, lands, and languages (LXX)
7:14	עַמְמַיָּא אֻמַיָּא וְלִשָׁנַיָּא	ἔθνη τῆς γῆς	Peoples, language and nations (MT) Nations of the earth (LXX)

In Daniel, their deployment underscores the comprehensiveness of the proclamations being made and the rule exercised by the Babylonian and Medo-Persian kings.

[214] And one four-fold formula in the LXX for Daniel 3:4.

The LXX translation of Daniel introduces a shift in the usage of the word ἔθνος. Elsewhere in the LXX, ἔθνος is most often used to translate the Hebrew גוי, representing "nation" or "people," with several nuances depending on context. In such instances it is often synonymous with "tribe" or "clan," and is frequently used to refer to any group which does not follow the God of the Children of Israel.[215] In this regard, ἔθνος should not be understood as corresponding to the modern understanding of "nation" as a political nation-state, most often containing multiple people groups who in some cases speak different languages.

The Hebrew phrases behind the LXX versions of Daniel's three-fold formulae do not contain the term גוי, nor its cognates. As such, the inclusion of ἔθνος in these formulae does seem to indicate a group who are united in allegiance and identity in some way other than kinship (φυλη), and focuses the reader on the universality of the proclamations, not their religious identity, or affiliation. As we shall see, this dynamic seems to be carried forward in Revelation's adoption and adaptation of Daniel's means of denoting universality, or in the case of Revelation, particularity within universality.

Within the sweep of the Daniel text, 7:14 also shifts the focus to "one like the Son of Man" (KJV) and to the expansive nature of this figure's authority, seemingly in direct reference to the claims made by the earthly rulers who are described in the court tales of Daniel 1–6. In the allusion-rich environment of Revelation, it is clear that these formulae have been chosen, in part, to invoke the Son of Man scene from Daniel, as well as to connect "the Lamb" of Revelation to this appellation which was the most frequent self-referent utilized by Jesus during his earthly ministry as described in the gospel tradition

[215] BAGD, "ἔθνος," 218.

(e.g., Matt 8:20; Mark 2:10; Luke 6:5; John 1:51). This connection is made explicit in Rev 1:13.

Exegesis of the Four-fold Formulae in Context

The book of Revelation proceeds from a declaration of its nature as an apocalypse (Rev 1:1–3), to a standard epistolary greeting (1:4–6), closed by an addendum to the greeting which discloses the unique multi-vocality of the prophetic message to be delivered. In the book, we hear from God the Father (10:8; 16:1, 17), God the Son (1:10–13; 1:17–3:22), God the Holy Spirit (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6,13, 22; 14:13), and from a range of angels (5:2, 11; 7:2; 11:15; 14:9, 15, 18; 19:7), all in the context of John's first-hand report.

The greeting itself coheres with my operating assumptions concerning the occasion for the book, in that John cites those aspects of the messianic expectation that would have been challenged by the historical circumstances. The greeting of "Grace and peace to you from 'he who is,' and who was, and is still to come" (1:4), repeated in slightly modified form in 1:8 provides assurance to John's readers that God will act, in the form of Jesus coming back, despite the delay in the Parousia. In writing, "and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth" (1:5a) John reminds them that Christ himself is a witness,[216] as his followers are called to be; that his resurrection holds the promise of eternal life for his followers, and that Jesus is, despite those who wield earthly power in the meantime, ultimately, the ruler of the kings of the earth. This greeting continues with an explicit affirmation of the Parousia (1:7), and a declaration of the timelessness of God, with God the Father using

[216] We will explore the critical nature of the theme of "witness" more extensively in Chapter 5.

the title “Alpha and Omega” which Jesus claims in 22:13. This self-identifying declaration repeats the modifier, “who is still to come” (1:8). This greeting reflects an intent to assure John’s readers that God will visit them in due time, that Jesus is the true ruler of the world, and that he is, indeed, coming back despite the contraindications they are seeing and experiencing.

John returns to describing the setting and circumstances of the revelation which he received, asserting a direct commission from the glorified Christ (1:9–20). The explication provided by Jesus of the seven stars and lampstands points to the mystical heavenly realities about to be disclosed. The presence of lampstands in the heavenly temple serves as a reminder that the lampstands which had been found in the now defunct Jerusalem temple were mere reflections of the heavenly reality.[217]

Jesus continues this opening declamation with an immediate turn to the messages for the seven churches (2:1–3:22), which David Aune argues are actually royal edicts, establishing Jesus as the true ruler of John’s audience.[218] This fits with the challenges to be put forth in these letters, in that Jesus claims the loyalty and obedience of his followers despite or in contrast to the claims of the Roman Empire.

In each of the seven letters, Jesus names the specific circumstances being confronted by each assembly in their localities. The overall emphases of Jesus in these letters are: 1) I know you, and what you are facing, hence the repeated οἶδα, “I know…,” 2) those of you who are standing firm in the face of persecution I will reward in due time,

[217] In Exod 25:9, 40; 26:30; 27:8 Moses is repeatedly told to record the “pattern” of the temple, suggesting that the design of the tabernacle is a replica of one he was shown in heaven.

[218] David E Aune. “The Form and Function of the Proclamations to the Seven Churches (Revelation 2–3),” NTS 3.2 (1990): 182-204.

3) those of you whom I must correct, I stand ready to discipline if you fail to receive my correction, and finally, 4) these messages have much broader application than to the specific churches so addressed, reflected in the repeated refrain, "Let him who has ears to hear" (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22).

The concerns of the post-Temple church are alluded to in these letters. The message to Ephesus commends their defense of nascent orthodoxy (2:2–3). Its mention of lampstands underscores the superfluous nature of the Jerusalem temple in light of the role of Jesus as intercessor in the heavenly one (2:1, 5). The message to Smyrna, with its reference to "those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan" (2:9) reflects the growing division between followers of Christ and synagogue-based, rabbinic Judaism.[219] Christianity had heretofore been known as a sect of Judaism but was progressively being excluded from the emerging rabbinic Judaism that was consolidating in the wake of the destruction of the Jerusalem temple.[220] While evidence is too scarce to warrant a hard-edged conclusion as to the decisive events in that alienation, conflicts over imperial tax exemptions appear to have been a contributing factor. Jews were afforded the ability to avoid paying taxes which were associated with imperial cult worship. Gentile converts to Christianity may have sought similar exemption, thereby threatening the privilege which Jews enjoyed.[221] The message to Pergamum addresses persecution

[219] This tension is reflected in a number of passages in Revelation (6:9; 9:20; 13:5, 14–15; 13:43; 14:1; 17:1–2, 17; 18:4, 7–8, 17, 19, 26; 19:8; 22:9; 24:12; 26:11).

[220] James D. G. Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways: Between Christianity and Judaism and Their Significance for the Character of Christianity* (London: SCM, 1991), 219–235.

[221] Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting*. The Biblical Resource Series. (Grand Rapids, MI:W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 2001), 8-12, 169,224-225, n.10.

(2:13), as well as unorthodox doctrine (2:15), and praxis (2:14). The mention of manna (2:17) would assure them of the viability of their pilgrimage in the absence of the temple, as the ark in the temple had held a remnant of the manna the children of Israel ate in the wilderness (Heb 9:4). The words to Thyatira echo the concerns in Pergamum (Rev 2:20, 24), and end with a reassurance of the ultimate Messianic rule of Jesus (2:26–28). The letter to Philadelphia again references "those of the synagogue of Satan…" (3:9).

The letters confirm the concerns listed in our hermeneutically driven conclusions concerning the occasion of the book of Revelation. The text reflects a need to require their adherence to early orthodoxy. There is a desire to encourage them in the face of intermittent persecution, often fueled by their tension with the Jews, yet focused on their non-participation in the imperial cult.[222] Among New Testament scholars a debate persists concerning what, if any, relationship exists between the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and the eventual expulsion of followers of Jesus by rabbinic Judaism.[223]

Once the letters are concluded, John proceeds to recount a series of kaleidoscopic visions of spiritual reality, shifting back and forth between heaven and earth, describing that which has previously taken place, the things that were taking place contemporaneously, and those which will take place leading up to the renewal of the heavens and the earth. The first such vision entails the heavenly throne room (4:1–6:11). The throne itself (4:2) stands in contrast to those of earthly kings, rendering all such

[222] Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 150–151.

[223] A recent foray into this subject is Tucker S. Ferda, "The Messiah of That Most Mischievous Superstition: Jesus and the Parting of the Ways in the Study of Christian Origins," *Early Christianity* 14, 1 (2023): 9-34. Ferda points out the difficulty posed by the paucity of information we have as to the specific events and decisions which led to the complete separation which is later apparent.

rulers, such as Caesar in Rome, as pretenders. God's throne, whether occupied by the Father, and/or by the Son (often in the person of the Lamb), is mentioned thirty-five times in the text of Revelation.[224] In contrast, Satan is only mentioned as having a throne twice (2:13; 16:10), emphasizing by contrast the superiority and durability of God's reign. This is crucial to the book's concerns, given the vulnerability experienced by followers of Christ to earthly authorities, and their understandably disappointed anticipation of Messianic rule (Matt 24:3).

The twenty-four elders who lead worship around the throne are introduced at this point (Rev 4:4). Their identities are not revealed here, nor are they specifically named, yet they appear four more times in the series of visions, always in the context of worship (4:4, 10; 5:8; 11:16; 19:4). I posit that they reflect a fusion of the old and new covenants, revealing God's kingdom as containing both Jews and gentiles, represented by these twenty-four elders, all Jews, twelve of whom which represent the twelve tribes of Israel, with the addition of the twelve apostles. [225] I base this assertion on the highlighting of these two groups in the constituent architecture of the new Jerusalem (21:12, 14). The description of their attire is reminiscent of that of the high priests (Rev 2:4; Exod 28). This is particularly important, as the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple have removed the possibility of priests continuing to function here on earth. On three

[224] The throne of God is mentioned in the following texts: 1:4; 3:21; 4:2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10; 5:1, 6, 7, 1, 13; 6:16; 7:9, 10, 11, 15, 17; 8:3; 11:16; 12:5; 14:3; 16:17; 19:4, 5; 20:4, 11, 12; 21:3, 5; 22:1, 3.

[225] For a survey of the variety of scholarly opinion as to the identity of the elders, see David E. Aune, "Excursus 4A: The Twenty-Four Elders," in *Revelation 1-5*, WBC 52A (Nashville; London: Nelson Reference & Electronic, 1997), 287–314.

occasions, believers are described as priests (Rev 1:6; 5:10; 20:6).[226] Under the Mosaic law, it was only members of the tribe of Levi who were authorized to serve as priests (Num 18). In agreement with 1 Pet 2:5 and 2:9, John is asserting that God has ordained his church to serve as priests in the new reality after the resurrection of Jesus. The temple service is no longer functioning, and according to the book of Revelation (as well as the epistle to the Hebrews), it is no longer necessary. This is the new covenant prophesied by Jeremiah (Jer 31:31–34).

The introduction of the Lamb in Rev 5 provides additional elements of comfort in the wake of the temple's destruction. The sacrificial system executed at the temple is no longer able to be exercised. But by emphasizing the role of Jesus as the "Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29, cf. 1:36), John is again underscoring the obsolescence of the temple ceremonial system. This emphasis is maintained and intensified through the course of the book, as Jesus appears or is specifically referred to as the Lamb thirty-four times.[227]

Yet another comforting reference in light of the absence of the temple is the golden bowls of incense being held by the elders (Rev 5:8). We are told that these bowls, which seem to take the place of the Levitical censers in the earthly temple (Lev 16:11–13), contain the prayers of the saints (Rev 5:8). In this way, believers in Jesus are

[226] In 1:6 he is speaking of believers generally. In 5:10 it indicates that he is talking about a group of martyrs. The same can be said of the 20:6 reference. However, if Augustine's view of the one thousand years is correct, these three audiences can be construed as one.

[227] The lamb appears or is referred to in Rev 5:6, 8, 12, 13; 6:1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 12, 16; 7:9, 10, 14, 17; 8:1; 12:11; 13:8, 11; 14:1, 4, 10; 15:3; 17:14; 19:6.

reassured that their prayers are received in the heavenly temple, whether or not the earthly temple exists in which sacrificial incense could be offered.

Revelation 5:8–12 —The First Appearance of the Four-fold Formulae in Revelation[228]

In the context of this throne room vision, the Lamb receives the scroll, and "the four living creatures, and the 24 elders fell down before the Lamb…" (Rev 5:8) and proceed to sing a "new song" which declares his worthiness to receive and open the scroll based on his having ransomed to God people "from every tribe and tongue and people and nation" (5:9).

Three observations are in order here. First, these redeemed people are emphatically declared to be from beyond the boundaries of Judaism (5:9). Second, they are declared to be a kingdom, "and you made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign upon the earth" (5:10). This suggests a new order which encompasses and transcends the ethnic, national, and political boundaries of the politically defined Jewish kingdom, casting a vision of a renewed covenant community like unto that established in Ex 19:6, "but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation." This covenant people, renewed, expanded, and diversified in Revelation, in keeping with the oracle in third Isaiah (Isa 56:1-8), is the focus of this study. Thirdly, by invoking the Exodus motif, they are declared not merely citizens of this newly conceived kingdom, but priests as well, seemingly as a replacement for the slaughtered and dispersed priests who once served in the Jerusalem temple during the Second Temple period. Here we see the reality

[228] The translations which follow of the seminal passages where four-fold formulae appear (Rev 5, Rev 7) or that speak directly to the fate of that multitude (Rev 21–22:5) are my own.

of the destruction of the capital of the nation of Judah, as well as its temple, addressed by way of identifying a new order in which the Lamb has redeemed, not just Israel, but a representative remnant from all the peoples of the world who are now declared to be priests in the kingdom of the Lamb.

The vision narrative proceeds in chapter 6 with the Lamb opening the first of the seals on the scroll (Rev 6:1). As the seven seals are opened, we see yet other images that reflect the concerns we have listed. The martial images of the first and second seals and their horses would reflect the disturbance experienced by those displaced by the Jewish rebellion, the subsequent Roman destruction of the land and the dispersion of the people of Israel (6:1–4). The third and fourth seals reflect the famine, outbreak of disease, and vulnerability to wild animals that are typical among such displaced populations (6:5–8). Revelation turns these evils back on those who are the enemies of God.

The fifth seal turns the focus to the reality of persecution. Those who had already lost their lives to persecution, such as Antipas of Pergamum (Rev 2:13), are told to be patient until their number is completed (6:11). This serves to comfort the reader with the knowledge that such martyrs are especially precious to God, and that others will follow. The sixth seal reminds the reader that the wrath of the Lamb is indeed coming, at whose advent all the powerful and arrogant of the earth will quail with fear (6:12–17).

Revelation (Rev 7:1–17) —The Second Appearance of these Four-fold Formulae Occurs in Revelation 7:9

Chapter 7 continues the provision of divine perspective on the destruction of Jerusalem and the plunder and razing of the temple. The vision of God withholding ultimate judgment of the earth (7:1–3) is followed by the description of two audiences. These are

the 144,000 Israelites, 12,000 from each tribe, presumably representing the Jewish remnant who acknowledge Jesus as Messiah (7:4–8).[229] These children of Israel seem to provide a counterpoint to those members of a "synagogue of Satan" mentioned in the letters to Smyrna and Philadelphia (2:9; 3:9).

The limited number from Israel acknowledging Jesus as Messiah is juxtaposed with the multitude from the nations which had already begun to respond and which is being prophesied herein to grow to the numberless assembly from "every nation and tribes and peoples and tongues" described in 7:9. Their white robes imply ceremonial purity, which is ironically produced by their having "washed their robes and whitened them in the blood of the Lamb" (Rev 7:14). Again, we see a subversive inversion of imperial logic, as white robes are produced by the blood of the sacrificial "conquest" of the Lamb.

The palm branches in hands of these individuals would call to the minds of his readers the gospel accounts of the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem—the now destroyed city (Matt 21:1–11; Mark 11:1–11; John 12:12–23). Yet, this prophecy declares that the worship of the Messiah will spread widely, yielding "a great multitude, which no one was able to number" (7:9). The description makes clear that those whose suffering allows them to join that chorus will no longer experience the degradations of the persecuted or displaced. There will be no more "hunger or thirst," no more exposure to the elements, "not even the sun or heat will strike upon them," (Rev 7:16) and there will

[229] Scholars all note the absence of Dan from the list and the inclusion of Manasseh in its place. Theories abound as to the source of this alteration of the list of tribes. For a full discussion, see Aune, "Excursus 7B: The Order of the Tribes in Rev. 7:4–8," *Revelation 6-16*, 464–465.

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be no more weeping "because the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and will guide them to the springs of living water, and God will wipe every tear from their eyes (7:17). Then, as now, these words and the images they invoke must have been a compelling comfort to those mourning the agony of their marginal existence in the wake of Jerusalem's decimation, staying their temptation to hopelessness.

Chapter 8 takes up temple imagery once again. An angel approaches the altar with what is called "a great quantity of incense to offer with the prayers of the saints on the golden altar that is before the throne" (8:3). The vision goes on to describe those prayers coming before God and being answered by the trumpeted judgment plagues which follow (8:4-12:12). The seven trumpet plagues themselves seem to correspond to the destruction of the land of Judah (8:6–9–21; 11:15–14:20). The redolence of the plagues of Revelation with the plagues of the Egyptian exodus (Exod 7:14–12:51) evokes several perceptions. First, they suggest deliverance from a torturously oppressive state (Exod 2:23–25; 3:9). Secondly, they predict a "hardening of heart" of the opposing, oppressive power (Exod 3:19). The hardness of heart foreshadowed by the Egyptian plague allusions will be made explicit in the chapters to follow (9:20-21; 16:8-11). Thirdly, they remind the reader that God's power is unmatched, his sovereignty unassailable, and his victory sure (Exod 3:20). Fourthly, they would remind the reader not to engage in the kinds of grumbling, complaining, and disbelief that the ancient Israelites had manifested.[230]

The visions and signs which John encounters in 8:16–9:21 are horrific but serve to suggest that the horrors which his hearers have experienced and may yet encounter are

[230] One of the clear themes of the Exodus story is the repeated disbelief, ingratitude, and tendency to want to return to Egypt. See Ex 5:20, 21; 6:9; 14:10–12; 15:24; 16:2–3: 17:2–3; 32:1–35.

tepid compared to the manifestation of God's wrath to be unleashed on a world which will "not repent of the works of their hands, so that they did not stop worshiping demons and idols … they did not repent of their murders, of their magic spells, of their sexual immorality, or of their stealing" (9:20–21).

Other Appearances of Four-fold Formulae in Revelation

The interlude vision between the sixth and seventh trumpets (10:1–11:15) serves to reaffirm John's prophetic commission (10:8–11), but also to emphasize that there are matters concerning the sequence and unfolding of events which will remain hidden (10:1–4). Yet, the centerpiece is an affirmation that "the mystery of God will be fulfilled" (10:5–7). This would provide profound reassurance in times of uncertainty and disappointment for his readers, while acknowledging the inscrutability and perplexing nature of the circumstances they confront. In 10:11 the four-fold formula is cast neutrally, as John is told in his commission that he "must prophesy again about many peoples and nations and languages and kings."

The sense in which a diverse multitude is described shifts to the negative in 11:9, as the formula is used to describe those gloating over the dead bodies of the two witnesses. "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 over them, celebrate, and exchange presents, because these two prophets tormented the inhabitants of the earth" (Rev 11:9–10). The identity of the two witnesses is disputed, although in our narrative figurative reading, the

idea of them being the church and Israel is a plausible interpretation.[231] The identification of the witnesses as "the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth" (Rev 11:4) seems to connect them to the lampstands of the churches in Rev 1:20. Israel is referred to as "A green olive tree, fair with goodly fruit," in Jeremiah 11:16. Zechariah 4 corresponds even more closely to the Rev 11 account of the witnesses, where we read that Zechariah is wakened from sleep by a vision about which the following conversation is recorded:

> He said to me, "What do you see?" And I said, "I see a lampstand all of gold, with a bowl on the top of it; there are seven lamps on it, with seven lips on each of the lamps that are on the top of it. And by it there are two olive trees, one on the right of the bowl and the other on its left." I said to the angel who spoke with me, "What are these, my lord?" Then the angel who spoke with me answered me, "Do you not know what these are?" I said, "No, my lord." He said to me, "This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of hosts. (Zech 4:2-6)

This allusion would remind John's audience of the crisis faced by Ezra in rebuilding the temple in the wake of the Babylonian captivity as recorded in the book of Ezra. The Babylonian connection discussed elsewhere would be reengaged by this allusion and connects the early church's discouragement over the loss of the temple with the account in Ezra. Additionally, they are reminded that their lack of power relative to Rome is of no consequence to God (Zech 4:6).

