

*Decolonizing the Bible as Literature**Ronald Charles*

The Bible remains the book of empire. The liberal project of “the Bible as Literature” has engaged mostly in placing the Bible on a pedestal as an important cultural artifact of the Western imagination, worthy to be read and to be studied in schools or universities. The contention of my analysis is that the Bible should be understood as an ambiguous text in terms of its position vis-à-vis empires. In other words, there is a complex, equivocal, and problematic relationship between the Christian Bible and colonialism. The biblical text has been used, and continues to be used, to subjugate and to otherize. Conversely, the Bible has also been deployed in struggles for liberation and emancipation.<sup>1</sup> The Bible as a text is replete with both tendencies. Thus, studying the Bible cannot simply be a descriptive project. The Bible is and is not what we make of it. It is not a blueprint. Simply stating that the Bible is for or against colonialism diminishes the complexities of its various narratives. Instead, we must strive to understand how the Bible is constructed, how its discourse contains alienating elements, how it has been used as a tool of colonization, and how it also contains elements that can be used for more liberating projects.

In various regions of the world, the Bible, or interpretations of some of its texts, continues to be central in the colonial history and reality of the local populations. Several people in and outside the State of Israel, for example, continue to refer to a text such as Joshua 1:1–4, with its mandate to conquer the inhabitants of the land across the Jordan river, to justify a particular understanding of what should constitute the parameters of a modern Jewish polity. In many African nations, the Bible, both in Western languages and its translations in Indigenous African languages, has served as a major instrument of control. In the colonization of Africa, the Bible was used as a tool for obedience and for oppression (Dube, Mbuvi, and Mbuwayesango; Dube; Mbuwayesango). The biblical story of the curse of Ham has been foundational in the production of a specific discourse of inferiority attributed to sub-Saharan Africans. Missionaries,

anthropologists, army officers, and traders invoked the so-called Hamitic curse in establishing and supporting their colonial endeavors. Although the Bible does not mention skin color in Noah's curse of Ham for seeing his nakedness (Gen. 9:22–25), the association with black skin and slavery has been woven into the interpretation of this narrative early on, and such an association has had a devastating effect on the lives of millions of Blacks throughout history (Goldenberg).

The origins of the modern terms “White” or “White supremacy” can be found in Protestant missionary ideologies of the early seventeenth-century Protestant Caribbean milieu, which aimed to control the bodies and souls of African slaves.<sup>2</sup> In the early colonial period, Protestant slave owners in the English, Dutch, and Danish colonies did not want their slaves to convert to Christianity because they believed that their religion was for free people only. As slaves converted and were baptized into the Christian religion, slave owners developed ways to integrate race into their colonial discourse to justify the bondage of non-Europeans brought to the colonies to work as slaves (Gerbner). The emergence of Protestant supremacy was due to the lack of a legal framework as well as the absence of theological clarity concerning what to do with slaves who accepted Protestant baptism in the early modern Atlantic world. By redefining Christian to mean White, slave owners were able to exclude Black slaves from Christian rites. Protestant slave owners were not homogenous but adopted various stances regarding slavery and slaves. Some viewed conversion as a destabilizing and unpredictable force to the slave system, whereas others believed that slaves could become Christians and be taught how to read to understand the teachings of the Bible. Many slaves felt it beneficial to convert to Christianity so that they could gain access to reading lessons and books (Gerbner, especially chapter 8, “Defining True Conversion,” 164–88). Many enslaved Africans in the Caribbean learned how to read the Bible, came to question some of the missionaries' interpretations of the Bible, and developed other, more liberative alternative interpretations of the biblical text. Many slave owners burned books, since they feared that literate slaves could ignite a rebellion against the slave system. And to appease the White slave owners, the missionaries conformed to the status quo and developed racialized/proslavery discourses that allowed the slave system to flourish unabated. More and more, missionaries rejected the importance of reading for the African slaves and followed the established institutional norm of slavery. For slaves, reading, and to a lesser extent writing, were important tools in the struggle for liberation. Two streams of Christianity surfaced in the Atlantic world, one that catered more and more to an unjust system

based on a highly racialized discourse and rationale, and another fueled by the Black slaves' desire to find freedom through education and community.