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[231] See Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 575–63, for a discussion of the interpretive possibilities of the two witnesses. As was stated in chapter 3, our interpretive lens views Revelation as an uncovering of what is taking place "behind the veil" in the supernatural realm. The characters and events recorded therein are largely figurative and allegorical, not necessarily historical figures. A prime example of characters and events which are hard to read as being literal appears in the next chapter, Revelation 12. Another instance of data that is difficult to read literally is the measurements of the new Jerusalem, which is a 12,000 stadia [1,380 miles] cube (Rev 21:16). I am interpreting the book as revealing symbolically what God has been doing in the past, what God is doing in the author's present, and what is taking place in God's dealings with humankind as history moves towards the eschaton in figurative and allegorical terms.

Finally, the allusion connects with the reality of the early church, for the latter part of Zech. 4 includes:

> For whoever has despised the day of small things shall rejoice and shall see the plummet in the hand of Zerubbabel. "These seven are the eyes of the LORD that range through the whole earth." Then I said to him, "What are these two olive trees on the right and the left of the lampstand?" And a second time I said to him, "What are these two branches of the olive trees that pour out the oil through the two golden pipes?" He said to me, "Do you not know what these are?" I said, "No, my lord." Then he said, "These are the two anointed ones who stand by the Lord of the whole earth." (Zech 4:10-13)

The existence of the early church as a marginalized minority both in the Roman Empire, and even in the context of 1st C Judaism would seem a "small" position. Yet, the book of Revelation is drawing them toward a future where multitudes of various nationalities and languages will embrace their beliefs. Admittedly, Revelation's alluding to the Zechariah passage is reinterpreting it and shaping it in light of the emerging reality of the early Jesus movement, but this is entirely consistent with the way Revelation deploys scriptural data in its allusive approach.

In Chapter 12 we read the story of the sun-clothed woman who most commentators interpret as a figurative depiction of Mary the mother of Jesus, or the church, or possibly Israel, or perhaps all three in the figurative, allegorical world of the Apocalypse of John. In any case, the narrative describes a cosmic conflict between the woman and her child, clearly a messianic figure (Rev 12:5), and the dragon/devil/Satan (Rev 12:9). The echoes in verses 1–6 of the birth of Jesus, the slaughter of the innocents, and the flight to Egypt are unmistakable (Matt 2). The dragon represents earthly pretentious political power, such as that wielded by Rome and its regent, Herod. The heavenly war described in verses 7–12, and the description of the dragon's war on the

woman's other children are an allegorical description of the subsequent persecution of the church, made even more clear by the summary that they war against "those who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus" (12:17). This apparent overview of the effort of the evil one to disrupt the plan of God to provide a crucified conqueror is a fitting overview of the contest that was continuing in the reality of the early followers of Jesus in the aftermath of the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple.

Chapter 13 continues the historical allegory, with the aggressive opposition of the earthly powers graphically personified in the beast (13:1–8), which recapitulates and reconfigures the beasts in the apocalypse of Daniel (Dan 7:3–7). A clear call to persevere under persecution is sounded in 13:9–10. The cryptic identification of the number 666 has been interpreted in many ways, most of which point to some form of reference to Nero or some other Roman emperor (13:18).[232] Once again, we see a warning not to concede to the empire, or its required religious practices. In 13:7 the beast is given authority over the multi-ethnic, multi-lingual multitude. "Also, it was allowed to wage war on the saints and to conquer them. It was given authority over every tribe and people and language and nation, and all the inhabitants of the earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slaughtered" (Rev 13:7–8). Again, the text implies that those who are entered into the citizenship roles of the kingdom of the Lamb as embedded within this diverse population.

[232] For an extended discussion of the history, sources, and interpretation of these images, see Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, "Excursus 13A: The Nero *Redux* or *Redivivus* Legend"; "Excursus 13B: The Eschatological Antagonist"; "Excursus 13C: 666 and Gematria," 737–773.

Chapter 14 repeats the affirmation of the faithful, whether they encounter God's grace under the old or the new covenant. The 144,000 appear again (14:1–5). I suggest that, while they are described as having different characteristics from the 144,000 in chapter 7, they, too, represent the faithful remnant of Israel. Here they are described as first fruits, suggesting they are the initial, faithful generation of followers of Jesus, virtually all Jews (Acts 1 and 2). This description of the old covenant contingent is immediately followed by the three angels proclaiming the gospel to all the people living on earth (14:6–11). In other words, the writer reports a vision which reaffirms that Israel is not rejected, and that the church is increasingly adding more and more people from the entire earth. And here there is a second explicit call to bear faithful witness in the face of persecution, even if it results in one's death (14:12–13). The second angel introduces an evolving oracle against "Babylon the great city!" This pronouncement of Babylon's doom will be further developed in chapters 16 and 17, and even more thoroughly in 18. The chapter closes with the two harvests, which make clear that God is going to hold people accountable for their decisions and deeds in this life (14:14–20). The use of the four-fold formula in 14:6 seems somewhat neutral, as it is used to describe the audience of the angel's proclamation, which is a call to "Fear God and give him glory" (Rev 14:7). This implies that the audience still has a choice of whom to follow, as those hearing the angel's message are given the option to respond. The exhortation is characterized in the text as a "call for the endurance of the saints…" (Rev 14:12), repeating the Rev 13:7-8 suggestion that those saints are embedded within "every nation and tribe and language and people" as delineated in verse 6.

Chapter 15 reiterates the theme that God's temple in heaven is still in place and fully operational (15:5–8). The sign of the seven angels who deliver plagues on the earth is heralded with the "song of Moses" (Rev 15:3,4; cf. Exod 15:1–8). The "glory of God," now absent due to the temple's destruction, now is observed in its eternal home, the heavenly temple (Rev 15:8). These are crucial connections with the Israelite heritage of his readers, whether genealogical or spiritual, and accentuate the fulfillment of the Jerusalem temple's purpose in Jesus.

The plagues of chapter 16 once again revisit additional plagues of Egypt (Exod 7–12). The plague of sores (Rev 16:2) reflects the sixth plague (Exod 9:8–12). The plagues of the sea and the fresh waters turning to blood (16:3–4) echoes the first plague (Exod 7:14–25). The plague of darkness reproduces the ninth plague (Exod 10:21–29). The frogs unleashed during the sixth plague of Revelation (16:12–16) are reminiscent of the second Egyptian plague (Exod 8:1–13). The hail which follows the earthquake of the seventh plague in Revelation (16:17–21) revisits the seventh plague of Egypt (Exod 9:13–35) as well as one of the miracles of the conquest of Canaan by Joshua (Josh 10:11). Additionally, the repeated notation of the refusal to repent (Rev 16:9, 11) echoes the hardening of Pharaoh's heart in the Egyptian exodus story.[233] In all these ways the readers of John's Apocalypse are connected to God's old covenant acts, and how they will color his final act of fulfilling the new covenant—despite the destruction of the temple and its city.

[233] Pharaoh is portrayed as repeatedly refusing to let the Children of Israel go, despite God bringing a series of increasingly horrific judgments on the land and the people of Egypt (Exod 4:21; 7:3, 13, 14, 22; 8:15, 19, 32; 9:7, 12, 34, 35; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8, 17).

As I alluded to in my comment on chapter 13, many theories have been proffered from antiquity until the present day as to the identity of the seven heads and ten horns on the beast carrying the woman Babylon in chapter 17. I will not attempt to sort them out in this study. What is apparent is that the locus of the vision's condemnation is the Roman Empire. Rome is famously situated on seven hills (17:9). The fact that "Babylon" refers to Rome is made abundantly clear in that Rome ruled over "the kings of earth" at that point in history (17:18). An additional pointer to Rome as Babylon is that the greatest sin of the woman Babylon is her being "drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of those who testified to Jesus" (17:6). So, we see the writer alerting his readers that persecution is to be expected from Rome and its tributary kingdoms, and that those kingdoms will have a fractious relationship with the empire (17:16). Nevertheless, ultimately, Jesus and His followers will be victorious (17:14). This perspective is particularly valuable considering the dispersion of the Jews, including Jewish followers of Jesus, in the wake of Jerusalem's destruction. This would place these early Christians in a position of greater vulnerability to the political intrigues which plague the relationships of the provinces to Rome, as well as reflecting the varying nature of the hostility to be experienced by their fellow believers from region to region. All of these dynamics cohere with the descriptions of the "the beast," "the woman" and the "kings of the earth." The final appearance of the four-fold formula is in 17:5, where John is told by the angelic interpreter that the waters on or by which the woman Babylon is seated in 17:1 "are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages." In 17:5 the exploitative nature of empire is depicted as extractive relative to the four-fold multitudes. This particular aspect of empire is named in its extreme form in the lament of chapter 18

where the “sins” (18:4) of Babylon include commerce in “slaves—and human lives” (Rev 18:13).

The Ecclesiological Content of Revelation.

As we have established, the Apocalypse of John was addressed to the ἐκκλησίαις, local πόλεις which are the instantiations of the kingdom of the Lamb. We will briefly revisit the ecclesiology on which we have touched in order to establish the rich ecclesiological content Revelation contains, as represented by but not limited to the 7 letters addressed respectively to 7 churches in chapters 2 and 3. This Apocalypse’s ecclesiology is not confined to these two chapters, as the book begins and ends with clear references to and images of the church, with abundant allusions throughout. John’s Apocalypse presents a view that the church of Jesus Christ is both local and transcendent, characterized by obedience to the teachings of Jesus, resistance to earthly powers, and a commitment to both holiness and an uncompromising witness.

Context

The Seven Letters

The Apocalypse is addressed specifically to the seven ἐκκλησίαις in Asia. As Boring points out, “ἐκκλησία is also a hermeneutical bridge word with deep roots in Gentile culture. It was used in classical Greek tradition and Hellenistic culture for the assembly of full citizens of the city-state, where decisions were made that shaped the political and

economic life of the city."[234] In labeling them in this manner, John is treating each city's assembly as a local deliberative community, which shared a common life and whose membership had clear boundaries, specific privileges, and delineated responsibilities. The letters address the real-time issues faced by these local congregations, while the apocalyptic content which follows the letters provides a spiritual montage describing the dynamics and outcome of the struggle in which they are engaged.

These "churches" are addressed in the plural, which reveals a recognition of the particularity of these assemblies. While later imagery will emphasize the universality (catholicity) of the church, the specific addresses of chapters 2 and 3 are contextual. The decoding of the vision supplied in 1:20 makes clear that there is a discrete reality of these churches represented by their "stars" being the angels of the respective churches, while the "lampstands" represent the churches themselves. At the same time, Jesus is described as "ruler of the kings of the earth" (1:5), his followers as "a kingdom" (1:6), and John describes himself as sharing in "the kingdom" along with his audience (1:9). These images and identifiers combine to form a picture of an alternative, spiritual kingdom composed of multiple local ἐκκλησίαι which in their particularity are tasked to reflect the identity and pursue the interests of the kingdom of "the Living One" (Rev 1:18). The connection between these churches and all who follow Christ is apparent in the closing declaration of the letters, "Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches" (Rev 3:22).

[234] M. Eugene Boring, "'Jesus' Call to Decision Implies an Ecclesiology'—The Church in the Theology of the Apocalypse." *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 45.2(2018,): 113–26, 123.

The letter to Ephesus (2:1-7) reveals a concern for right teaching. The content of that teaching is not clear, but the admonition to return to a "first love" suggests a devotional emphasis, in addition to a doctrinal one. The address to Smyrna (2:8-11) discloses the tension between these followers of Christ and the local Jewish synagogue. The message to Pergamum (2:12-17) demonstrates the possibility of martyrdom in its reference to Antipas (2:13). It also includes a marker of the community in its denunciation of participation in idol worship and "playing the harlot," suggesting compromise of a spiritual morality for the sake of earthly pleasure such as eating meat which had been sacrificed to idols (2:14). Again, in the letter to the church at Thyatira, we see the rejection of the practice of such culinary practices (2:20). Chapter 3 continues the emphasis on spiritual purity, as some of the Sardinians are affirmed for not having "soiled their garments" (3:4). The church in Philadelphia is commended for maintaining their testimony of Jesus despite opposition from the Jewish synagogue (3:8-9). The condemnation of the church in Laodicea is based on complacency. Their relative material prosperity and lack of local opposition seems to have resulted in an inability to perceive their own mediocrity (3:17-18). While it is not clear what their lack may be, the emphasis on testimony in the other letters may suggest that the Laodicean Christians had failed to use their prosperity to give testimony to Jesus.

It should be noted that the leadership of the churches themselves is not described. We will address the leadership role of the 24 elders in the heavenly visions (4:4,10; 5:5-14; 7:11-13; 11:16; 14:3; 19:4) later in our analysis. There are no hierarchies, local offices or organizational structures identified or referred to in these letters. The only instance of an individual asserting or exercising authority over others is the "woman

Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess" (2:20) who is clearly presented negatively.[235] The author refers to himself initially as "his servant John, who gives witness" (1:1), simply "John" in verse 4 [and again in 22:8], and then "John, your brother" (1:9), eschewing any hierarchical title. In the context of the book's emphasis on the non-necessity of the now defunct temple, it having been merely a shadow of the heavenly reality, the author seems to be suggesting that the Jewish priesthood, which would have been his audience's liturgical assumption, is now superfluous. Rather, they comprise a kingdom of priests (1:6; 5:10).

In summary, these seven letters convey that these churches are defined by their testimony to Jesus, their refusal to participate in idol worship or the fruits thereof, and their willingness to endure rejection by Jews who do not accept Jesus as their Messiah. These are the boundaries which were established in the context in which these churches functioned. No specific mention is made of imperial harassment apart from the martyrdom of Antipas (2:13). However, the prevalence of such is made clear in the chapters to follow.

An assessment of the terminology and language used in the subsequent apocalyptic visions reveals more about how John defined the church. The specific use of the word ἐκκλησία ceases until the end of the book (22:16). However, there are multiple words and phrases used to refer to the followers of Jesus in the montage of scenes which follow.

[235] Additionally, she is condemned for the content of her teaching and not specifically criticized as a woman asserting spiritual authority.

Characteristics of the Citizens/Members of the Kingdom

As we have surveyed the seven letters, several terms are used repeatedly to define and demark membership in the kingdom. Their use continues through the course of John's Apocalypse. These terms identify those who "obey" or "keep" the word of Christ, functioning as his "holy" "servants" or "slaves" who "conquer" by the word of their "testimony" or "witness."

τηροῦντες

"keep, obey, observe" appears 11 times in John's Apocalypse, with 3 of them in the ordinary sense of "remaining" (3:10; 8:12; 16:15). The other 8 instances are in reference to keeping "the words of this book" or to keeping God's commands (1:3; 2:26; 3:3, 8, 10; 12:17; 14:12; 22:7, 9). The author is emphatic that observation of God's commands and the teachings of Jesus are crucial identifiers of followers of Jesus and required of members of the ἐκκλησία.

δούλοι

"servants, slaves" in the plural is used eight times to refer to faithful followers of Jesus (1:1; 2:20; 6:11; 7:3; 19:2, 5; 22:3, 6). The word, which modern translators often translate "servant," is more literally "slave," indicating that the church is comprised of those who have pledged absolute fealty to Jesus as their Lord, or master. The use of the plural makes clear that the Lord views his people as a collective, not as a conglomeration of individuals. It is used in the singular only twice, in both cases by the angelic guide in

refusing John's worship, referring to himself as a "fellow servant" (19:10; 22:9), with two additional plural uses in reference to "his servants the prophets" (10:7; 11:18).

νικῶν

"The one who conquers" appears ten times in reference to the followers of Jesus (2:7, 11, 16, 17; 3:5, 12, 21; 12:11; 15:2; 21:7). This decidedly militant term is used of the first rider of the seven seals (6:2), and of the enemies of God twice (11:7; 13:7). The Lamb of God is predicted to "conquer" his foes in 17:14. John's characterizations of followers of Christ make clear the oppositional posture in which maintaining "the testimony of Jesus" places one relative to the powerful empires and governments dramatically and symbolically represented in 37 mentions of a "beast" and in 12 of the 19 the reference to the "nations" of this world. He sees following Jesus as incompatible with the idolatrous practices utilized to express support for the Roman empire, and that such resistance is not passive, but produces victory. To be clear, this victory is like unto the victory of Jesus, involving the death of the one conquering (2:8, 10; 3:21; 5:9; 6:9, 11).[236]

ἁγίων

"holy ones" or "saints." This substantive adjective describes those whom God has designated as holy. It is used twelve times (5:8; 8:3, 4; 11:18; 13:7, 10; 14:12; 16:6; 17:6; 18:20, 24, and 20:9), often in conjunction with prophets and martyrs. The term underscores the high moral expectations placed on followers of Jesus, as well as the distinctiveness of their lifestyles. To be a follower of Jesus, a member of one of the

[236] Boring, "Jesus' Call to Decision," 126.

ἐκκλησιῶν, was not a casual commitment. The saints are described as being conquered by the "beast from the sea" in chapter 13:7, while the ultimate destiny of the saints is to be vindicated by God (18:20).

μαρτυρίαν

"Witness" and "Testimony" are grouped together, in that both English words are used to translate the same Greek root. It is also the root from which we derive the word "martyr." In its various forms and cognates, this word is used 15 times in the Greek text.[237] Two of these uses are in reference to Jesus (1:5; 3:14), two are of the enigmatic two witnesses of Rev. 11. One refers to the "tent of testimony" in the heavenly temple (15:5). Ominously, the majority of the appearances of the word are in the context of persecution and death, culminating in the identification of those whose testimony had cost them their lives being rewarded by being granted rule during the one-thousand-year reign of Christ (20:4). Brian Blount observes that this activity of "witness" is one of resistance to the orders of evil which rule this world in the time before the Parousia.[238] We will return to this responsibility of the followers of Jesus in chapter 5, for, in agreement with Brian Blount, I see its numerical prevalence as in indication that this aspect of Christian identity is the through-line of the book of Revelation.

An intriguing juxtaposition is manifest in the phrase "a kingdom (βασιλείαν), priests (ἱερεῖς) to his God and Father" (1:6). This notion of a kingdom of priests occurs in

[237] Rev 1:2, 3 ,5 ,9; 2:13, 3:14; 6:9; 11:1, 3, 7; 12:11, 17; 15:5; 19:10; 20:24.

[238] Brian Blount. "The Witness of Active Resistance" pages 28-46, in David M. Rhoads, *From Every People and Nation: The Book of Revelation in Intercultural Perspective*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2005), 37-42.

4 places (1:6; 5:10; 20:4-6; 22:3-5) and resonates with I Pet. 2: 5, 9. In Revelation, the idea is embedded with consistent testimony and explicitly related to martyrdom in chapter 20. This imagery would be particularly relevant to a Jewish Christian audience, wrestling with the destruction of the temple and the impossibility of Old Covenant sacrifices, as well as the dissolution of the limited sovereignty enjoyed prior to the Great Revolt of 66-73 CE.[239] It establishes the ability of the church to intercede as priests and rule this new, alternative, spiritual kingdom. We will return to the question of leadership when we discuss the 24 elders of Rev 4, 5, 7, 11, 14 and 19.

Secondary descriptions

Less frequent terms invoked to describe the faithful are "brothers" (4 instances), expressing the manner in which citizenship in the kingdom of God renders its members as kin. The phrase "those written in the Lamb's book of life" (3 instances), suggests the centrality of the sacrifice which Jesus had performed, as well as the judgement he and he alone is entitled to exercise. The church collectively is referred to as the "bride," which occurs 4 times at the end of the apocalypse (19:7; 21:2, 9; 22:17). The "bride" language echoes Song of Songs, as well as Eph. 5:27 and II Corinthians 11:2. We will consider the implications of the new Jerusalem in greater detail later in our study.

An additional feature of the church in John's heavenly visions is the cultural, ethnic and national diversity demonstrated in the multiple deployment of four-fold descriptions of diversity (5:9; 7:9).[240] Four-fold formulae are used elsewhere in the book

[239] De Villiers, "Entering the Corridors of Power," 38-39.

[240] Ronald Herms, *An Apocalypse for the Church and for the World*, 176-177.

to denote a universal audience, usually in the context of judgement (10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:15). In the case of 5:9 and 7:9, the context clearly indicates that these instances of four-fold formulae refer to God's faithful. For the reader of these words the confusion of languages and sundering of culture communicated in Genesis 11:1-9 is undone, and the miracle of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-12) is consummated. God's kingdom does not obliterate the cultures of the world but transcends and unifies them, as Zizioulas and Orsy affirm.[241] This reality is central to our argument and will be addressed in more detail later in this chapter.

Analysis in light of 21st Century Ecclesiological Discourse

The Apocalypse of John reveals a distinctive view of the church, perhaps one which sees the catholicity of the church in terms other than the singular form, ἐκκλησία. His preferred term of reference for what we now call the universal church is "the kingdom" (βασιλείαν).[242] He consistently uses the plural form of the term, ἐκκλησίαι, unless he is addressing a local congregation specifically, suggesting that he views the local assemblies as local *poleis* of a spiritual kingdom, earthly local instantiations of a mystical transcendent reality. Afanasiev reflects this understanding in his assessment that early churches were autonomous and independent.[243] This view of the church as an alternative "kingdom" to those of earthly rulers coheres with that articulated by N.T.

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[241]John Zizioulas, "The Institution of Episcopal Conferences: An Orthodox Reflection." *The Jurist* 48 (1988): 376-83, 382; Ladislas Orsy. *Receiving the Council: Theological and Canonical Insights and Debates*. (Collegeville: Liturgical P., 2009, 16-34), 33.

[242] Rev 1:6,9; 5:10; 11:15; 12:10, 16:10; 17:12, 17.

[243] Nicolas Afanassieff, "Una Sancta." In *Tradition Alive: On the Church and the Christian Life in Our Time: Readings from the Eastern Church*, edited by Michael Plekon, 3-30. (Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield, 2003), 15.

Wright, who interprets Mark 13 in light of Daniel 7.[244] As such, both Jesus in the gospels and John in Revelation are speaking in terms of the Kingdom of God.

Citizenship in these *poleis* of the Kingdom is reserved for those "servants" who, having declared fealty to Jesus as Lord and King, "keep his words." Their testimony requires holy living, serving as priests interceding on behalf of a resistant, rebellious world, awaiting the return of their king - the true king - at which time they will reign with him. The book closes with a warning in 22:15 against those who fail to maintain a holy life or to keep his words. The boundary described here seems much simpler and more straightforward than the many issues and theological controversies which have produced schisms, resulting in a more Augustinian than Cyprian understanding of who is qualified for the Kingdom.[245] It also suggests that holiness in Revelation is both individual, in that its readers are called to bear consistent witness as individuals and corporate, as the letters to the churches reflect. This only makes sense, given that persecution by the state was a person-by-person matter. Yet, the letters are clearly addressed to communities who are alternately praised and condemned for their corporate character. The corporate rebukes of 2:4-5, 14-16, 20-23 and 3:1-3 and 15-17 suggest that sin of individuals and of a church collectively are of concern to Jesus, in agreement with the understanding of Sullivan as well as Gaillardetz.[246]

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[244] N.T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999, Intro 2015), 51.

[245] Florovsky. "St. Cyprian and St. Augustine on Schism." In *Ecumenism II: A Historical Approach*, 48-51. (Belmont, MA: Nordland Publishing Company, 1989), 49-51.

[246] Francis A. Sullivan, *The Church We Believe In: One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic*. (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 81-83. Richard R. Gaillardetz, *Ecclesiology for a Global Church: A People Called and Sent*. Theology in Global Perspective Series. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 203-204.

They are tasked to "conquer" the wicked political and religious systems of this world through their consistent, uncompromising "testimony" to Jesus as Messiah, King of kings and Lord of lords, even to the point of death. This admonition to the churches forces us to address the relationship between church and state which is so prominent in this text. It is painfully obvious that John would not have perceived the potential fusion of church and state positively, which Meyendorff describes having been the history of the Byzantine church.[247] The "sacramental image of the empire" which Papanikolaou attributes to Eusebius cannot be supported from John's Apocalypse.[248] The empire is portrayed as hostile to spiritual faithfulness, the vehicle through which satanic forces, depicted in a variety of outlandish images, harass, oppose and martyr God's faithful (11:7; 12:17; 13:7, 10; 18:24; 19:18). In the current era in which many seek to have the government create conditions that favor and support the church,[249] the complex history which Doerfler delineates suggests that the message of Revelation remains relevant.[250]

The kingdom of God will reach its ultimate expression in a new Jerusalem which will reunite the ancient and the Messianic Israel with its gentile multitude from every people, tribe, tongue, and nation, who will collectively receive the glory of the peoples of the earth, and where the glory of the Lord will illuminate all. This understanding is sympathetic with Golitzin's assertion that the church is Messianic Israel, but disavows a

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[247] John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes*. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1983), 212-18.

[248] Aristotle Papanikolaou, *The Mystical as Political: Democracy and Non-Radical Orthodoxy*. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 13-54, 19.

[249] Papanikolaou, *The Mystical as Political*, 53.

[250] Maria E. Doerfler, volume editor, and George Kalantzis, series editor. *Church and Empire*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2016), xi-xliii.

supersessionist application.[251] The four-fold diversity described repeatedly in Revelation suggests that national or ethnically focused churches, while affirmed in their particularity, must never consider themselves to be the norm for Christian worship. Perhaps Mannion is correct that we need to consider a "virtue ecclesiology" which makes room for a diversity with which many may find themselves uncomfortable.[252] A "virtue ecclesiology" coheres with African American ecclesiology with its incorporation of an ethical component to its definition of faithfulness.[253]

Ecclesiological Summary

The book of Revelation presents a "kingdom" ecclesiology, one which recognizes the identity of local assemblies, or churches, but seems to see them as local *poleis* which operate as the local embassies of that kingdom. Citizenship in the Kingdom is available to all, based on their sworn fealty to the true king (possibly demonstrated through baptism, though this is not explicit in the text of Revelation) and their uncompromising testimony. One could perceive "testimony" as encompassing a eucharistic expression, although the emphasis in the text of Revelation is on verbal witness and behavioral holiness. In the current debate about ecclesiology, whether it should have a eucharistic,

[251] Alexander Golitzin. "Scriptural Images of the Church: An Eastern Orthodox Reflection." In *One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic: Ecumenical Reflections on the Church*, edited by Tamara Grdzelidze, 255-266. (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005), 255.

[252] Gerard Mannion, *Ecclesiology and Postmodernity: Questions for the Church in Our Time*. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007), 40.

[253] Peter J. Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples: The Search for a Common Moral Discourse* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

communion, or a universal emphasis, [254] might this "kingdom ecclesiology" provide an alternate way. Radu Bordeianu suggests precisely this, positing that eschatology should be the first step in theology, "not the last."[255] As such Revelation, whose very presence in the canon was disputed for centuries, can be a fruitful locus for ecclesiological reflection. This is particularly true as it pertains to our theological anthropology of culture, in light of Revelation's anticipation of a diverse expansion of the covenant people of Israel's God.

In any case, the ecclesiology reflected in John's Apocalypse provides biblical data that must be accounted for in our discussions of the nature and dynamics of the universal church. This eschatological focus seems increasingly needed, if the disparate and diverse churches around the world are to overcome the centripetal forces of postmodern, postcolonial, and multi-cultural life, as well as a multilingual constituency. The modern invention of the separation of church and state elevates the need to recognize the seductive and oppressive nature of secular regimes, which may or may not make policy and legislation favorable to faith. Churches must wrestle with how they will respond when faced with an increasingly hostile government administration. Constantinianism has demonstrated serious pitfalls. In a secular, ever more multicultural nation such as the US, an increasing and often uncomfortable reality in many Western nations, how will the church conduct itself? Revelation paints a picture of churches united in worship of the Lamb, uncompromising in their witness as to his sovereignty, walking in obedient

[254] John A. Jillions, "Ecumenism and the Paris School of Orthodox Theology." *Theoforum* 39.2 (2008): 141–74; Afanassieff, "Una Sancta," 3-30.

[255] Radu Bordeianu, *Icon of the Kingdom of God: An Orthodox Ecclesiology.* (Washington D.C: Catholic University of America Press, 2023), 24.

holiness, in a way that embraces, celebrates, and yet transcends national and cultural particularity.

The Fate of the Multitudes Described by Four-Fold Diversity

The chapters that follow Rev 17 describe the ultimate fate of the "woman" Babylon (the Roman Empire) and the bride (the church), which has implications for the multitudes which are described as four-fold in their diversity. Chapter 18 is an oracle of judgment on Babylon/Rome, beginning with the famous declaration, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!" (Rev 18:2).[256] The series of prophetic allusions from Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel found therein communicate three things.[257] One, it decries the seductiveness of the prosperity associated with imperial commerce, accomplished by the frequent references to merchants and luxury, such as "For all the nations have fallen from the wine of the wrath of her prostitution, and the kings of the earth have engaged in sexual immorality with her, and the merchants of the earth have grown rich from the power of

[256] This opening cry is an adapted echo of Jer 21:9b, ""Fallen, fallen is Babylon, and all the images of her gods lie shattered on the ground." The dirge over "Babylon the Great" that follows seems to be modelled after the oracle against Tyre (Is 23).

[257] There are allusions in Rev 18 to multiple oracles announcing doom on those who have despoiled Israel and Judah, as well as adaptions of prophetic condemnation of the children of Israel in times of their disobedience. See Is 13:21-22 for one allusion to wild beasts (Rev 18:2). The characterization of Babylon as a prostitute is redolent of Nahum 3:4-5, "Because of the countless debaucheries of the prostitute, gracefully alluring, mistress of sorcery, who enslaves nations through her debaucheries and peoples through her sorcery, I am against you, says the Lord of hosts, and will lift up your skirts over your face, and I will let nations look on your nakedness and kingdoms on your shame." The admonition to "Come out of her, my people" (18:4) is a direct quote of Jer 51:45, where the exiles are warned against aligning with Babylon when it is judged for having acted against God's covenant people. The "quote" of Babylon in 18:7 seems to echo Deutero-Isaiah's condemnation of Babylon for having declared, "'I shall be mistress forever,' so that you did not lay these things to heart or remember their end" (Is 47:7). The lament of the merchants (18:11-19) echoes the lament over Tyre in Ezekiel 27. Rev 18:22b-23a appears to be a clear reworking of Jer 25:10, with their shared language of "the light of a lamp," "the sound of the millstone, "the voice of the bridegroom and bride."

her luxury (18:3, see also 18: 7, 9, 11–17, 19, 23). Mercantile imperialism yields benefits to those privileged within it, but it is extractive, exploitative, and ultimately immoral.

Two, the calls to the faithful to beware of being ensnared by her wiles beginning in verse 4, where we read, "Then I heard another voice from heaven saying, 'Come out of her, my people, so that you do not take part in her sins and so that you do not share in her plagues.'" Later in the oracle, we read of the arts and trade as mechanisms by which "the nations" are bewitched. (18: 21–23). In keeping with the exhortations of the seven letters, the faithful are warned that the fruits of empire are damning.

And three, to remind the faithful that the empire is the source and executor of their religious (and political) marginalization. "And in you was found the blood of prophets and of saints and of all who have been slaughtered on earth" (18:24). Rome had destroyed Israel, Jerusalem, and its temple, and the empire engaged in periodic, but persistent, persecution of followers of Jesus. Babylon is chosen as the personification of Rome because both empires have accomplished the destruction of Jerusalem and the dismantling of the temple. Again, the author powerfully addresses his audience's distress and anxiety over the loss of the central place of worship for Judaism and the first Christians. Also, referring to the empire and its power as "Babylon" may have provided some cryptic plausible deniability, to help avoid further inciting the ire of the Roman authorities.

Chapter 19 launches the final vision sequence of the book. In 19:1–3 we read the chorus of the great multitude in heaven praising God for His having enacted justice on Babylon. It repeats that the ultimate sin listed in Babylon's list of crimes is her complicity in "the blood of his servants" (19:2). The call to faithful witness is sounded once again,

this time somewhat implicitly in the declaration that the bride of the Lamb is clothed with "bright, clean, fine linen" which is explicitly identified as "the righteous deeds of the saints" (19:8). The command to witness, testify, be *μαρτυρία,* is highlighted in the angel's refusal of John's worship in 19:10.

The emergence of the White Rider, Jesus the Conqueror (19:11–16), culminates all messianic expectations. The various monikers and descriptors listed here are impressively ended with the counter-Imperial title, "King of kings and Lord of lords" (19:16). This emphasizes the incompatibility of one's witness to Jesus with any participation in the Imperial cult. It is also possible that the reference here (and 16:16) to "the kings of the earth and their armies" (19:19) refers to the Roman legions and auxiliaries, which by the time of Revelation's composition, were notoriously populated by soldiers drawn from their conquered territories.[258] This would invoke the memory of the armies assembled to execute the suppression of the Jewish Rebellion circa 67–73 CE, during which the city of Jerusalem, and the temple were destroyed. The feasts of the carrion fowl announced in 19:17–21 may invoke memories of the vultures seen in the wake of the massacres involved in the suppression of that rebellion. The defeat and destruction of leaders of the rebellion against the authority of the White Rider may very well recall the memory of the treatment of the leaders of the Jewish Rebellion. However, it is worth noting that, despite the earlier description of a seeming force of virgin warriors (Rev 14:1-5), the armies of heaven do not seem to correspond to an earthly army:

> Then I saw heaven opened, and there was a white horse! Its rider is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and wages war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name inscribed that no

[258] Henry Michael Denne Parker, *The Roman Legions: With a Bibliography by G. R. Watson* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1958), 169–171.

> one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is called The Word of God. And the armies of heaven, wearing fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule[259] them with a scepter of iron; he will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. (Rev 19:11-15)

Despite the ways in which Revelation has been used to motivate and justify earthly combat, the text leaves the execution of eschatological warfare to a supernatural contingent.

Like the identity of the horns and kings of chapter 17, the thousand-year reign of Christ/captivity of Satan has generated two millennia of varied speculation.[260] The problems with attributing a chronological sequence to the visions recorded through the course of the book of Revelation are multiple. In this case, the simplest solution seems to be, as Augustine has elucidated, that this account is a description of the current age between Christ's crucifixion, resurrection and ascension, and his second coming in judgment and victory.[261] This makes most sense if chapter 20:1–10 are understood as a recapitulation of 19:11–21. However, 20:10 describes the devil being cast into "the lake of fire…where the beast and the false prophet were…", which clearly places these events subsequent to those described in 19:20. While many modern translations suggest that "those who are given authority to judge" are those who had been beheaded and "came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years" (20:4), the Greek says, "καὶ ἔζησαν καὶ

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[259] This is the NRSV translation. Again, my argument supports the position of Jon Morales that the Greek word here, being *ποιμανεῖ* should be translated "shepherd" not "rule."

[260] A non-European monograph which surveys the tensions and possible interpretations of this text is Eke Wilfred Onyema, *The Millennial Kingdom of Christ (Rev 20, 1–10): A Critical History of Exegesis with an Interpretative Proposal*, TGST 198 (Roma: Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 2013).

[261] Saint Augustine, *The City of God*: *Abridged Study Edition*, t*rans. William Babcock* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2018), 467.

ἐβασίλευσαν μετὰ τοῦ Χριστοῦ χίλια ἔτη"[262] which can be translated "and they lived and reigned with Christ for one thousand years." This more literal translation is more sympathetic to Augustine's interpretation. Whatever the resolution of these cryptic and somewhat confusing events, for our purposes the most significant points are the clear promise of reward in 20:4 and 20:6 to those who are martyred for their faithful testimony. Their role as priests and rulers addresses the desolation of the Jewish temple priesthood, and the absence of a messiah king in the wake of the destruction of Jerusalem and the decimation and dispersion of the Jews (20:6).

The great white throne makes clear that any residual anticipation of a Jewish messiah king to come and throw off Roman rule using conventional revolutionary means is not in keeping with the message of Revelation. The text presents the outcome of the Parousia of Jesus being the judgment of all of humanity (20:11–15). Such a clarification would have been necessary, when we consider the persistence of a political messianic expectation which culminated in the Bar-Kosiba revolt of 132-136 CE.[263]

Preliminary Review of Observations

In review, these varied usages of the formulae serve a powerfully evocative purpose. One observes a triple valence in these formulae. In two instances, the four-fold formulae are deployed positively (Rev 5:9; 7:9), where they are used to describe the great diversity of the innumerable multitude whom the Lamb has ransomed by his blood in the throne room scenes of chapters 5 and 7. In 10:11 the formula is cast neutrally, as John is told that he

[262] Revelation 20:4 NA[28]

[263] Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, lviii.

"must prophesy again about many peoples and nations and languages and kings." I argue that the appearances of the formulae in 13:7, as well as in 14:6 and 17:5, are neutral. In 13:7 the four-fold audience is characterized as being deceptively dominated which seems to mirror Ps 2, as Herms highlights. Rev. 14:6 reads neutrally to me, as it emphasizes the choice placed before the various peoples of the world, and Rev 17:5 illustrates their victimization by the mercantile imperialism of the woman, Babylon. The only occurrence that I read as purely negative is that which conveys the rebellion and resistance of the nations of the world in Rev 11:9.

The four-fold formulae are used to declare early in the vision narratives (chapters 5 and 7) that there will be citizens of God's kingdom from every people, tribe, tongue, and nation (5:9), not just a token presence, but an immeasurable assembly (7:9). This corresponds to the language of Ps 102:18–22 and is reinforced by the subsequent occurrences of this rhetorical device.

Many scholars interpret these texts differently. Many see the four-fold descriptions of diversity as generic allusions to the peoples of the world, or universality.[264] Some commentators only mention it in passing, with little attention given to the particularity of the descriptions being provided. In recent decades the debate has centered on the questions of soteriology, responding to Richard Bauckham's radical proposal in *The Climax of Prophecy*. Bauckham suggests that the overarching message of Revelation may represent the salvation of all humanity.[265] Like most scholars of

[264] J. Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2007), 95, 126; Koester, *Revelation*, 380; Boxhall, *The Revelation of Saint John,* 101; Caird, *Revelation*, 76, 100.

[265] Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, 330–337.

Revelation, Beale emphasizes that these saints are *from* (Greek ἐκ) every tribe and tongue and people and nation.[266] In other words, what is envisioned is not the universal salvation of all humanity, but a redeemed portion from every representative subset thereof. In his longer commentary, Beale includes a lengthy argument for seeing the four-fold formula as Revelation's means of including gentile believers in the promise to Israel as Abraham's spiritual descendants.[267]

In our reading, what emerges is a picture of two destinies. The various peoples of the world are confronted with a choice, to follow the Lamb or the beast/dragon. That choice results in either eternal blessing, (Rev 5:9; 7:9, 21:7, 24–26; 22:1–5) or abuse, exploitation, and ultimate destruction (Rev 17:5; 18:13; 21:8, 27; 22:15). This apocalypse makes it clear that the drama of the ages is about righteousness versus wickedness. The focus of the text is summarized in Rev 18:4 where we read, ""Come out of her, my people, so that you do not take part in her sins…" Such an interpretation is fairly common among interpreters.[268]

Or, to approach the interpretive problem differently, the Apocalypse of John contrasts the way ethnic and cultural diversity is handled by the kingdom of God versus the way in which empires, such as Babylon and Rome, relate to the peoples they encounter. As Rev. 18 makes clear, empires seek to exploit, extract, and enrich themselves at the expense of those peoples. This reality would have been tangible in the

[266] G. K. Beale, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 117.

[267] Gregory K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1999), 426–431.

[268] Koester, *Revelation*, 419.

minds of John's original audience, if, as we have argued, the Apocalypse was written after the fall of Jerusalem and its temple. Josephus records the manner in which Jewish prisoners of war, the leaders, as well as a representative number (700) of the vanquished combatants, were paraded in the Roman triumph of Titus and Vespasian after Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed.[269] The leaders were executed, and the temple furnishings, wrought of gold, were also displayed in that procession,[270] driving home the utter desolation that had been wrought, the wealth that had been extracted, and the finality of the destruction of the loci of Jewish messianic expectations.[271]

In contrast to Rome/Babylon, the Lamb of John's Apocalypse is radical in his sacrificial intent and moves counter to the values of empire. Rome was famous for displaying the captives and spoils of the nations conquered. Steven Friesen notes the presence of iconography at the Sebastion of Aphrodisias which depicts the nations or peoples which have been conquered by the empire, citing Servius and Dio Cassius.[272] R. R. R. Smith has documented the Sebastion at Aphrodisias in great detail, observing that the figures displayed there have "overtones of conquest, capture, submission."[273] Smith continues, noting that "The distinctively Roman concept of 'pacification' (a violent

[269] Josephus, *JW*. 7.118.

[270] Josephus, *JW*. 7.148–151.

[271] For a similar analysis concerning a different canonical book, see Ellen Bradshaw Aitken, "Portraying the Temple in Stone and Text: The Arch of Titus and the Epistle to the Hebrews," *STRev* 58, no. 3 (Pentecost 2015): 617–44.

[272] Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 86.

[273] R. R. R. Smith, *The Marble Reliefs from the Julio-Claudian Sebasteion*, Aphrodisias VI: Results of the excavations at Aphrodisias in Caria conducted by New York University (Darmstadt/Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 2013), 111.

process) … captures this ambivalent meaning well: the *gentes*[274] represented the peaceful incorporation of new conquests."[275] Revelation takes this imperial value and practice and turns it upside down.