African Americans read the Bible to find liberation, equality, and a shared experience (Smith; Bowens). A hermeneutic of trust was built around the biblical text, whereas a clear hermeneutic of suspicion was deployed against White interpreters and their preaching and reading of the Bible. African Americans saw parallels between Hebrew history and their own, which they understood in terms of a second Exodus. From their perspective, American slavery was like Hebrew slavery in Egypt, and the White slave master was the new Pharaoh. Hence, the motif of liberation persisted and was adapted to new social and political realities.

In Haiti, my native land, colonization came with the Bible. It came with a message of salvation and with a program of *mission civilisatrice* from the European Christians (Hurbon, *Comprendre*; Hurbon, *Religions*; Bellegarde-Smith; Farmer). It was a violent colonization program in the name of God. The first colonial gesture was to plant a cross at Môle-Saint-Nicolas on the northwest coast of Ayiti, or land of great mountains, as the island's first inhabitants called it. The colonizers changed the island's name to Hispaniola (little Spain), thus claiming the land for the throne of Spain. The extinction of the Indigenous Taino population of Haiti by the Spanish and the ensuing brutal oppression of the Africans brought to the island by the French remain a colonial legacy with traumatizing consequences for the future of the country.

The question of interest in this essay is, how can one approach the topic of decolonizing the Bible as literature? To answer this, I will parse the Book of Revelation to show how a particular biblical text may offer liberative ways of confronting empire and its economic aspects and at the same time also serve to recolonize. I will situate some of the decolonial impulses of the Book of Revelation in the specific social and political contexts of Haiti, a place where the Bible has been used and continues to be used mostly for colonizing effects. I will first situate the Book of Revelation in its own imperial context by showing how it served as a cautionary tale that urged marginalized Christian communities of the first century to be vigilant and to resist, warning them to expect harsher persecutions from the ambient Roman political regime in its brutality and threats against any group not willing to comply with its political posture. The text is written in coded language to offer the little communities on the margins of the power structure a subversive hope, while imagining a counterhegemony, that of Christ, displacing the Roman empire. The second methodological

undertaking is to show how a text that evokes an imagined world set in opposition to a world perceived to be in crisis is used in later and different historical, social, and political milieus to subjugate and create Others. With its proposal of a savior in battle against the Roman empire (dubbed Satan), the final argument of the chapter is that the text contains seeds that will be developed to alienate and/or Satanize those deemed to be opposing particular theological interpretations of specific (powerful) groups. This type of reading, which colonizes by way of exclusion and by way of advocating transcendental truths at the cost of social reality, is what I will highlight as the usual and debilitating reading done in the specific context of Haiti.

### Revelation in Its Socio-Historical Context

John the Seer is in exile on a remote island called Patmos. He is a “brother, and companion in tribulation” (1:9), and he is banished because of “the word of God, and the testimony of Jesus Christ” (1:9). John composed his text as a revelation or unveiling to offer a subversive resistance tract to comfort Christians in Asia Minor.<sup>3</sup> The Book of Revelation is an apocalyptic<sup>4</sup> work that evokes an imaginative world set in opposition to one perceived as chaotic. The Seer is cautioning his communities to hold fast, to be vigilant, to resist the Roman emperor’s claims to divinity, and even to expect harsher persecutions for refusing to participate in imperial cults. The goal of public religion was to ensure the *pax deorum* (“the peace of the gods” or their goodwill), from which communal prosperity would flow. Not offering libation on behalf of the emperor was considered a refusal to do one’s proper civic duties. Any group not willing to do their duties was seen as acting against state policy, the *Pax Romana* (the Roman Peace). The Seer wrote his Revelation at a time of political, social, and economic upheaval in a turbulent Judean context with different political/religious movements that seemed to be ready to take arms against Rome for liberation.<sup>5</sup>

John’s message stands in opposition to a political system that is judged as subhuman and degrading and which pacifies through killing. John’s message to these fearful and apprehensive communities on the margins of the power structure is one of hope amid despair, a message that is fundamentally structured around Jesus, the anointed one of God. John’s message is a call to live and struggle in the present in light of what God has already done and of what is yet to come. The book starts with a series of messages sent to seven different communities scattered throughout the Mediterranean. The pattern of these missives follows the same

composition pattern: they state that Jesus knows the work of the community; they identify the strengths and weaknesses of a specific Christ-group; and they conclude with an exhortation or encouragement.