Revelation portrays visions of the faithful witnesses from the nations of the world being canonized, a direct subversion of the logic of 'nations conquered' in the Roman Empire. "You were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe, and language and people and nation" (Rev 5:9). Instead of those so ransomed being presented in a posture of obeisance, as would be the case in a Roman triumphal ceremony, they are described as standing before the throne. "After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands" (Rev 7:9).

While Boxall acknowledges that there is some significance in the particularity of the assembled multitude (Rev 7:9) of those "who have come out of the great ordeal" (Rev 7:14),[276] most commentators are content to treat them as a trope of universality. Our contention is that there is a substantive message in the usage of the four-fold formulae. The vision of the new Jerusalem will implicitly reveal that message.

The Eschatological Outcome of this Four-Fold Diversity - Revelation 21-22

[274] A shortened version of *gentes devictae*, Latin for "nations conquered."

[275] Smith, *Sebasteion*, 116.

[276] Boxall, *The Revelation to St. John,* 126.

The crowning vision of the Revelation given to John (Rev 21:1–22:5) seems to punctuate and clarify the notes of comfort woven throughout the book, and the diversity of the citizenry of the heavenly city is a key part of that message of comfort. Chapter 21 reveals that the current heaven and earth are done away with as it declares, "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth. For the first heaven and the first earth departed and the sea is no more" (21:1). This reconciles the vision of an earthly reign of Christ with the Johannine gospel tradition, "My kingdom is not from this world…" (John 18:36).[277] The provision of a "new Jerusalem —descending out of heaven from God" (21:2) decisively connotes that the destruction of the "old" Jerusalem by the Romans is comparatively of little consequence. The temple in Jerusalem had been the site of the manifestation of "the LORD's glory" (1 Kgs 8:11). The presence of "the glory of God" within the new Jerusalem culminates the book's argument that the temple's destruction is of much less import than John's audience may have felt prior to this time, as the new Jerusalem has "the glory of God, whose light is like a precious stone like crystal jasper stone" (21:11). The names of "the twelve tribes of the children of Israel" affixed to the twelve gates of the new Jerusalem which are guarded by 12 angels affirm Israel's prominence, place, and security in Christ's kingdom (21:12). The names of "the twelve apostles of the Lamb" on foundations of the city's walls makes clear the prominence of the followers of Jesus (21:14). The old and new covenants are thereby jointly confirmed and fulfilled.

After describing a city of such unparalleled richness and splendor that a human mind can scarcely comprehend it, with building materials of precious stones (21:15–21),

[277] This point also supports Augustine's interpretation of the one-thousand-year reign. If Christ is bodily present on the earth during those thousand years, how is it that his "kingdom is not of this earth"?

the vision includes a pointed comment on the absence of a temple in the new Jerusalem, "And no temple is in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple" (21:22). The presence of God Himself and of the Lamb render a temple obsolete. The "glory of God" is mentioned again, this time as the means of illumination of the city "And the city has no need of the sun nor the moon in order to illumine it, for the glory of God lights it, and the Lamb is its lamp" (21:23). The inclusiveness of the city is expressed as a counterpoint to the fate of the Gentiles in some Jewish eschatological scenarios, wherein they are subjugated or defeated. "And the nations will walk on account of its light, and the kingdoms of the earth are bringing their glory into it" (21:24). The gates remain open (21:25) contrasting with the inaccessibility of the now defunct earthly temple with its outer and inner courts, and its holy of holies, which only the high priest could enter once per year (Exod 26; Lev 16:29–34). In all these ways the fulfillment of messianic expectations, no longer possible in the old, earthly Jerusalem, is now described as taking place in the new Jerusalem.

Two additional threads from the old covenant are woven into the eschatological fabric of this vision. The "glory and honor of the nations" is brought into the new city (21:24, 26). This restores the unity of humanity which had been sundered at the Tower of Babel (Gen 11:8, 9), demonstrating the redemptive purpose and power of the Lamb from that protological account of the origin of the diversity of peoples, tongues, languages, and nations.[278] Interestingly, in 21:24 we read, καὶ περιπατήσουσιν τὰ ἔθνη διὰ τοῦ φωτὸς αὐτῆς· καὶ οἱ βασιλεῖς τῆς γῆς φέρουσιν τὴν δόξαν αὐτῶν εἰς αὐτήν· "the kingdoms of

[278] Natasha O'Hear, "Seeing the Apocalypse: Pre-1700 Visualizations of Revelation," in *The Book of Revelation and Its Interpreters: Short Studies and an Annotated Bibliography*, Ian Boxall and Richard Tresley, editors, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 91.

the earth are bringing their glory into it." This suggests a present reality which is already taking place. This precedes the language of 21:26, where the text says, καὶ οἴσουσιν τὴν δόξαν καὶ τὴν τιμὴν τῶν ἐθνῶν εἰς αὐτήν, "and they will carry the glory and honor of the nations into it," using the future tense. This apparent linguistic inconsistency will be explored further in our final chapter, but it certainly suggests a "now, and not yet" interpretation of this vision. It also inverts the Roman Imperial triumph, in which conquered opponents and their artifacts were paraded in the capital.[279] The "river of the water of life" combines old and new covenant imagery (22:1–2), reconfiguring Ezekiel's prophecy (Ezek 47:1–12) and touching on the teachings of Jesus recorded in John's gospel (John 7:37–39). The "tree of life" in the midst of the river hearkens back to Eden (Gen 2:9; 3:22–24), and Ezekiel's prophecy (Ezek 47:12),[280] yielding twelve kinds of fruit, one per month, perhaps evoking a connection to the twelve tribes and the twelve apostles (Rev 21:12–14). In the new Jerusalem, "the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations," not their subjugation and exploitation (Rev 22:2).

The book closes with a declaration of the reliability of the revelation, ""These words are trustworthy and true…" (22:6), a reminder that Jesus is coming soon, and a blessing on those who remain faithful until the end (22:7). There is a note of caution reiterated in 22:11 and 14 to not expect complete deliverance until the Parousia.[281] That

[279] Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 421.

[280] "On the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food and their leaves for healing." Ezek 47:12

[281] "Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy." (Rev 22:11)

Jesus is the source of the revelation in is made explicit once again (22:16), with a final declaration that He is "coming soon!" (22:20).

While the Hebrew bible prophetic tradition frequently declares that the wealth of the nations will be brought to the Jerusalem temple (Hag 2:6–8),[282] in the new Jerusalem, the glory and honor (τὴν δόξαν καὶ τὴν τιμὴν) of the nations is offered (Rev 21:26). While some translators render this phrase "splendor and wealth," our final chapter will explore what that glory and honor may in fact, be, arguing that a more literal translation is in order, and that a more creative and inclusive interpretation is more faithful to the full context of the book of Revelation.

[282] "For thus says the Lord of hosts: Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land, and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with splendor, says the Lord of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the Lord of hosts." Haggai 2:6-8

CHAPTER 5: WHAT IS THE GLORY AND HONOR OF THE NATIONS IN REVELATION 21?

Various Views

Scholars and exegetes have argued a variety of positions concerning the procession of the kings of the nations and their offering of the glory and honor of those nations (Rev 21:24, 26). Stephen Moore and his students use postcolonial theory to diagnose Revelation's parasitic dependence on imperial violence.[283] Moore's assessment seems driven, in part, by the reality that many interpreters have managed to read Revelation as supportive of empire.[284] There is some warrant to Moore's concern. As we explore the text, the translational choices of various expositors seem to reflect the degree to which they are willing to preserve a positive place for earthly empire in their exegesis.

Womanist students of Moore's adopt his skeptical posture toward Revelation. Lynne St. Clair Darden applies postcolonial analysis to assess Revelation as "an extremely problematic text that justifies the use of violence and destruction in the formation of a new symbolic order that is actually based on the adaptation and re-presentation of Roman imperial ideology."[285] Shanell Smith similarly adapts postcolonial critique to conclude that Revelation is a "masculinist" document which reinscribes patriarchal and imperial tropes.[286] There is an emphasis on the negative symbol of "the

[283] Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse*, 109–118.

[284] Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse*, 122.

[285] Darden, *Scripturalizing Revelation*, 105.

[286] Smith, *The Woman Babylon*, 104.

woman Babylon" (Rev 17) and a lack of focus on the positive image of "the sun-clothed woman" (Rev 12). As such, these commentators view Revelation as oppressive towards women and the nations which will ultimately be brought into forced subjection to the kingdom of the Lamb.

Feminist interpreters have also questioned the language and overall message of Revelation. In her 1992 work *Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John*, Tina Pippin reads Revelation with a special eye for how women are depicted. She sees Revelation as "a fantasy of the end" in which the desire for retribution and utopia are juxtaposed, as the positive depictions of the Bride and the Woman Clothed with the Sun are contrasted with those of the great whore, Babylon.[287] Pippin's focus is on the absence of women as agents in the text, and her stated desire for twenty-first century women to speak to the biblical and contemporary apocalypses of potential nuclear holocaust and ecological collapse.[288] In a 2000 article, Pippin cites the danger of seeking to map the "armies of God" onto modern-day political entities.[289] However, she pays little attention to the diverse nature of the multitudes assembled in Rev 5:9 and 7:9. Adela Yarbro Collins also gives little attention to the four-fold descriptions of diversity in Revelation and sees them simply as consistent with the book's vision for "the whole world" coming to worship the Lamb.[290] Catherine Keller, like Pippin, sees the looming

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[287] Tina Pippin, *Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 71–77.

[288] Pippin, *Death and Desire,* 106–107.

[289] Tina Pippin, "Mapping the End: On Monsters and Maps in the Book of Revelation," *Interpretation* 74, no. 2 (April 2020): 95.

[290]Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Apocalypse*, New Testament Message 22 (Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1979), 150.

threat of ecological disaster as resonant with the message of John's Apocalypse. While identifying the ravages of European colonization on the southern hemisphere,[291] she gives little attention to the ethnic and cultural diversity in the text of Revelation.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's insightful analysis of Revelation also seems to view the four-fold descriptions of diversity as symbolic of a universal, global marker.[292] She comments, as I do, on the expansive and inclusive nature of this new kingdom of the Lamb.[293] She reads the book as a vision of and call for justice. In this regard my assessment of the book aligns with hers.

My African American hermeneutic is decolonial and sees in Revelation the subversion of imperial values and the inversion of imperial logic. As Schüssler Fiorenza notes, the citizens of the kingdom of the Lamb are ennobled as a 'kingdom of priests."[294] Southern Baptist African American scholar Jarvis Williams has come close to addressing our question in his work, *Redemptive Kingdom Diversity: A Biblical Theology of the People of God.* The survey of biblical history which Williams lays out parallels my own. His analysis of ethnic diversity is a significant contribution to a biblical accounting of the diversity which we see ultimately expressed in Revelation.[295] However, he does little to define or elaborate on the nature of the glory and honor of the nations of which we read

[291] Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then*, 152–153.

[292] Schüssler Fiorenza, *Justice and Judgment,* 68–70.

[293] Schüssler Fiorenza, *Justice and Judgment*, 76.

[294] Schüssler Fiorenza, *Justice and Judgment*, 76.

[295] Jarvis J. Williams, *Redemptive Kingdom Diversity: A Biblical Theology of the People of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2021), 142–147.

in Rev 21:24, 26. Nor does Williams extend the bible's critique of empire beyond the Roman Empire.[296]

Historian of early church history, particular that of the church in Ethiopia and Egypt, Vince Bantu, does not deal specifically with Revelation, but documents and exposes the diversity of the Christian church from its earliest days.[297] He is particularly helpful in decentering that history from the European bias so often present in the academy.[298] Throughout his work, Bantu describes the destructive effects of Constantinianism on the church, its unity, and therefore its witness.

To address the question of the significance of the ethnic, linguistic, and national diversity represented in Revelation, a more thorough exegesis of τὴν δόξαν καὶ τὴν τιμὴν is required. We will note translations and interpretations which align with imperial values and see the Lamb as the ultimate righteous ruler who subjects the nations, and contrast those interpretations with those which see the Lamb as shepherding the nations for their healing.

Exegetical Analysis of τὴν δόξαν καὶ τὴν τιμὴν

The nature of the "glory" (Rev 21:24, 26) and the "honor" of the nations (Rev 21:26) which the "kings of the earth" (Rev 21:24) will bring into the new Jerusalem is pivotal to our thesis and is critical for discerning whether Revelation embraces earthly empire or stands in opposition to it.

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[296] Williams, *Redemptive Kingdom Diversity*, 147.

[297] Vince L. Bantu, *A Multitude of All Peoples: Engaging Ancient Christianity's Global Identity*, Missiological Engagements (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2020), 1–7; 227–230.

[298] Bantu, *A Multitude of All Peoples*, 6, 224.

I translate Rev 21:24, in the following way: "And the nations will walk on account of its light, and the kings of the earth are bringing their glory into it."[299] Similarly, I translate Rev 21:26, "and they [the kings of the earth] will carry the glory and honor of the nations into it."[300] Most English translators adopt a similar translation, with some (NET, NAB, NJB) rendering τὴν δόξαν αὐτῶν in verse 24 as "their grandeur" or "wealth," and τὴν δόξαν καὶ τὴν τιμὴν in verse 26 as "grandeur and wealth" or "treasure and wealth."[301] There are reasons to consider this latter, more materialist understanding of τὴν δόξαν καὶ τὴν τιμὴν. An analysis of the usage of these words and phrases in the Septuagint (LXX), as well as the Christian scriptures illuminates the question.

In the LXX, δόξα and its cognates appear 438 times in 420 verses.[302] The same word appears 166 times in the Greek New Testament and is nearly always translated "glory."[303] The choice to translate δόξα with any word other than "glory" can be supported when one looks at the LXX of Isa 60, to which Revelation seems be alluding in Rev 21:22-26. Most notable in this chapter of Isaiah are Isa 60:1-3, which reads, "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth and thick darkness the peoples, but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light and kings to the

[299] καὶ περιπατήσουσιν τὰ ἔθνη διὰ τοῦ φωτὸς αὐτῆς, καὶ οἱ βασιλεῖς τῆς γῆς φέρουσιν τὴν δόξαν αὐτῶν εἰς αὐτήν (Rev 21:24 NA28).

[300] καὶ οἴσουσιν τὴν δόξαν καὶ τὴν τιμὴν τῶν ἐθνῶν εἰς αὐτήν, (Rev 21:26 NA28).

[301] Revelation 21:24–26 NET, https://accordance.bible/link/read/NET#Rev._21:24; https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0839/__P134.HTM, accessed 01/22/2024.

[302] https://accordance.bible/link/search/LXX1#δόξα.

[303] https://accordance.bible/link/search/GNT28-T#δόξα.

brightness of your dawn" (Isa 60:1-3).[304] This is followed by Isa 60:4–5 where we read, "Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together; they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried in their nurses' arms. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you; the wealth of the nations shall come to you." Rev. 21 does not quote this passage, but the allusion seems clear.

The notion of wealth being brought to Jerusalem is more pronounced in the LXX of Isa 60:11, "Your gates shall always be open; day and night they shall not be shut, so that nations shall bring you their wealth, with their kings led in procession."[305] This corresponds strongly with Rev 21:25-26, " Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations." One final example from Isa 60 is found in the LXX of verse 19, which is rendered, "The sun shall no longer be your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give light to you by night, but the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory."[306]

However, the translation of τὴν δόξαν καὶ τὴν τιμὴν in Rev 21:26 as "grandeur and wealth" seems to disconnect this appearance of δόξα from its other deployments in the New Testament, particularly from its usage elsewhere in Revelation. In every other

[304] Φωτίζου φωτίζου, Ιερουσαλημ, ἥκει γάρ σου τὸ φῶς, καὶ ἡ δόξα κυρίου ἐπὶ σὲ ἀνατέταλκεν. ἰδοὺ σκότος καὶ γνόφος καλύψει γῆν ἐπ᾽ ἔθνη· ἐπὶ δὲ σὲ φανήσεται κύριος, καὶ ἡ δόξα αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ σὲ ὀφθήσεται. καὶ πορεύσονται βασιλεῖς τῷ φωτί σου καὶ ἔθνη τῇ λαμπρότητί σου (LXX1) https://accordance.bible/link/read/LXX1#Is._60:1-3.

[305] καὶ ἀνοιχθήσονται αἱ πύλαι σου διὰ παντός, ἡμέρας καὶ νυκτὸς οὐ κλεισθήσονται, εἰσαγαγεῖν πρὸς σὲ δύναμιν ἐθνῶν καὶ βασιλεῖς ἀγομένους (Isaiah 60:11 LXX1).

[306] καὶ οὐκ ἔσται σοι ὁ ἥλιος εἰς φῶς ἡμέρας, οὐδὲ ἀνατολὴ σελήνης φωτιεῖ σοι τὴν νύκτα, ἀλλ᾽ ἔσται σοι κύριος φῶς αἰώνιον καὶ ὁ θεὸς δόξα σου (Isaiah 60:19 LXX1).

case, in combination with τιμὴ, it is deployed in the context of worship of God or the Lamb.

The word τιμὴ which appears in Rev 21:26 has a more flexible meaning. This word and its cognates appear seventy-one times in sixty-nine verses in the LXX.[307] Its meaning centers on "honor" or alternately, "value." The Hebrew word behind this translation into Greek varies quite a bit. Eighteen different Hebrew words were rendered τιμὴ by the translators of the LXX. At times it is used to denote "value" or "price." Of the twenty-seven instances where it translates a Hebrew word indicating a monetary amount,[308] seventeen occur in the book of Leviticus, in context of describing the redemption value required in various ceremonial circumstances. The other forty-four times it is found in the LXX, the meaning in context and based on the Hebrew presumed to be behind the text is clearly "honor" or "reputation."

A final justification for the NET's, NAB's, and NJB's translations is an identification of the scene in Rev 21 as an allusion to, or fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, such as Zech 14:14b, "And the wealth of all the surrounding nations shall be collected: gold, silver, and garments in great abundance." Similar thoughts are also expressed in Ps 105:44 and Isa 66:12. So, the notion of the wealth of the nations coming to Jerusalem is attested in the Hebrew Bible.

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[307] https://accordance.bible/link/search/LXX1#τιμὴ.

[308] The words from the Hebrew Bible which are translated by the LXX as τιμὴ to indicate "value," "amount," or "price" are as follows: כֶּסֶף , Gen 44:2; Job 31:39; Isa 55:1/ עֵרֶךְ , Lev 5:15, 18, 25; 27:2, 3(twice), 5, 6, 7, 8, 13, 15, 16, 17, 19, 23(twice), 25, 27/ מָכָר , Num 20:19/ מְחִיר , 2 Chr 1:16/ הוֹן , Ps 43:13[45:10HB]/ יָקָר , Ps 48:9[49:8HB]; 48:13[49:13HB]; הוֹן , Ps 43:13[44:14HB]; בַּצַע , Prov 6:26/ חֹסֶן , Ezek 22:25.

G.B. Caird translates in keeping with this more monetary understanding, identifying τὴν δόξαν of 21:24 as "their treasures" and τὴν δόξαν καὶ τὴν τιμὴν of 21:26 as "the treasures and wealth of the nations."[309] While Robert Mounce translates the text as "the glory and honor of the nations" he seems to pave the way for an understanding of τὴν δόξαν καὶ τὴν τιμὴν as describing tribute from the nations in his comment that this is a "reference to the choicest of earthly treasures."[310]

However, there is significant evidence against these wealth-oriented translations. First of all, the word τιμὴ appears forty times in the Greek New Testament, with thirteen of those appearances in context indicating "price" or "cost." The other twenty-seven times it is used to indicate honor. So, the predominant meaning is "honor."

Additionally, the author of Revelation could have used other words to indicate "wealth," such as πλούτος. Finally, the combination of δόξαν and τιμὴν appears frequently in various lists and conventional phrases of esteem and ascendance in ancient Greek,[311] so it is not surprising that this combination is used seventeen times in the LXX,[312] and thirteen times in the New Testament. It is worth noting that six of the New Testament appearances occur in the context of worship scenes in which God is being hailed as worthy of τὴν δόξαν καὶ τὴν τιμὴν.[313] Craig Koester emphasizes these worship

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[309] Caird, *Revelation*, 269, 279.

[310] Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 397.

[311] Moloney, *The Apocalypse*, 336.

[312] Twelve of these appearances of δόξαν with τιμὴν are translations of Hebrew Bible texts in the LXX (Exod 28:2; 38:40; 2 Chr 32:33; Esth 14:21; Ps 8:6; 28:1; 95:7; Job 37:22; 40:10; Isa 10:16; 35:2; Dan 2:37; 4:30). The other five appear in the Apocrypha (1 and 2 Macc, and Wisdom).

[313] Rom 2:7, 10; 1 Tim 1:17; Heb 2:7, 9; 1 Pet 1:7; 2 Pet 1:17; Rev 4:9, 11; 5:12,13; 7:12; 21:26.

scenes, particularly those in Revelation, as tilting the scale towards translating these phrases as "glory" in Rev 21:24 and "glory and honor" in Rev 21:26.[314] Beale argues that this glory and honor are the "righteous deeds" of the nations (Rev 14:13; 19:8), "which they can continue to perform by praising God" in the new Jerusalem.[315] While I agree with Beale's assessment, I believe the text is also conveying a significant nuance to prior understandings of what it is that the nations bring to the worship of God, which will be presented shortly. Predictably, Richard Bauckham translates these phrases "their glory" (Rev 21:24) and "the glory and honor of the nations" (21:26), in keeping with his more positive assessment of the destiny of the nations of the earth in Revelation.[316] Similarly, Boxall renders these phrases, "glory" and "glory and honor" respectively.[317]

The connection with Isa 60 is acknowledged by Aune, yet he, too, notes that "in Isaiah kings have been taken captive and are led in a victory procession, while in Rev 21:24–26 kings and nations enter freely."[318] Ronald Herms takes a somewhat indeterminate position, maintaining the ambiguity of the text, yet acknowledging that even as the author of Revelation is drawing on Isa 60, he "makes adjustments intended to reflect his own theological agenda."[319] Jon Morales maintains "glory and honor" as the appropriate translation in keeping with his beneficent perspective concerning the

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[314] Koester, *Revelation*, 822.

[315] Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary*, 1095.

[316] Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, 313, 315.

[317] Boxall, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 309.

[318] Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1170.

[319] Herms, *An Apocalypse for the Church and the World,* 251.

"shepherding" of the nations by Jesus, but acknowledges the ambiguity of these phrases as a counter to the potential condemnation of all wealth that a reader could infer from the denunciations of mercantile imperialism in Rev 18.[320] Morales celebrates the offering of "glory and honor of the nations" reported in Rev 21:26 as a fulfillment of Rev 15:4, "all nations will come and worship before you."[321]

Therefore, I conclude that the NET/NJB/NAB translations are inconsistent with the framing of these texts, particularly when τὴν δόξαν καὶ τὴν τιμὴν is so frequently used in the text of Revelation itself, and in every other context in Revelation, it is understood to indicate, and is translated as, "glory and honor." G.K. Beale acknowledges the connection to Isa 60, yet agrees with my analysis of Rev 21 concerning the kings of the nations that "they are not bringing literal riches but themselves as worshippers before God's end-time presence."[322] Brian Blount emphasizes this point, connecting his translation of these phrases as "glory" and "glory and honor" to the admonition in Rev 14:7 to "give God glory" and notes the contrast being made with the refusal to do so by unbelievers from among the nations indicated in 16:9.[323] An African American decolonial hermeneutic demands such a translation, in that one which reflects a demand for monetary tribute suggests that God's kingdom is extractive, exploitative, and oppressive. A decolonial hermeneutic leans hard in the opposite direction of such an interpretation. In this conclusion, I am consciously rejecting that of Stephen D. Moore,

[320] Morales, *Christ, Shepherd of the Nations,* 129.

[321] Morales, *Christ, Shepherd of the Nations*, 131.

[322] Beale, *Revelation*, 1999, 1095.

[323] Blount, *Revelation: A Commentary*, 394; cf. 288–289.

who sees Revelation as reinscribing imperial dynamics.[324] As we have demonstrated, Revelation inverts imperial logic. When Revelation recounts the glory and honor of the nations entering the new Jerusalem, it is describing the voluntary offering of attributes or assets of the nations, not particularly and certainly not exclusively monetary or material wealth. This understanding sets the stage for the theological exegesis which is the core of this study.

An Eschatological Vision of Inclusion

As we demonstrated in Chapter 4 and have elaborated carefully in this chapter, most interpreters struggle with the nature of the glory and honor of the nations as referred to in Rev 21. The challenge all interpreters face is how to reconcile the negative images of Rev 8–20 with the positive vistas of Rev 21 and 22. Our thesis is based on a reading which interprets the verses, "The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth are bringing their glory into it" (Rev 21:24), and "and they will carry the glory and honor of the nations into it" (21:26) as providing the resolution of the spiritual drama which was introduced in chapters 1–3, and graphically illustrated in the series of visions of chapters 4–20. The net effect of those visions is to paint a picture of these varied groups—peoples, nations, tribes, and speech communities—being presented with a choice. As the gospel is proclaimed to them (Rev 14:6), they can choose to follow the beast/Satan/dragon (Rev 12:9), or they can choose to be servants of the Lamb (Rev 14:7, 12; 22:3). This narrative with its epistolary elements, and its prophetic content presented in an apocalyptic style,

[324] Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse,* 108–109, 118–121.

are intended to comfort its readers in the aftermath of the loss of the capital city of their Jewish messiah, and the destruction of the temple which had for centuries been the locus of the worship of their god. These concluding scenes disclose a future with a very different Jerusalem, one in which a temple is unnecessary (Rev 21:22), and which city becomes the centerpiece of a new earth with God and God's Lamb present with the full diversity of the cultures of the world.

Through the visions of Rev 4–20, the loss or delay of Israel's anticipated messianic ascendance is placed in perspective by the reality that there will be followers of the Lamb from a highly diverse population. This perspective is progressively and kaleidoscopically unfolded as the revelation unfolds:

1. Revelation 5:9 says, "They sang a new hymn: 'Worthy are you to take the scroll and opening its seals, because you were slain and ransomed to God by your blood from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.'"
2. Merely two chapters later (Rev 7:9), we read, "After these things I looked, and behold a great multitude, which no one was able to number, from every nation and tribes and peoples and tongues standing before the throne and before the Lamb having been clothed with white robes and palm branches in their hands." Ronald Herms meticulously demonstrates that these two passages are special among the various four-fold descriptions of universality in John's Apocalypse. They describe the faithful who are destined to receive God's blessing in the final judgment (Rev 22:1–5).[325] The throne room scenes of

[325] Herms, *An Apocalypse for the Church and for the World*, 172–176.

chapters 5 and 7 disclose the outcome of the drama before the various representations of that drama are placed before the reader.

3. That to which I am seeking to draw attention is the repetition of ethnic, linguistic, and cultural distinctiveness. John's use of four different terms to underscore the cultural, linguistic, and ethnic diversity which is preserved among the faithful gathered around the throne suggests that the kingdom of God does not obliterate diversity, but rather celebrates it. The picture John paints invokes several things, providing a multi-valent message to the church in his day, as well as to the church in ours:
    A. It alludes to the various traditions in the Hebrew scriptures concerning the gathering of "the nations."[326]
    B. It revisits the primordial narrative of the tower of Babel (Gen 11) where the nations are scattered across the face of the earth. This reflects the "protology in eschatology" which we established in Chapter 3.
    C. In connection with this latter instance, it also describes the ultimate fruition of the miracle which took place on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), whereby each person in that multicultural multitude is singing or speaking in their respective languages, such that everyone understands the message which is being proclaimed.

[326] Ps 22:27; 47:8–9; 102:18–22; 138:4–5; 148:11–13; Isa 2:2–4; 25:6–8; 49:6–7; Isa 55:3–5; 60:1–22; 66:10–13; 17–19; 22–23; Jer 3:17; Dan 7:14; Mic 4:1–3; Zeph 3:8–9; Hag 2:7; Zech 2:11; 8:22–23; 14:16–21.

D. It replaces the grief of the loss of an anticipated liberated and ascendant Jewish state with the wondrous image of a multi-national, multi-lingual, multi-ethnic multitude participating in the worship life of the kingdom of which followers of Jesus are citizens.

E. It subverts the logic of imperial Rome, which took great pride and delight in displaying representatives and spoils of the peoples, lands, and property which they had conquered. In contrast, the book of Revelation presents the multitude of four-fold diversity as honored citizens, "priests" of the realm of the Lamb (Rev 1:6; 5:10; 20:6).

So, in review, we see in the Christian canon the inauguration of distinctions in culture via the Tower of Babel story in Gen 11. Our reflection on the theological anthropology of Gen 1–3 reminds us of the mixture those cultures represent, that divine image-bearers create cultures which also reflect the fallenness of those image-bearers. We observe the miracle of the gospel being proclaimed in multiple languages at the day of Pentecost in Acts 2. And in Revelation we see the multitude in Rev. 7:9 reflecting the fulfillment of that which Acts 2 foreshadows. God has chosen to preserve cultural diversity in God's kingdom as a means of enriching the praise which God will receive.

The Through-Line of the Book

A final key to our interpretation of the mystery of the four-fold multitudes is highlighted by Brian Blount in his African American hermeneutical reading of Revelation, *Can I Get A Witness?* In both *Can I Get A Witness?* and in his historical-critical commentary on Revelation, Blount places emphasis on that which we noted in Chapter 4, the prominence

of the word μαρτυρέω and its cognates in the Greek text of Revelation.[327] Blount concludes that the call to testify as to the identity and actions of the Lamb, Jesus, is an overarching message of the book.[328] I concur with this assessment. As we have noted, the word or its cognates appears nineteen times in the text of Revelation. As an expression of what Blount terms "cultural interpretation" and which I identify as an African American hermeneutic, Blount references the African American homiletic signal, "Can I Get a Witness?" a phrase which Black preachers use to punctuate their messages and let their audience know that it is time to respond in the culture's call-and-response preaching tradition. Blount does so to highlight the prominence of μαρτυρέω in Revelation.

As Blount notes, the book begins with John declaring his own commission to testify concerning Jesus, speaking of himself, "who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw" (Rev 1:2).[329] John indicates the priority he places on the function of *witness*, or *testimony* by his use of two forms of the word in this self-introductory sentence.

He immediately invokes Jesus as "the faithful witness," the source of the messages and visions to be revealed (1:5).[330] He continues to reinforce the priority of witness in 1:9 where he declares, "I, John, your brother who share with you the persecution and the kingdom and the endurance in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos

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[327] Blount, *Revelation: A Commentary,* 13–14; *Can I Get a Witness*?, 46–49.

[328] Blount, *Revelation: A Commentary,* 27–32.

[329] Blount, *Revelation: A Commentary,* 28. The Greek here is ὃς *ἐμαρτύρησεν* τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τὴν *μαρτυρίαν* Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ὅσα εἶδεν (Rev 1:22 NA28)

[330] Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, ὁ *μάρτυς* ὁ πιστός(NA28).

because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus."[331] John's presence on the isle of Patmos is due to his unwillingness to separate himself from, or limit his exercise of, his testimony concerning Jesus.

Within the letters to the seven churches, Jesus commends "Antipas my witness, my faithful one," who was slain for his testimony (2:13). In 3:14, we read Τάδε λέγει ὁ Ἀμήν, ὁ μάρτυς ὁ πιστὸς καὶ ἀληθινός, where Jesus identifies himself in a manner similar to that which John had identified him in 1:5, as "the faithful and true witness."

We see μαρτυρίαν highlighted in 6:9, where those who had been slain for their *testimony* are to be found under the altar of God, crying out "how long?" (6:10) We encounter it again in chapter 11, where the two witnesses (11:3) operate, and whose deaths are described in verse 7, in which these two witnesses are slain after completing their *testimony*.[332] The through line of testimony or witness continues in 12:11 where a voice from heaven declares that the war with the dragon is won by "our brothers and sisters" (12:10) who "have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony" (12:11).[333] The description of this battle concludes with the dragon departing to wage war on the "children" of the woman, "those who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus" (12:17).[334]

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[331] Ἐγὼ Ἰωάννης, ὁ ἀδελφὸς ὑμῶν καὶ συγκοινωνὸς ἐν τῇ θλίψει καὶ βασιλείᾳ καὶ ὑπομονῇ ἐν Ἰησοῦ, ἐγενόμην ἐν τῇ νήσῳ τῇ καλουμένῃ Πάτμῳ διὰ τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τὴν *μαρτυρίαν* Ἰησοῦ (Rev 1:9 NA28).

[332] Καὶ ὅταν τελέσωσιν τὴν *μαρτυρίαν* αὐτῶν, τὸ θηρίον τὸ ἀναβαῖνον ἐκ τῆς ἀβύσσου ποιήσει μετ' αὐτῶν πόλεμον καὶ νικήσει αὐτοὺς καὶ ἀποκτενεῖ αὐτούς (Rev 11:7 NA28).

[333] καὶ αὐτοὶ ἐνίκησαν αὐτὸν διὰ τὸ αἷμα τοῦ ἀρνίου καὶ διὰ τὸν λόγον τῆς *μαρτυρίας* αὐτῶν (Rev 12:11 NA28).

[334] τῶν τηρούντων τὰς ἐντολὰς τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ ἐχόντων τὴν *μαρτυρίαν* Ἰησοῦ (Rev 12:17 NA28)

The scene described in 15:5, "After this I looked, and the temple of the tent of witness in heaven was opened"[335] engages the protology in eschatology of Revelation, by demonstrating that the temple, now lost, was a shadow of the one in heaven, and ties it to the theme of witness. That the scene is focused on this heavenly temple yet again coheres with a reality in which the earthly temple is now gone, while simultaneously reminding the reader that the earthly temple is patterned after the heavenly one (Exod 25:9, 40; 26:30; 27:8).[336] The deployment of the term "tent" or "tabernacle of witness" in relation to the temple alludes to the function of the Jerusalem temple as a place of witness concerning the existence and superiority of the God of Israel. Additionally, while "tabernacle of testimony," "tabernacle of witness," and "ark of the testimony," are mentioned frequently in the Pentateuch in somewhat interchangeable ways, this particular "concatenation"[337] is found, in slightly modified form, only in Num 9:15.[338] I suggest that the context of Num 9:15 is also significant, in that the immediately preceding text, Num 9:14, disclosed the Lords command that "the stranger" who keeps Passover is to be included in the assembly. This suggests that the various Hebrew Bible allusions which appear in Revelation are being chosen to emphasize the inclusive nature of the kingdom later to be described in the new Jerusalem (Rev 21). That very inclusiveness is being

[335] Καὶ μετὰ ταῦτα εἶδον, καὶ ἠνοίγη ὁ ναὸς τῆς σκηνῆς τοῦ *μαρτυρίου* ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ (Rev 15:5 NA28).

[336] Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, 878. Moses is shown the "pattern" of the temple, suggesting that what he is seeing and recording exists in the heavenly realm.

[337] Aune, *Revelation 6–16,* 877.

[338] Numbers 9:15 אֶת־הַמִּשְׁכָּן לְאֹהֶל הָעֵדֻת HBS; τὴν σκηνήν, τὸν οἶκον τοῦ μαρτυρίου· LXX. The LXX uses οἶκον instead of ναὸς, and rearranges the word order. Nevertheless, the combination in Num 9:15 stands apart from other Hebrew Bible references to the "tabernacle of testimony" or "ark of the testimony" in placing "testimony," "tabernacle," and "witness" together.

subtly, but consistently, presented as the mission with which John is charging his audience. Their *witness* is to have an outcome, the inclusion of the diverse multitudes described in Rev 5:9 and 7:9.

In Rev 17:6, John identifies the followers of the Lamb who are the victims of the murderous appetite of the woman Babylon as τῶν ἁγίων, "holy ones," and τῶν μαρτύρων, "witnesses," again disclosing the essential nature of those individual's faithful witness concerning Jesus in John's spiritual economy. We see the priority of "witness" emphasized again in 19:10, where John attempts to worship his angelic tour guide. In the angel's rebuke, he responds identifying himself as a "fellow servant with you and your brothers and sisters who hold the testimony of Jesus" and that "the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy."[339] The angel's description makes clear that the primary identity of followers of Jesus is as witnesses to his life, death, and lordship.

In the climactic scenes of Rev 20 we observe the high value placed on faithful, sacrificial witness, as those who are slain on account of their testimony on behalf of Jesus (διὰ τὴν μαρτυρίαν Ἰησοῦ) are granted to rule with Jesus in the much-debated thousand-year reign (Rev 20:4).[340]

The final warnings of this self-described prophetic revelation are marked by Jesus affirming his testimony three times: 1) in 22:16 "It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches;"[341] 2) in 22:18, where we read, "I testify that if

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[339] Ὅρα μή· σύνδουλός σού εἰμι καὶ τῶν ἀδελφῶν σου τῶν ἐχόντων τὴν *μαρτυρίαν* Ἰησοῦ· τῷ θεῷ προσκύνησον· ἡ γὰρ *μαρτυρία* Ἰησοῦ ἐστιν τὸ πνεῦμα τῆς προφητείας (Rev 19:10 NA28).

[340] See note 260.

[341] Ἐγὼ Ἰησοῦς ἔπεμψα τὸν ἄγγελόν μου *μαρτυρῆσαι* ὑμῖν ταῦτα ἐπὶ ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις (Rev 22:16 NA28).

anyone hearing the words of prophecy of this book adds anything to them, God will place upon them the plagues written in this book;"[342] and 3) 22:20, where the final declaration of, "The one who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon."[343] These final three appearances of forms of μαρτυρέω serve both as affirmations of the trustworthiness of the testimony recorded therein, as well as an ultimate declaration of the priority of witness in this text. Jesus is presented here as requiring his followers to be faithful witnesses, even as he is a faithful and truthful witness (Rev 1:5; 3:14).

As Brian Blount has aptly described it, African American preachers who shout the phrase "Can I Get a Witness?" are echoing one of the themes (arguably the most prominent) of the book of Revelation. This emphasis is reflected in the spiritual, "Witness," which opens with the words, "My soul is a witness for my Lord," and closes with challenge, "Who will be a witness for my Lord?"[344] These recurrent refrains in the African American ecclesial tradition sounds a call to all followers of Jesus to remain faithful and uncompromising in their testimony concerning Jesus. In Revelation, John paints a picture with his words in which one cannot overstate the value placed on that testimony, even if it costs one their life. This value is particularly significant in light of the anticipated product of that witness, the inclusion of an unlimited multitude from every people, tribe, tongue, and nation (Rev 5:9; 7:9). This vision is big enough to offset the grief and distress prompted by the news of Jerusalem's demise and the temple's destruction. And this vision of an expanded and renewed kingdom is manifested in the

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[342] *Μαρτυρῶ* ἐγὼ παντὶ τῷ ἀκούοντι τοὺς λόγους τῆς προφητείας τοῦ βιβλίου τούτου. ἐάν τις ἐπιθῇ ἐπ' αὐτά, ἐπιθήσει ὁ θεὸς ἐπ' αὐτὸν τὰς πληγὰς τὰς γεγραμμένας ἐν τῷ βιβλίῳ τούτῳ (Rev 22:18 NA28).

[343] Λέγει ὁ *μαρτυρῶν* ταῦτα· Ναί· ἔρχομαι ταχύ. (Rev 22:20 NA28).

[344] Work, *American Negro Songs and Spirituals,* 177-179.

promise of a new Jerusalem in which the temple is no longer needed to mediate God's presence (Rev 21).

A Synthetic Proposal

The various data points which we have reviewed so far lead me to a synthesis of the information they provide. This synthesis addresses the tensions found in the various motifs in the text and elevates the four-fold descriptions of diversity to a central place, not an incidental one. The question we have still failed to answer is the nature of the glory and honor of the nations of which we read in Rev 21:24 and 26. Their glory and honor is multiform, characterized by the four-fold diversity mentioned positively in Rev 5:9 and 7:9. *I propose that the glory and honor they bring is the witness of those nations concerning Jesus.* To reinforce this point, I will review the witness of the canonical Hebrew Bible and Christian scripture as to the fate of the nations, and the vision of inclusion which flows through these texts.

The Theological Anthropology of Culture in Scripture

Old Testament Allusions

Genesis 1–3

These origin stories remind us that each human being is a possessor of the *imago dei*, yet that image is shrouded, or co-mingled with our sinful proclivities as a result of The Fall of Adam and Eve. Hence, the cultures that humans produce reflect that comingling. The

incarnation of Jesus demonstrates that our humanness can be reclaimed by grace, the grace of the redemptive power of Jesus manifested in the cultures we create. The *imago dei* can be allowed to shine forth more perfectly when the gospel penetrates and is incarnated within a culture. That perfecting process is accomplished in the community of the faithful. It takes a community of believers to engage the process of critically incarnating the gospel, and that community is embedded in, or at least a product of, a particular culture. Yet, our respective cultural blind spots can only be exposed, or discerned, when we encounter other communities which have undertaken the task of incarnating the gospel within their respective cultures. What the text of Revelation reveals is that it takes a variety of cultural incarnations to approach the process of fully representing who Jesus is. Pope Francis affirms, "no single culture can exhaust the mystery of our redemption in Christ."[345] Revelation describes a vision of the church as a diverse and varied kingdom, a collective of cultural incarnations of the gospel, coming together to give more perfect witness to Jesus.

The "Nations"

In Rev 15:4b we read "All nations will come and worship before you…" The varying visions and declarations in Revelation all point back through the day of Pentecost to the Babel incident (Gen 11), drawing on protology to indicate the reversal that is taking place in the unfolding of the eschaton. While Gen 11 records the scattering of the nations, Rev 5:9 and 7:9 celebrate the diversity that was generated and the witness that is created by

[345] Francis, *Evangelii-Gaudium* (encyclical letter), *Vatican* website, 24 November 2013, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html, section 118.

the multitude's multicultural, multilingual praise. Later in Revelation, various four-fold phrases are used to describe the universality of captivity to the wiles of the serpent and his minions in 11:9, 13:7 and 17:15. Yet, 14:6 makes clear that the opportunity to repent will be extended to this same multinational throng encompassing the entirety of the earth. And ultimately, every nation on earth will be represented in collective worship of their creator, according to 15:4, as well as 21:24 and 26.

Distinctions in culture are introduced in the biblical witness in Gen 11. The familiar tale of the "Tower of Babel" indicates that God confused the languages of humanity, causing them to spread out over the earth and develop distinct cultures (Gen 11:1–9). While many interpreters suggest that the proliferation of cultures is a product of God's censure for the prideful attempt to erect a tower to reach the heavens, Theodore Hiebert takes a different view.[346] In his 2007 article, "The Tower of Babel and the Origin of the World's Cultures," Hiebert provides a thorough exegesis in support of his thesis that the story of Babel is etiological in nature, intended to explain the diversity of cultures on the earth.[347] Moreover, he finds no evidence of censure in the Hebrew language of the narrative.[348] He contends that this Yahwist version of the origin of cultures indicates that the correction initiated by God is of the refusal of the inhabitants of Babel to "fill the earth" (Gen 9:1–7), and of their intent to concentrate and create one culture in a single

[346] Theodore Hiebert, "The Tower of Babel and the Origin of the World's Cultures," *JBL* 126, no. 1 (2007): 29–58.

[347] Hiebert, "The Tower of Babel," 50.

[348] Hiebert, "The Tower of Babel," 52.

city. Consequently, cultural diversity is, in fact, God's own idea.[349] Conversely, homogenizing empire is not God's concept.

Given the theological accounts in Gen 1–3 describing the descent of humans from Adam and Eve, the cultures their descendants produce are reflections of the theological anthropology indicated in those three chapters. Humans are created in the image of God, able to produce beauty and meaning from the world, yet fallen, prone to corrupt and distort that capability. As such, the cultures they create reproduce mixed outcomes. Kwame Bediako explores the fecundity of this reality in his chapter "One Song in Many Tongues" in *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa*.[350] He describes the power of the theological insights revealed when biblical texts are translated into the vernacular, suggesting that "the full stature of Christ is revealed only as a fresh cultural entity is incorporated into the Church which is his body."[351] The theological anthropology implied in this statement is that every culture has vestiges of the truth about God imbedded in them. Missionaries, such as Don Richardson, have come to understand this and seek out commonalities and connections in the culture they are seeking to engage with the gospel. Richardson makes this clear and illustrates this principle in his 1974 book, *Peace Child*.[352] An earlier recognition of this can be found in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's reflections on international ecumenical gatherings, in which he states:

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[349] Hiebert, "The Tower of Babel," 58.

[350] Kwame Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa: History and Experience* (New York: Orbis Books, 2004), 77-82.

[351] Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa*, 79.

[352] Don Richardson, *Peace Child* (Ventura, CA: GL Publications, 1974).

> Isn't it also especially in the spirit of these conferences that, whenever we find ourselves face to face with someone who seems completely strange to us, whose concerns we cannot understand yet who surely has a right to be heard, we hear in the voice of this brother the very voice of Christ, and thus do not refuse to listen, but rather take this voice completely seriously, hear it, and love this other person just because of his or her strangeness to us?[353]

A Vision of Inclusive Worship of the Creator

When God makes the covenant with Abraham, God's intention to "bless the peoples of the earth" through the descendants of Abraham is made explicit (Gen 12:3; 22:18). That intention is reaffirmed in the theophanies experienced by Abraham's descendants Isaac (Gen. 26:4) and Jacob (Gen. 28:14).

God's purpose to see all the peoples of the earth come to worship the God of Israel is a prominent part of the prophetic tradition. We see this universal purpose addressed recurrently in several of the prophetic books (Isa 55:5; 66:18; Jer 3:19; 4:2; Dan 7:14; Mic 2:2–3; Zech 2:11; 8:22). While the primary focus of the Hebrew scriptures is God's dealings with Israel, we see a fascinating dynamic at work in Ps 102, a psalm of lament in which, in the midst of anguish over the destruction of Jerusalem, the psalmist declares:

> *Let this be written for a generation to come and for a people yet to be created,*
> *that they may praise the LORD.*
> *For the LORD looked down from His holy height, from heaven to earth he looked.*
> *To hear the groans of the prisoner, to set free the children of death;*
> *That the name of the LORD be recounted in Zion and his praise in Jerusalem,*
> *When the peoples are gathered together and the kingdoms to serve the LORD*.[354]

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[353] Dietrich Bonhoeffer et al., "Texts from Ecumenical Work: July–October 1932," in *Ecumenical, Academic, and Pastoral Work: 1931–1932: Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 11*, eds. Eberhard Amelung et al. (Minneapolis: 1517 Media, 2012), 352–353.

[354] Psalm 102:19–23, author's translation of HBS.

As John Goldingay points out in his 2006 commentary *Psalms*, this indicates that the biblical documents are being recorded so that future Israelites, as well as other peoples who had not yet come into existence, would read of God's dealings with Israel and become part of the assembly gathered to praise the Lord.[355] Andrew Witt observes that Ps 102 echoes Isa 49:6–13, 22–23 in placing special emphasis on the universality of the prophet's and the psalmist's visions.[356] As Frank-Lothar Hossfeld describes it in his 2011 commentary, Israel is to become the leader of "universal praise of God."[357] Psalm 67 echoes this call for the nations to worship the God of Israel:

> May God be gracious to us and bless us
> and make his face to shine upon us, *Selah*
> that your way may be known upon earth,
> your saving power among all nations.
> Let the peoples praise you, O God;
> let all the peoples praise you.
> Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,
> for you judge the peoples with equity
> and guide the nations upon earth. *Selah*
> Let the peoples praise you, O God;
> let all the peoples praise you.
> The earth has yielded its increase;
> God, our God, has blessed us.
> May God continue to bless us;
> let all the ends of the earth revere him. (Ps 67)

While Herms focuses on Ps 2 and Isa 60 as the basis for Revelation's imagery, I contend that Ps 102: 19–23 and Ps 67 are more influential as the background of Rev 21.

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[355] John Goldingay, *Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 158.

[356] Andrew Witt, "Hearing Psalm 102 within the Context of the Hebrew Psalter," *VT* 62, no. 4 (2012): 603.

[357] Frank-Lothar Hossfeld, "Psalm 102," in *Psalms 3,* eds. Erich Zenger et al. (Philadelphia; Edinburgh: Fortress, 2011), 25.

Matthew 28:18–20

The biblical witness concerning the inclusion of multiethnic expressions of devotion to the God of Israel is even more pronounced in the New Testament (John 4:21–26; 10:16; 12:20–23; Luke 13:29). Matthew 28:18–20 recounts that the final words of Jesus to his disciples were,

> And coming to them, Jesus spoke to them saying, "All authority has been given to me in heaven and upon (the) earth. Therefore, (while you are) going, make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things which I commanded you; And Behold! I am with you always until the end of the age.[358]

The key phrase in this passage is "make disciples of all the nations," (μαθητεύσατε πάντα τὰ ἔθνη). As disciples are formed and step forward from πάντα τὰ ἔθνη to express their faith in this Jewish Messiah, they bring new perspectives and new readings to the biblical texts. Some modern translations, in choosing the word "nations" to translate *ἔθνη* can lead current readers to assume that the writer of the Gospel of Matthew is referring to the modern nation-state. That is not the case. There are other Greek words the author could have chosen to convey that meaning, such as χώρα or πατρίς. The Greek word for "nations" or "gentiles" that has generated so much scholarly debate is *ἔθνη*, the root from which we derive our word "ethnic." The text has in mind that disciples are to be made from and among all the peoples (ethnic groups) of the world, of which there are many more than the number of political nations which currently exist on the planet. Each

[358] Author's translation.

people group on earth, each with its distinct language, worldview, and culture, was included in the commission recorded in Matt 28:19.

The Acts of the Apostles.

In the version of the final commission of the disciples by Jesus which we find in the book of Acts (Acts 1:8), the description of their task seems to assume a cultural grid. “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” The mention of Samaria would have brought to the minds of the disciples their nearby, but hostile kin, whose culture was similar but distinct from their own. The “ends of the earth” would unmistakably force them to engage other cultures. The subsequent miracle of tongues on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–12) made the cross-cultural mission of the church abundantly clear. As the account of the book of the Acts of the Apostles continues, Paul, Barnabas and others sought to fulfill that mandate. Yet, it was still the case that many of the first believers in Jesus, all Jews, struggled to accept that one did not have to become a Jew to be a follower of the Jewish Messiah. This controversy is described in Acts 15: 1–29. Yet the decision of the Jerusalem council which assembled to resolve this conflict was to prioritize the preservation of freedom from religious and cultural complications. While the Mosaic Law was specifically given to create purity among the Children of Israel, it also created a culture, or cultures. This is particularly clear when one considers the accretion of interpretive applications of the Mosaic Law, which differed between the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes. So, the decision of the Jerusalem council meant that, in addition to gentile converts not having to adopt Jewish

religious regulations, the council was also freeing gentiles from having to conform to Jewish culture in order to be followers of Christ.[359]

1 Corinthians

1 Corinthians, provides a fertile and nuanced picture of the dialectic of Christian unity and Christian particularity which Margaret Mitchell describes as a "letter of concord."[360] In 1 Cor. 9:20–23, the apostle Paul emphasizes his willingness to adapt to cultural particularity in order to clearly articulate the message of Jesus to various audiences.

> To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to gain Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might gain those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not outside God's law but am within Christ's law) so that I might gain those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might gain the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I might become a partner in it. (1 Cor 9:20–23)

Then, in 1 Cor 12 Paul describes the manner in which the various spiritual gifts present among the believers in Corinth all work together to build them up as a local manifestation or expression of the body of Christ. This imagery, which Dale Martin argues is an adaptation of Stoic philosophy's concept of a "civic body," makes clear the dependence of each member of the church at Corinth one upon another. The Stoics promoted a view that society is made up of different classes which all played their part in allowing "the body" to prosper. While the Stoic concept places elites and commoners in a

[359] Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, 32–33.

[360] Margaret Mary Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation: An Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians*, First American Edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 296–297.

hierarchical relationship, Martin argues that Paul subverts that notion by teaching that in the body of Christ no one is superior—rather all are necessary: [361]

> The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect, whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. (1 Cor 12: 21–26).

Such a view is readily applicable to the various cultural expressions of devotion to Christ, as well. I argue elsewhere that 1 Cor 12:27 makes clear that the church at Corinth is merely "a member of a part" of the larger body of Christ. In other words, each "part," whether distinct linguistically, genetically, tribally, or geographically, is an important part of the whole.[362]

The Apocalypse of John

As we have demonstrated, the celebration of the inclusion of a multitude whose diversity John describes using four-fold formulae begins in Rev 5:9, is highlighted again in Rev 7:9, and culminates in the kings of the earth entering the new Jerusalem in Rev 21: 24, 26. That the cultures represented are part of the witness to Christ is clearly declared in the worship scene of Rev 7:10, καὶ κράζουσιν φωνῇ μεγάλῃ λέγοντες· ἡ σωτηρία τῷ θεῷ ἡμῶν τῷ καθημένῳ ἐπὶ τῷ θρόνῳ καὶ τῷ ἀρνίῳ. "They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

[361] Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 46–47.

[362] Charles Gilmer, "An Alternate Translation of Μέλη Ἐκ Μέρους in 1 Corinthians 12:27," *Conversations with the Biblical World* 40 (2020): 44–68.

"Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb!" As the theme of witness in the book underscores, the testimony of those entering the new Jerusalem, those redeemed from the nations of the world, is a fitting contribution to the praise, honor, and glory which is being declared by the citizens of the kingdom of the Lamb.

As a final point of synthesis, the divergent Greek grammatical case of the phrases in Rev 21:24, and 21:26 suggests a distinction which contributes to our understanding of the message of the book. Rev 21:24 indicates that the kings of the earth "bring" (φέρουσιν) their glory into the new Jerusalem, a present active verb. In Rev 21:26 it reads that they (the kings of the earth) "*will* bring" (οἴσουσιν) their glory and honor into it, a future active verb. I suggest that the ongoing inclusion of people from every people, tribe, tongue, and nation which was already being observed in the time of John's recording the visions of Revelation is in view in Rev 21:24. There was an observable phenomenon that the testimony of diverse peoples and cultures were adding to the collective witness of the followers of Jesus. It was a process already in operation and which was occurring actively at that time. At the same time, Rev 21:26 describes an eschatological anticipation of a reality which had not yet come into full flower. Therein an expansion of the followers of Jesus is declared which would continue to increase in a manner which could only be expressed as Rev 7:9 does, "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages." This suggests ecclesiological implications and applications, which will be addressed in the next section.

Towards the Cultural Incarnational Ecclesiology Implied in Revelation[363]

This section builds on the insights of Kwame Bediako, Andrew Walls, and Lammen Sanneh to support the synthesis I am proposing, that the glory and honor of the nations described in Rev 21:24 and 26 is the witness of the four-fold multitudes described in Rev 5:9, 7:9. The approach of these scholars is from a missiological and theological one, observing a biblical theology of ethnicity/culture, which is emerging from the missiological practice of the twentieth century to produce an ecclesiological reality in the twenty-first century which I am calling a *cultural incarnational ecclesiology*. My thesis is that Revelation casts a vision and predicts a future in which the global church's understanding of the glory and honor of God and Jesus will only be filled out as the gospel is incarnated in the cultures of the world.[364] A cultural incarnational ecclesiology contends that each culture that encounters the gospel brings something distinct, in some cases unique, to the body of Christ's interpretation and understanding of the gospel. I will also examine the methods of Bénézet Bujo, Ada María Isasi-Diáz, and Kwok Pui-Lan, as well as contemporary scholar Dan Lee to seek elements toward synthesizing a method of theologizing in light of this cultural incarnational ecclesiology. As we have been demonstrating, the current reality of a multicultural witness to the person and work of Jesus was prophesied and depicted in the book of Revelation. I close the final chapter in this dissertation by illustrating the ethical obligation incumbent upon Western scholars and church leaders to create space, release power, and extend privilege in ecclesial

[363] The following section is excerpted and adapted from Charles Gilmer, "Toward a Cultural Incarnational Ecclesiology" *Journal of African Christian Thought,* Volume 25.2 December 2022.

[364] Kwame Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa*, 109.

discourse involving the world church and in the theological academy, so that these diverse ethnic and cultural voices may be heard, considered, and given credence as legitimate sources of theology. This will expand and enrich the understanding of the central theological claims of the Christian faith for a more diverse world church, adding to or augmenting the glory of the God of that church and of the Lamb, God's Messiah.

A Call to Oneness

The "High Priestly Prayer" of Jesus recorded at the end of the Gospel of John's pre-crucifixion farewell discourse indicates that Christian unity was of the utmost importance to Jesus. In John 17:20–23, he ties the unity of his followers to the credibility of their testimony that God, the Father, had indeed sent him. This may lead some to assume that all believers in Christ should be under one common, monocultural (in some cases, even monolingual) structure. However, the imagery of the book of Revelation anticipates an ecclesiology in which the body of Christ, the mystical, universal church, is composed of culturally incarnated expressions of those following Jesus which aid one another in understanding and representing the truth of God revealed in Jesus to an unbelieving world. This reality is creating a growing awareness among leaders and scholars of the power of the increasingly manifold witness of the church.

Sanneh, Walls, and Bediako—A Missiological Observation

In 1989 Gambian missiologist Lamin Sanneh published the original edition of *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture.* In this landmark volume, he describes the interactions of Christian missions with various cultures from the earliest

days of Christianity through the Constantinian era and on until the present day. He cites the apostle Paul as championing cultural pluralism in the nascent church with his mission to the gentiles.[365] He argues that when Christianity is translated into vernacular cultures, it enjoys its greatest influence within those cultures.[366] He observes that Christianity's complicity with empire has a stultifying effect on the faith.[367] This is, of course, consonant with the message we have discerned in the book of Revelation. As one evidence of his claim, Sanneh notes the accelerated growth of the church in Africa after the end of colonial rule.[368] He addresses the power of vernacular language, forms, and practices, noting that translation of the faith into various cultures, particularly via the translation of the Christian scriptures into vernacular languages, has the effect "that God's intervention in the Word made flesh is ground for embracing all flesh—and the words for it—as clean."[369] Sanneh does not perceive this creating a sacralization of culture. Rather, he underscores the critical effect the gospel has on a culture when inculturated in the vernacular. He describes the process of inculturation as "a force for cultural relativism, although in proclaiming the saving acts of God it brings culture under the judgment of God rather than promoting culture as a moral absolute."[370] We see this dynamic of judgment graphically illustrated in the Apocalypse of John. Yet, that

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[365] Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 55.

[366] Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 60.

[367] Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 11, 42, 81.

[368] Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 162.

[369] Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 250.

[370] Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 133.

judgment is tempered by the affirmation of culture embedded in the texts of Rev 5:9, 7:9, 21:24 and 26.

Scottish missionary and missiologist Andrew Walls does a similar survey of Christian history in his 2002 book, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, in which he joins Sanneh in describing the shift of the geographic center of Christianity from Europe and North America to the Southern hemisphere.[371] Walls examines the letter to the Ephesians to establish that the first-century church was "not about cultural homogeneity; cultural diversity was built into the church by the decision not to enforce the Torah." He goes on to declare that "The very height of Christ's full stature is reached only by the coming together of the different cultural entities into the body of Christ."[372] He quotes Lesslie Newbigin in describing the emerging interdependence of Western Christianity and non-Western expressions of the faith. "We need their witness to correct ours, as indeed they need ours to correct theirs. …we imperatively need one another if we are to be faithful witnesses to Christ."[373] Walls invokes Newbigin to promote a cultural incarnational ecclesiology.

Kwame Bediako, a student of Andrew Walls, addresses the significance of inculturation more extensively as a Ghanaian teaching theology in Ghana in his 2004 work, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa: History and Experience*. Bediako quotes Schumacher who chides the West for failing to recognize that Third World churches are

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[371] Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process*, 63–64.

[372] Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process*, 77.

[373] Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process*, 69, who cites Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).

"new incarnations of the Church in cultures having their own contribution to make to the fullness of the people of God."[374] He closes *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa* with a chapter calling on the academy and the church to recognize that the future of theology is one in which culturally incarnationally expressed Christianities interact with one another to arrive at a more accurate and full understanding of our shared faith. Bediako contends that "The promise of Pentecost has been fulfilled more abundantly than on the first day and the cross-cultural mission now comes into its own, for the whole Church has more opportunity to hear and share the Gospel as all of us 'hear in our own languages [contexts, cultures and nations] about the great things that God has done' (Acts 2:11)."[375] Bediako agrees with Walls that our ecclesiology must recognize the incarnation of Christ being expressed within the cultures of the world.

Pope Francis has accelerated the Vatican II movement towards inculturation within Roman Catholicism. In *Evangelii Gaudium* he describes the church as composed of "many faces," specifically affirming inculturated expressions of devotion to Christ.[376] He echoes Pope John Paul II[377] when he describes the reality that "no single culture can exhaust the mystery of our redemption in Christ."[378] This insight adds a powerful

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[374] Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa*, 109; citing John Schumacher, "The Third World and the Twentieth Century Church," in *Mission Trends No. 1: Crucial Issues in Mission Today*, eds. Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky (New York: Paulist Press; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 205–214. First published in *Concilium*, September 1971.

[375] Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa*, 118.

[376] Francis, *Evangelii-Gaudium*, sections 115–118.

[377] John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Ecclesia in Asia (6 November 1999), 20: *AAS* 92 (2000), 478–482.

[378] Francis, *Evangelii-Gaudium*, section 118.

dimension to our understanding of cultural incarnational ecclesiology. The mystery of God expressed and incarnated in Jesus requires the contribution of the insights and witness of various cultures which have received the gospel and translated it into their own receiving culture, producing a distinct witness to Jesus. No one distinct witness can claim to possess a perfect or complete understanding of Jesus. All are required to help the church draw closer to the truth of Jesus.

These scholars and ecclesial leaders have observed what the book of Revelation reveals prophetically. Revelation anticipates and celebrates that the Christian church will become geographically, linguistically, and culturally more diverse, and globally inclusive. History has made that vision increasingly real.[379] The visions of worship around the throne in the book of Revelation (Rev 5:9; 7:9; 21: 24, 26; 22:2–5) cohere with such a culturally incarnated ecclesiology.

Theologians of various traditions are recognizing the challenge faced when discussing ecclesiology in light of the burgeoning manifestation of a world church, as well as the opportunity therein. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen recently updated his earlier work, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology: Historical, Global, and Interreligious Perspectives,* in which he surveys the state of ecclesiological discourse.[380] He understandably begins with the Orthodox and Roman Catholic understanding of ecclesiology, which has historically been focused on their historical split from one another. He cites Catholic theologian Hans

[379] Pew Research Center, "Key Findings From the Global Religious Futures Project," December 21, 2022. https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/12/21/key-findings-from-the-global-religious-futures-project/; see also Barry Whitworth, "Good news! Christianity is growing around the world!" Baptist Resource Network, February 5, 2024. https://www.brnunited.org/news/good-news-christianity-is-growing-around-the-world/.

[380] Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology: Historical, Global, and Interreligious Perspectives* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2021).

Küng as indicating that there is a growing recognition that "differences in and of themselves can now be seen as assets."[381] Kärkkäinen describes Reformed icon John Calvin as preserving the Roman Catholic view that citizenship in an earthly realm as synonymous with church membership.[382] Kärkkäinen credits the Radical Reformers of Europe as having recognized the dangers of conflation of the church and the state, long before many Western countries recognized the dangers inherent with Constantinianism.[383] In Kärkkäinen's analysis, the Pentecostal/Charismatic movements within the various church communions have been harbingers of a "multicultural, multinational" ecclesial reality.[384] Pentecostal emphases on the supernatural and on missions, as well as their disconnection from imperial sponsorship have made them key players in indigenization and inculturation of the Christian message around the globe for the past 125 years.[385]

Kärkkäinen champions contextual theology, a step towards a cultural incarnational ecclesiology, yet he admits that "only some theologians are mindful of and readily acknowledge the contextuality of their theologies."[386] He asserts emphatically that

[381] Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology*, 42.

[382] Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology*, 61.

[383] Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology*, 71–72.

[384] Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology*, 83–84.

[385] Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology*, 89.

[386] Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology*, 97.

"theologizing can no longer be the privilege of one culture only. It is going to be a global, interrelated enterprise."[387]

Before leaving this brief ecclesiological survey, our decolonial African American hermeneutic warrants an opportunity to express its ecclesiological perspective. African Americans have long articulated a view of the church which is not demonstrated via systematic propositional treatises.[388] It is manifested in the spirituals, hymnody, and the variety of church practices which have characterized the range of African American churches.[389] As noted in Chapter 2, the spiritual "I Got Shoes" reflects that Black American Christians have long held the view that not all who are members of local congregations are true Christians.[390] As such, African American views of ecclesiology tend to focus on the mystical, invisible church rather than the institutional one. At the same time, there has been a dogged determination to build and maintain black denominations in the U.S. as safe harbors for the dignity and agency of African American followers of Jesus.[391] Albert Raboteau notes that while doctrinal and polity differences resulted in an assortment of Black denominations, "black Christians shared more with

[387] Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology*, 98.

[388] Vincent W. Lloyd, *Religion of the Field Negro: On Black Secularism and Black Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 5.

[389] Kärkkäinen *An Introduction to Ecclesiology,* 155, n. 43. Kärkkäinen acknowledges the wide spectrum of fellowships which are typically considered "Black churches" in the African diaspora, citing Anthony Reddie's work, "Black Ecclesiologies," in RCCC, 445–449.

[390] Emilie M. Townes, "Cultural Boundaries and African American Theology," in *The Oxford Handbook of African American Theology*, ed. Katie G. Cannon and Anthony B. Pinn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 485.

[391] Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones*, 79.

each other than they did with white Christians of the same denominations."[392] As a result, certain ecclesiological understandings can be observed across these black organizations. The book of Revelation played and continues to play a significant role in these varied understandings of the church.[393] The theme of *witness* adroitly surfaced by Brian Blount is manifested in the traditions of "testimony time" and in the traditional sermonic close in which the preacher is expected to walk through the crucifixion and resurrection as a "witness" to the reality of Jesus.[394] Another connection with *witness* appears in Raboteau's report of the prominence of conversion narratives in the black church tradition.[395] Finally, the black church sees its role as a prophetic one in relation to this nation, like unto the book of Revelation's scathing diatribes against the kingdoms of the earth which persist in rebellion to the Lamb (Rev 16:9–11).[396]

This raises a question as we approach the end of our study which will be addressed via three excursuses. How can the church begin living into the cultural incarnational ecclesiology we have discerned in the book of Revelation?

[392] Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones*, 108.

[393] Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones*, 155.

[394] Charles Gilmer, "An African American Christology Based on an Archetypal Folk Chanted Sermon Close," *Black Theology* 20, no. 2 (May 2022): 184–97.

[395] Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones*, 155.

[396] Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones*, 186–187.

EXCURSUS 1 - LIVING INTO A CULTURAL INCARNATIONAL ECCLESIOLOGY

Kwok Pui-lan's *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz's *En La Lucha*, and Bénézet Bujo's *Foundations of an African Ethic* supply key features required for the church to "live into" a culturally incarnational ecclesiology. I hope to synthesize these features in a preliminary summary.

I imagine that for most people the idea of a culturally inclusive conception of the church is an attractive idea. The problem is how to alter our thinking, our theologizing, and our behavior to move towards this biblical vision. One challenge is that those who sit in the center of privilege and power will find it difficult to discern the ways they are perpetuating the "imperial gaze" invoked by E. Ann Kaplan in her 1996 book *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film, and the Imperial Gaze.*[397] The phrase "Imperial Gaze" summarizes the ways in which Western scholars observe, catalogue, conceptualize, judge, and ultimately seek to intellectually possess and ideologically marginalize those not in the imperial center as described in Edward Said's 1979 classic, *Orientalism*.[398] Biblical and religious studies have participated in this[399] and a dynamic of "pedagogical imperialism" still operates, according to Willie James Jennings.[400]

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[397] E. Ann Kaplan, *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film, and the Imperial Gaze* (London; New York: Routledge, 1996).

[398] Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 25th Anniversary Edition (New York: Doubleday, 1979), 97,117, 310.

[399] Said, *Orientalism*, 17, 51, 18, 202.

[400]Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*, Kindle Edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), location 3440 of 8980.

We shall look to four academics who define themselves as operating on the margins of the academic theological discourse, Kwame Bediako, Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, Daniel Lee, and Kwok Pui-lan in order to develop a synthesis of how the twenty-first century church can move closer to enacting a cultural incarnational ecclesiology. To do so will require the cultivation of the ability to imagine interactions within the world church which defy the imperialistic structures embedded in the neo-liberal world order as well as the "ecclesial imperialism" Jennings cites Daniel Castro as discerning.[401]

Three Awarenesses and a Proposed Process

In her 2005 book *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, Kwok Pui-lan recommends three components of a developing postcolonial imagination, *historical imagination*, *dialogical imagination*, and *diasporic imagination*.[402] Postcolonial imagination will be required, given the history of mission operating in concert with imperialism, as Sanneh notes,[403] and Pui-lan documents.[404]

[401] Jennings, *Christian Imagination*, location 2288 of 8980, where he cites Daniel Castro, *Another Face of Empire: Bartolomé de Las Casas, Indigenous Rights, and Ecclesiastical Imperialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

[402] Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 3.

[403] Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 57, 81, 90, 157.

[404] Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination,* 31–32.

Historical Imagination

Colonialism and its heirs have crafted narratives that lionize their colonists, explorers, and warriors and which dehumanize the colonized.[405] The tales the colonists have told (and their descendants continue to tell) remove subjectivity from the colonized.[406] There is clearly a need to continue to cultivate, unearth, and platform corrective narratives to counter the disingenuous myth-systems that sacralize imperial aspirations, exploitations and normative assumptions. This is suggestive of the *proyecto histórico* of which Ada María Isazi-Díaz writes.[407] The tragedies that have been enacted upon colonized peoples by colonial empires must be a part of the educational curriculum. The agency exercised by the colonized whether through revolution, subversiveness, or resilience must be communicated to the generations that follow.[408] In light of these histories Christians should lead the way in truth-telling and restorative justice efforts.

I saw a telling example of this when I visited the Victoria Memorial in Kolkata, West Bengal, India in 2017. Funded and constructed in the early twentieth century by the British Raj, this impressive example of neo-classical architecture displays the history of India. Walking through the exhibit, one could see multiple places where the original descriptions of the artifacts and exhibits had been "erased" and replaced by new definitions and descriptions provided by indigenous scholars and archivists. A textual

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[405] Said, *Orientalism*, 49.

[406] Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination,* 36.

[407] Ada María Isasi-Diáz, *En La Lucha—in the Struggle: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 52-61.

[408] Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination,* 36–37.

example from here in the United States is Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz's 2014 work, *An Indigenous People's History of the United States,* which exposes the genocidal reality of European settler colonialism in the US, including a damning description of the "Doctrine of Discovery" promulgated by Pope Alexander VI.[409] Another is, of course, Edward Said's *Orientalism*.

Perhaps most relevant to an African American decolonial hermeneutic is the case of the US Colored Troops which fought for the Union during the American Civil War. While Southern racists have cultivated the "Lost Cause" narrative to claim morality and dignity for the attempt of the southern states to secede from the United States, they have also trafficked in the notion that Blacks were not agents in their own liberation. Yet, historians are clear that without the involvement of Black soldiers the Northern states would likely not have prevailed.[410] The U.S. Army's own website reports:

> The first military action involving a black regiment was the Battle of Island Mound (Missouri), at which the 1st Kansas Colored Volunteers were instrumental in ensuring a Union victory. USCT regiments also served heroically at the Battle of the Crater (Virginia), the Battle of Chaffin's Farm (Virginia), the Battle of Fort Wagner (South Carolina), and the Battle of Nashville (Tennessee). They were also among soldiers at the fall of Richmond (Virginia) and were present when the Army of Northern Virginia surrendered at Appomattox.
>
> By the end of the Civil War, there were 175 USCT regiments, containing 178,000 soldiers, approximately 10% of the Union Army. The mortality rate for these units was exceeding high. One of every five black soldiers in the conflict died, a 35% higher rate than other troops. In the process, sixteen USCT soldiers earned the Medal of Honor for their Civil War service.[411]

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[409] Pope Alexander VI, *1493 Inter Caetera: Division of the Undiscovered World between Spain and Portugal*, https://www.papalencyclicals.net/alex06/alex06inter.htm.

[410] Jim Percoco, "The United States Colored Troops" American Battlefield Trust. https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/united-states-colored-troops.

[411] Paul-Thomas Ferguson, **"**A History of African American Regiments in the U.S. Army," Joint Munitions Command. February 11, 2021. https://www.army.mil/article/243284/a_history_of_african_american_regiments_in_the_u_s_army.

While some seek to suppress stories such as this one, Historical Imagination requires African Americans to acquire such knowledge in order to offset the stereotypes perpetuated by white supremacist influences in the United States.

Theologically, and ecclesiologically, what is implied by *Historical Imagination* is a definitive declaration of the non-normativity of European Christianity and its theological inheritors. I observe that this is difficult, even for those from majority world communities, due to the hegemonic influence of European colonialism, both modern and neo-liberal, including the economic and academic imperialism practiced by the United States. This breeds a presumptiveness in ecclesiological and theological conversations that pervades a host of interactions. Which leads to our next area of imaginative development.

Dialogical Imagination

Kwok Pui-lan also recommends *Dialogical Imagination*. *Dialogical Imagination* is her description of the attempt to recover an authentic translation process.[412] She laments the difficulty Asian scholars have in theologizing in authentically Asian ways due to the intellectual hegemony exercised by the Western academy.[413] Even in Asia, the academy continues to build upon the Western intellectual and theological tradition. She acknowledges the difficulty in achieving this dialogue, in light of the distorting effects of the colonial period and the pernicious effects of the "unholy alliance of capitalism,

[412] Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination,* 38–39.

[413] Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination,* 41.

patriarchy and Neo-Confucianism."[414] Scholars from minoritized communities are forced to master the languages and literature of the European empires, which we see reflected in the self-admitted Eurocentrism of the scholarly sources in Edward Said's *Orientalism,*[415] and James Cone's *Black Theology of Liberation.*[416]

Perhaps the way we need to think about *Dialogical Imagination* is to privilege the accounts of the marginalized in theological discourse, as many Liberation theologians have suggested. James Cone declares that "Oppressed blacks and other people of color are the only signs of hope for the creation of a new humanity in America."[417] Bediako notes that non-Western Christian theologians "pose all sorts of questions and produce a whole range of problems for which our theological knowledge, gained through study in the West, has not prepared us."[418] Ada Maria Isasi-Diáz goes even further, pioneering a methodology by which the theological academy can build theology from the people who represent the communities and traditions from which non-Western theologians hail.[419] The esoteric and speculative topics often explored by Western academicians may have to

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[414] Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination,* 4.

[415] Said, *Orientalism*, 339. There he admits that "…my work is correctly perceived as Eurocentric in its texts..." He cites this as a reason that his work has not been nearly as constructively received in the Arab world.

[416] James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), x, 5. On page x of his 1997 Introduction, he notes that some Black theologians felt that he gave too little attention to African sources of Black (American) theology. On page 5 he describes the disconnect between his Eurocentric education and his Black college students who knew Jesus, but not based on the propositional truths he had studied at Garret.

[417] Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 203.

[418] Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa*, 79.

[419] Isasi-Diaz, *En La Lucha*, 180–181. This is also in keeping with the position of Vincent Lloyd, *Religion of the Field Negro*, 5.

be reduced to make room for those wrestling with the theological implications of the inculturation and incarnation of the gospel within their own cultures. As both Pui-lan and Isasi-Diaz have discussed, trained theologians from marginalized or colonized populations may struggle to turn their attention to the lived experience of those inhabiting their cultures of origin.[420] Our minds have been colonized, even as our homelands were. The questions we take up must be the ones people "in the pews" are actually asking, not ones scholars a generation ago (or more) were positing. Yet, the modified apprenticeship structure of PhD programs predisposes new candidates to formulate questions based on their advisor's interests and concerns. This is an impediment to innovative and adaptive contextual questions, particularly as the pace of cultural evolution and hybridization accelerates. The latter leads to Kwok Pui-Lan's final conception of the imaginative challenge.

Diasporic Imagination

Kwok Pui-lan's description of diasporic thinking has powerful linkages to the creation of the transcultural dialogue entailed in a cultural incarnational ecclesiology. She delineates the extent and diversity of diasporic experience.[421] While the term "diaspora" originated relative to Jewish people experiencing scattering and dispersion from their homeland in Palestine, it is often invoked to describe those who have migrated to, through, and at the behest of colonial centers to populate regions in which their cultures were previously

[420] Isasi-Diaz, *En La Lucha*, 180; Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination*, 39. This also coheres with the thought of Spivak.

[421] Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination*, 44–45.

unknown.[422] Theologians and other academics from colonized populations typically enter a diasporic experience in order to be trained for their professions. The ability of majority world scholars to retain the connections required to exegete the lived experience and grass roots theology of their cultures of origin is thereby structurally impeded.[423] While such diasporic scholars possess the ability to speak from and to the two poles of the colonial dyad, Pui-lan's challenge extends to those who originate in the metropoles.[424]

Here I invoke the biblical concept of "sojourners" to recommend that we all dissociate from our essentialized perceptions of ethnic or cultural superiority, and recognize that we are all pilgrims, originating in one land (our culture of origin, however we define it—*if* we have defined it), existing in another, on our way to yet a third (or fourth or fifth). As Christian theologians, we are inheritors of the declaration of Jesus that "My kingdom does not belong to this world. If my kingdom did belong to this world, my attendants [would] be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not here."[425] As followers of Jesus, we are all on our way to an eschatological reality, rendering each of our earthly identities transitory whether national, political, or economic. As we interact, write, and respond to one another, a Diasporic Imagination affords us the opportunity to adopt a posture of alertness to the lessons which

[422] Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination*, 45.

[423] Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination*, 47.

[424] Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination*, 49.

[425] John 18:36 NEB.

can be derived from another culture, particularly from another culture's engagement with, and expression of, the gospel of Jesus Christ.[426]

[426] While Pui-lan has abandoned an orthodox position on the soteriological uniqueness of Jesus, the concept of *diasporic imagination* remains not only fruitful, but an expression of a biblical concept (Rev 5:9; 7:9).

I will take a moment to describe this cultural incarnational ecclesiology conceptually, yet, in keeping with Bujo and Isasi-Diaz, I believe this ecclesiology has little meaning unless it is accompanied by *praxis*, which will be illustrated in our final excursus, Excursus 3.

Cultural Incarnational Ecclesiology in Brief

A cultural incarnational ecclesiology believes that the incarnation of Jesus Christ, while a singular event, has several components which make it significant for our view of the church. In keeping with my African American hermeneutic, by "church" I mean the universal, invisible church, which includes all true believers, whatever their church communion may be. That church is comprised of individuals who have come to know Jesus in the context of a community. The translation and inculturation process so aptly described by Sanneh provides that there are varieties of expression of what it means to follow Jesus, which Bujo, Bediako, Isasi-Diaz, and Kwok Pui-Lan all agree are shaped by culture. As Bujo, Bediako, and Isasi-Diaz cogently argue, these expressions of faithfulness to Jesus are all legitimate, adding something to our collective awareness of Jesus. The incarnation gives sanction to this process, as the incarnation of Jesus was to and within a particular culture—1st century Palestinian Judaism. The Jerusalem council of Acts 15 determined that one does not have to be a practicing Jew to be a follower of Jesus. Therefore, the church has taken on various characteristics depending on the language (and thereby culture) into which it has been translated, or, in keeping with the description which we are extrapolating from Revelation 5:9 and 7:9, in which it has been incarnated. This is the local manifestation of cultural incarnational ecclesiology.

On a catholic scale, the principle delineated earlier from 1 Cor 12:27 pertains. Each respective cultural incarnation of the gospel/Jesus/the church is a part of the universal church—the body of Christ. As such, each of these cultural incarnations sheds a slightly different light on what it means to embody Christ. No one culture, or its particular philosophical heritage, has the ability to exhaust all that God and Jesus Christ are and what they mean. Therefore, as the church continues to recognize its world penetrating character, and its deep, rich diversity, it is incumbent upon it to recognize this epistemic principle as its reality, and function accordingly.

Cultural Incarnational Ecclesiology in Praxis

Asian American scholar Daniel Lee proposes the idea of cultural archetypes as a heuristic to generate the means to negotiate various perspectives on the biblical text in his 2016 essay, "Cultural Archetypes for a Theology of Culture in a Global Age."[427] He suggests that a dialectical relationship exists between Cultural Archetypes, analyzing the thought of Lingenfelter, Newbigin, Calvin, and Luther against this approach. Lee's interpretation of non-Christian cultures is driven by his intense view of the Fall, driving him to a condemnation of all human cultures as utterly sinful, in need of redemption.[428] His assessment seems to discount the significance of the *imago dei* and the incarnation. Not only are human beings capable of generating beauty and other virtues as a result of being created in God's image, the incarnation of Jesus, by which his divinity was enfleshed in

[427] Daniel Lee, "Cultural Archetypes for a Theology of Culture in a Global Age," *Cultural Encounters* 12, no. 1 (2016): 41–42.

[428] Lee, "Cultural Archetypes," 50.

the particularity of first-century Jewish culture, demonstrates the ability to critique a culture, while operating fully within it.

Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz's *mujerista theology* provides two insights which I would like to highlight. M*ujerista theology* gives specific voice to Latin American women, yet the issues surfaced therein have benefit to other audiences, at points transcending the concerns of that demographic. One is her emphasis on "grassroots" theology, sourcing her theological reflections on a synthesis of the lived experience of Latina Christians.[429] This provides a corrective to the (Western) academic imperialism experienced by the trained theologian. Secondly, she describes a dialogical process in which she listens intently to the stories of these "grassroots theologians" and then reflects those stories, and her synthesis of them, back to her dialogue partners.[430] In this way, she models a process for documenting, validating, and critiquing grassroots contextual theology. As Isasi-Diaz puts it, "…*mujerista theology* evaluates culture from within."[431] This critical contextualization is an important aspect of the intracultural incarnation process.

Bénézet Bujo offers the African traditional Palaver as a model for cultivating unity in cultural diversity within the world Christian communion.[432] He offers the Word (Christian scriptures) as the focal point of this Christian Palaver.[433] In other words, the

[429] Isasi-Diaz, *En La Lucha*, 80-96.

[430] Isasi-Diaz, *En La Lucha*, 87–89.

[431] Isasi-Diaz, *En La Lucha*, 37.

[432] Bénézet Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality*, trans. Brian McNeil (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2001), 146.

[433] Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic*, 150–153.

beginning point of any cross-cultural incarnational ecclesial exchange must be the biblical texts, not the philosophical theologies emanating from, developed, and often defended by Western scholars. He is not suggesting that the Western traditions are illegitimate, but rather that "the interpretation generated by this Western thinking may not present itself as more than one of many possible models. It cannot become the norm for all cultures."[434] While he is rather diplomatic in forming the thought, he also suggests a hermeneutic of suspicion concerning tradition, in light of its dependence on Greco-Latin philosophical concepts.[435] Such an approach may seem radical, even disrespectful, but any less will fail to unencumber the conversation from historical patterns of domination and control.[436] A process which honors the cultural incarnational reality of the universal church will need grace to seek the truth beyond or apart from Eurocentric formulations, whether Roman Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant. As Sanneh has pointed out, despite their rallying cry of *sola scriptura*, the Protestant European Magisterial Reform movements (such as Lutheranism and Calvinism) were at times resistant to the vernacular translation required for an incarnational witness within cultures which were newly exposed to the gospel.[437]

[434] Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic*, 157.

[435] Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic*, 156–157.

[436] Linda Hogan and Kristin Heyer, "Beyond a Northern Paradigm: Catholic Theological Ethics in Global Perspective." *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 39, no. 1 (January 1, 2019): 21–38.

[437] Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 90.

Penultimate Conclusions.

Oneness in the Christian community, when it can be found, does provide credibility to the gospel. Our lack thereof contradicts it, which is much more the perception of most people. While the modern missionary movement has generated a proliferation of Christian faith around the globe, manifesting itself in cultures which had not previously encountered the message of Jesus, the church struggles to express oneness, both ecumenically, and within various church communions. To achieve, or move towards oneness will require a postcolonial imagination, much like that described by Kwok Pui-lan: one that practices Historical Imagination, Dialogical Imagination and Diasporic Imagination.

Historical Imagination needs to be characterized by truth-telling. The experience of those who have suffered oppression and exploitation must be allowed to be seen, heard, and dealt with. Such a practice coheres with Isasi-Diaz's *Proyecto Historico* among *mujerista* theologians. As those who are the beneficiaries of that history discover the privilege which they have inherited at the expense of other communities, cultures and populations, confession and repentance are in order (1 John 1:9). Lev. 26:40–42 prescribes the appropriate response of the covenant people of God when they realize they are dealing with the consequences of a previous generation's sin. The transgenerational obligation for such is seen in Lev 26:40–42:

> But if they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their ancestors—their treachery against me and also their continued hostility to me, **41** so that I in turn was hostile to them and brought them into the land of their enemies—if, then, their uncircumcised heart is humbled and they make amends for their iniquity, **42** then will I remember my covenant with Jacob; I will remember also my covenant with Isaac and also my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land. (Lev 26:40-42)

The prayer of Daniel in Dan 9 illustrates such repentance and confession:

> Then I turned to the Lord God to seek an answer by prayer and supplication with fasting and sackcloth and ashes. I prayed to the Lord my God and made confession, saying, "Ah, Lord, great and awesome God, keeping covenant and steadfast love with those who love you and keep your commandments, we have sinned and done wrong, acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments and ordinances. We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes, and our ancestors, and to all the people of the land.
>
> "Righteousness is on your side, O Lord, but open shame, as at this day, falls on us, the people of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and all Israel, those who are near and those who are far away, in all the lands to which you have driven them because of the treachery that they have committed against you. Open shame, O Lord, falls on us, our kings, our princes, and our ancestors because we have sinned against you. To the Lord our God belong mercy and forgiveness, but we have rebelled against him and have not obeyed the voice of the Lord our God by following his laws, which he set before us by his servants the prophets.
>
> "All Israel has transgressed your law and turned aside, refusing to obey your voice. So the curse and the oath written in the law of Moses, the servant of God, have been poured out upon us because we have sinned against you. He has confirmed his words that he spoke against us and against our rulers by bringing upon us a calamity so great that what has been done against Jerusalem has never before been done under the whole heaven. Just as it is written in the law of Moses, all this calamity has come upon us. We did not entreat the favor of the Lord our God, turning from our iniquities and reflecting on his fidelity. So the Lord kept watch over this calamity until he brought it upon us. Indeed, the Lord our God is right in all that he has done, for we have disobeyed his voice.
>
> "And now, O Lord our God, who brought your people out of the land of Egypt with a mighty hand and made your name renowned even to this day—we have sinned, we have done wickedly. O Lord, in view of all your righteous acts, let your anger and wrath, we pray, turn away from your city Jerusalem, your holy mountain; because of our sins and the iniquities of our ancestors, Jerusalem and your people have become a disgrace among all our neighbors. Now therefore, O our God, listen to the prayer of your servant and to his supplication, and for your own sake, Lord, let your face shine upon your desolated sanctuary. Incline your ear, O my God, and hear. Open your eyes and look at our desolation and the city that bears your name. We do not present our supplication before you on the ground of our righteousness but on the ground of your great mercies. O Lord, hear; O Lord, forgive; O Lord, listen and act and do not delay! For your own sake, O my God, because your city and your people bear your name!" (Daniel 9:3-19)

Daniel offers this prayer despite his portrayal in the tales of the previous chapters as personally having committed none of the sins which he confesses. He is confessing on behalf of his ancestors, identifying with the wrongs of a previous generation in order to remove the consequences his generation is suffering.

Dialogical imagination requires the cultivation of the practice of making space for and giving attention to conversation partners who do not share our culture, nor the other indices of our social location, be they economic, educational, political, or linguistic (translational difficulties notwithstanding). The dialogical challenge operates on two fronts: 1) within a particular former colonized culture, those who are theologically trained must work to hear from "everyday Christians" and speak meaningfully with them in order to discern what is, in fact, the lived theology of their community. Again, Isasi-Diaz has provided a valuable case study of the value and productivity of listening to the lived experience of those at the grassroots; 2) Cross-culturally, there is a particular challenge for those who possess privilege and power, or are from the communities which enjoy such, to meaningfully engage those who are speaking from marginalized, oppressed or dispossessed communities. Bujo's Palaver Process provides a hopeful methodology for achieving this end.

Kwok Pui-lan's third imaginative emphasis, Diasporic Imagination, seems to flow from the first two. Diasporic Imagination addresses the dynamic fluidity of a theologian's social, cultural, and intellectual location. The Christian community is, in one sense, now a dispersion. We are dispersed geographically, linguistically, culturally, and ecclesially. Shanell Smith's caution about marginalized scholars attending to their own privilege, based on Spivak's work delineating our obligation to represent the subaltern, is well

founded.[438] The challenge facing the twenty-first century theologian is to become adroit at negotiating the ebbs and flows, awareness and ignorance, competencies and incompetencies that are inherent in a diasporic reality. This sort of awareness is a frontal activity for those of us who are from marginalized communities. It is incumbent on those born into privilege to recognize and embrace the need to develop a Diasporic mindset, one that sees their history, culture, assets, and experiences as non-normative, but one of many social locations from which, and in which, one can incarnate the gospel. Additionally, we all must engage a personal accounting of the power we wield. For example, as an African American cis-gender male I enjoy privilege and power as a male, while at the same time experiencing marginality as an African American.

[438] Smith, *The Woman Babylon,* 179-181.

EXCURSUS 3 - AN EXAMPLE OF A CULTURAL INCARNATIONAL ECCLESIOLOGY IN PRAXIS

The Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church (CTEWC) initiative founded by James Keenan is an expression of a recognition of cultural incarnational ecclesiology. Its intentional effort to include and platform scholars from the "global South" recognizes the need to engage a Postcolonial imagination, in its historical, dialogical, and diasporic dimensions.[439] Its practice of securing funding so that scholars from the global South can participate in global conferences is a significant expression of "…ethical vigilance and epistemic humility…"[440] In 2006, 175 of 400 attendees at their global gathering were from the global South. In 2018 the global meeting had 300 of 500 attendees from the global South. In both instances, the attendance of these southern conferees was underwritten by the CTEWC, which I assume is funded from the global North.[441] The example of their response to the observation of a dearth of African women ethicists in 2006 led to the creation of a scholarship program which has funded the education of eight African female ethicists, which one can assume catalyzed the generation of twenty-four total in the guild in 2018.[442] While Linda Hogan's and Kristin Heyer's article contains a wealth of information about the progress of the CTEWC initiative, two observations resonate with our essay.

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[439] James Keenan, "A Note From Our Founder," *Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church*. https://catholicethics.com/who-we-are/.

[440] Linda Hogan and Kristin Heyer, "Beyond a Northern Paradigm: Catholic Theological Ethics in Global Perspective" *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 39, vol. 39, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2019), 32.

[441] Hogan and Heyer, "Beyond a Northern Paradigm," 28–29.

[442] Keenan, "A Note From Our Founder."

One is the reality that "hybridity is not just a post-modern cliché, but rather a social, religious and political condition, and an everyday experience."[443] The authors indicate that not only do the global South participants experience hybridity, but those from the North, accustomed to occupying a normative position, are challenged in this way, as well. This corresponds to the call for Diasporic Imagination sounded by Kwok Pui-lan.

Second is their citation of James Keenan as they note that "the foray into intercultural, local contexts need not compromise the search for universal moral truth."[444] This also coheres with a decolonial African American hermeneutic of trust. As I conclude this study, I contend that cultural incarnational ecclesiology is the only context in which the 21st century church can claim to be in pursuit of the truth about Jesus. As has been stated, no one culture can claim to have the resources to exhaust all that can and should be known about God and Jesus as God's Messiah.

Other sub-guilds of the theological academy would do well to follow the lead of the CTEWC. While there may be other similar initiatives of which I am unaware, the paucity and under resourced nature of such policies is lamentable. In a maturing world church, which operates in spaces characterized by inequality and neo-colonial dynamics, it behooves each church communion, and each theological guild to think and act in light of a cultural incarnational ecclesiology. As I touched on early in this study, such an agenda entails:

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[443] Hogan and Heyer, "Beyond a Northern Paradigm," 34.

[444] Hogan and Heyer, "Beyond a Northern Paradigm," 34. Citing James F. Keenan, "What Happened at Trento 2010?" *TS* 72 (2011): 138–39.

1) Acknowledging and respecting one another's leaders (Rom 16:1,2; I Cor 16:10-12).

2) Communality expressed in resource sharing and mutual concern (Acts 11:27-30; 1 Cor 16:1–4; 2 Cor 8:1–9:15; Rom 15:14–32; 1 John 4:20-21).

3) Fostering opportunities to express Christocentric unity which places the collective public witness of churches above all other concerns (John 17:20-23).

If the church fails to embrace such commitments, it will remain in default concerning the prayer of Jesus in John 17:20–23.

Summary and Conclusions

This study established its goals in Chapter 1, surveying the variety of approaches to interpreting the book of Revelation, establishing the need to address its treatment of diversity in light of both current debates within the world church as well as the history of divergent interpretations. Chapter 2 established our African American hermeneutic, one which is decolonial and yet applies a hermeneutic of trust, not necessarily trusting of those who have interpreted the text but believing that the text of the bible mediates divine realities in a manner that is accessible to those who engage it faithfully. An African American decolonial hermeneutic also affirms that absolute truth exists but avers that no one culture can claim to have a complete understanding of that truth.

Chapter 3 focused on the nature of the book of Revelation itself. As Apocalyptic literature, it utilizes a vision-based approach. After introducing Jesus as the source of the revelations to follow, the apocalypse utilizes an epistolary format in chapters 2 and 3, proceeding in full vision-tour mode from Chapter 4 on. The motif of protology in eschatology is explored in order to understand the method of argumentation which is found in the book. This exposes the rich Hebrew Bible and Christian scripture allusions which are invoked by John. Of particular meaning for our study, I present evidence for the occasion of the book being to comfort, reassure, and instruct those in John's audience in the wake of the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple.

Chapter 4 delves deeply into an exegetical analysis of the book, addressing the key words for the identity of the nascent church, the canonical allusions at play, and the particular significance of the four-fold formulae for diversity which course through the book. Our argument is that the audiences represented in this way are described as such to

cast a much broader vision of what the kingdom of the Lamb will become, far beyond most Jewish messianic expectations, and to contrast the way the peoples of the earth are incorporated into the kingdom of the Lamb in contrast with the practices and policies of the Roman Empire. Rome is characterized as Babylon, the conquering empire who destroyed the capital of Israel, and dismantled the temple of the Jewish God. While mercantile imperialism is condemned in Rev 18, and those who persist in following the beast/serpent will be judged, the peoples of the earth have the opportunity to choose to follow the Lamb.

Chapter 5 proposes a specific meaning of τὴν δόξαν καὶ τὴν τιμὴν τῶν ἐθνῶν, making the case that the "glory and honor of the nations" is the manifold witness of the various peoples of the world, diverse culturally, linguistically, as well as geographically, who acknowledge Jesus as Lord of Lords and King of Kings, in defiance of imperial claims. This leads us to suggest a cultural incarnational ecclesiology, which builds on the evidence from the book of Revelation and other scripture, incorporates missiological insights, and proposes means by which the emerging global reality can be embraced.

The three closing excursus are not dependent on the book of Revelation but suggest connections with theological methods which can aid those seeking to "live into" the reality Revelation presents. The growing recognition of which Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen writes, and which John Keenan is seeking to apply, is most encouraging. May they prove to be part of the vanguard of those who seek to steward the privilege we each enjoy and open our arms to embrace the manifold witness of our co-religionists from cultures and communities other than our own.

At this point, a clarification may be in order. I view a cultural incarnational ecclesiology as an antidote to Christian Nationalism, as opposed to a rationale for it. While Revelation 21:24 and 26 celebrate the diversity of witness produced by culturally incarnated churches as it is represented in Rev 5:9 and 7:9, it is balanced by the prayer of Jesus for the unity of his followers as recorded in John 17:20-23. Additionally, the teaching of 1 Cor 12 that we all need each other is applicable to the church collectively, which is made clear by 1 Cor 12:27, that we are "members of a part" of a much bigger entity, "the body of Christ." The highlighting of the collection for the church in Jerusalem which follows (1 Cor 16: 1-4), Paul's reminding them of those not from Corinth who have invested in them (1 Cor 16:10-20), his commendation of the Macedonia church's generosity (2 Cor 8:1-15), and his lengthy appeal for them to give more (2 Cor 9:1-15) all create a picture of mutuality which Paul is seeking to see manifested in the sharing of material resources. If Paul's logic is extended further, there should be no poor churches and rich churches, for we would share "all things in common" (Acts 2:44-45).

White Christian nationalism as it is presenting itself in the US in 2024 demonstrates none of the characteristics Paul is calling the church in Corinth to cultivate. It is xenophobic, self-protective, acquisitive, and characterized by demonizing of others who will not espouse the same priorities as theirs, even demonizing fellow Christians who do not share their political agenda. The sharing of resources and the pursuit of justice highlighted in Excursus 3 are not to be found in a White Christian nationalist framework.

As I close this study, I find it difficult to leave this topic without commenting on the reception history of the book of Revelation in the African American community. As

was noted at the conclusion of chapter 3, the slave songs, or Negro Spirituals demonstrate a deep affinity for the Apocalypse of John. An African American decolonial hermeneutic takes special note of Rev 18. As the descendants of those who have been trafficked, we find resonance with the condemnation in Rev 18:13 of those who traffic in "slaves – and huma lives." In the early 20th Century, African American intellectual and activist W.E.B. Dubois claimed that "modern imperialism and modern industrialism are one and the same system…empire is the heavy hand of capital abroad."[445] An African American hermeneutic wrestles with the question generated by the admonition of Rev 18:4, what does it mean to "Come out of her?" The answers have varied, yet the relevance of the book of Revelation remains.

As theological educational opportunities for African Americans have broadened, some African Americans find themselves lured into the camp of dispensational theologies, with their millenarian emphases, and propensity for adopting a "decoding" approach to Revelation. The fear which such theologies foment may have been effective in evangelistic contexts in the past, yet younger generations are finding them unsatisfactory, with their history of racist apologists, and current adherents who are white evangelical racial reactionaries.

The fantastic images of Revelation are often off-putting to highly educated black theologians, as we have demonstrated in the work of Lynn St. Clair Darden and Shanell Smith. Yet, those churches which are enduring through the dislocation of "gentrification"

[445] W.E.B. DuBois, "The Negro Mind Reaches Out" Pages 385-414 in *The New Negro: An Interpretation*. Alain Locke, editor. (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925. Reprinted as American Negro, His History and Literature. New York: Arno Press, 1968), 414.

and the negative habituation of the Covid-19 pandemic[446] are still engaging in worship which often echoes the choruses of Rev 5, 6, 11, 15, 19, and 20.

A final observation is to note the fruitfulness of contextual incarnations of Jesus. The fecundity of the African American church tradition is a poignant example of such. While the Black church in America was founded as a reaction to slave-holder religion in the Southern US and blatant racism within northern American churches, what emerged was a contextualized incarnation of faith in Jesus. A missiologist might say that the development of the Black church was "the right thing for the wrong reasons." In other words, a contextualized church for Black people aided its missiological development, even though it existed in large part due to the sins of oppression and partiality manifested by segments of white Christian America. The distinctiveness of the Black church is widely documented, but its most noteworthy product, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is frequently celebrated in a manner which disconnects him from his point of origin.

In his "Editor's Introduction" to *A Testament of Hope,* Joseph Washington makes clear that to divorce Dr. King from his Black church roots is to produce a dishonest characterization of who King was.[447] The world has benefited from King's political theological production, reads his sermons and books, and hearkens to his dream (albeit often disingenuously) on a regular basis. Yet the Christian context and content of his life and ministry are frequently erased.

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[446] Many churches are reporting a reluctance for their parishioners to resume in-person attendance, opting to continue online participation. See Emily Belz, "COVID-19 Hit Black Churches Harder, but They Weathered It Better," *Christianity Today Online*, September 26, 2023. https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2023/september/covid-study-pandemic-churches-black-african-american-impact.html.

[447] James Melvin Washington. "Editor's Introduction" in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr*., James Melvin Washington, editor. 1st (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), ix-xix.

Of course, Dr. King is not the only influential product of the Black ecclesial tradition. A plethora of individuals have emerged from the milieu of the Black church to shape American life and world culture in ways that are undeniable and profound, such as academicians Cornel West, Eddie Glaude, Jr., and Michael Eric Dyson, media personalities like Rev. Al Sharpton, musicians such as Whitney Houston and Aretha Franklin, actors like Denzel Washington, not to mention the various artists, inventors, innovators, and influencers.

An important example of this reality is the life and ministry of Rev. Adam Clay Powell, Sr. This early 20th Century churchman is often overshadowed by the controversial career of his son and successor as pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, New York, Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Yet, Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. is the one who grew Abyssinian to be the largest protestant congregation in the nation in the early 21st Century, black or white, with 14,000 members.[448] Some have described it as the first megachurch.

The elder Powell is cited by Gary Dorrien as having a profound influence on Dietrich Bonhoeffer during the German theologian's year at Union Seminary before he returned to face the confessional crisis which ultimately cost him his life at the hands of the Nazis.[449] In Powell's 1928 sermon, "Saints in Caesar's Household,"[450] he championed

[448] Powell, Adam Clayton. *Against the Tide: an Autobiography*. (New York, R. R. Smith, 1938), 182.

[449] Gary J. Dorrien, *The New Abolition: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Black Social Gospel*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 437.

[450] Adam Clayton Powell, *Palestine and Saints in Caesar's Household*. (New York: R. R. Smith, 1939), n, p. 209.

the sort of mutuality a cultural incarnational ecclesiology warrants and which Bonhoeffer adopted:

> My text begs us to recognize people on earth in the spirit of Christian fellowship. It earnestly pleads for more social warmth among the believers in Christ Jesus. Though a Christian hails from India, China or Africa, we are one with him in Christ, and he should be greeted with as much Christian cordiality in the church as our next-door aristocratic neighbor.[451]

As the church embraces the cultural incarnational ecclesiology delineated in Revelation and which I have attempted to elucidate, it remains to be seen who will step forward next to solve the societal problems resulting from the damage done by centuries of compromise with empire by followers of Christ. Such leadership will be necessary to enact a future which moves toward the inclusive, healing environment, dare I say beloved community by which Revelation characterizes the new Jerusalem.

[451] Powell, *Palestine and Saints in Caesar's Household*, 211.

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