John's overall purpose seems to be that God will bring the end of the present corruption and ensure the coming of a new era. Then, there will be judgment upon non-Jews and unfaithful Israelites alike. All Christ's enemies will be put to death, and the earth will be restored to health in a renewal as wide as the creation itself. The underlying motivation of the Book of Revelation was to justify the ways of God to the suffering Christian communities: though everything is bleak in the present, God, in the end, will vindicate the faithful and punish their oppressors.<sup>6</sup>

The messages in chapters 2 and 3 reflect antagonism toward a variety of Christ-followers' groups. John uses traditional images from Near Eastern myths such as sea dragons and holy war scenarios to interpret his situation and that of his community. He associates chaotic images with Rome as a new Babylon and the image of a sun-clad woman with the faithful people of God. He resorts to two symbols to represent different aspects of the empire: the beast and the sea monster. The beast represents the military and political power of the Roman emperors. The sea monster alludes to the economic order and hegemony of Rome dominating the Mediterranean Sea to develop its exploitative commerce.<sup>7</sup>

To empower his community, John invokes the combat myth. Thus, the Seer sets the coming kingdom of God in Christ in opposition to the kingdom of Caesar, depicting a struggle between two distinct and powerful forces, good and evil, for kingship. In this myth, evil is often represented by a pair of dragons or beasts waging war against another pair such as husband and wife, brother and sister, or mother and son. In the Book of Revelation, the combat myth is found in the story of a great dragon waging war against a woman and her son (Rev. 12). In the opening scene of the story, a pregnant woman is crying out in agonizing birth pangs. A great dragon is standing before the woman so that he might devour her child as soon as it is born. Suddenly, the reader/hearer is in the heavenly realm watching a war breaking out. Michael and his angels, representing the good, are fighting against the dragon/Satan and his angels, representing evil. The dragon and his angels fight back, but they are defeated, and there is no longer any place for them in heaven. The brutality of the Roman Empire is contrasted with a vision of Christ as the head of a great army of heavenly avengers dressed in white. This combat myth makes it possible to grasp complex realities more easily, and in the imagination of the Seer, it functions as a powerful cultural and sacred force. It is designed to displace

fear in the small Christ-communities and to give them the strength to face persecution for their faith. They are offered visions of monsters and martyrs to articulate a position of domination against the threatening Other (Frilingos). In its original context, the combat myth was a powerful way of standing up against a totalitarian regime. However, as noted by Leif E. Vaage, “God and Jesus in Revelation are mirror-imitation of the Roman emperor,” and because of this, “such language, originally of resistance, soon would serve equally well as the discourse of succession” (268). In other words, transposed from other times and culture, this same combat myth, this same anti-imperial text, had ingrained in it the possibilities of becoming a tool of domination, of colonization in the hands of powers who were intent on eradicating other groups who could be perceived as “the enemy.”

### **Colonizing through the Book of Revelation**

As described above, the text of Revelation is written out of the experience of a minority in the colonized Roman Empire. It speaks of struggles, sufferings, and nightmares, that is, of the everyday experience of people in many parts of the world. Many impoverished and marginalized communities today share with the Johannine communities the longing for justice, for peace, for security, and for their well-being. Several writers from the Global South have pointed out the liberating project of this text in their own context. In this vein, Tina Pippin notes, “the ethical choice in Revelation of either Christ or Caesar has been used by Daniel Berrigan, Ernesto Cardenal, and Alan Boesak to address the oppression of nuclear proliferation, the oppression of Nicaragua under Somoza’s rule, and the apartheid system of South Africa, respectively. Revelation is a cathartic text for Christians in oppressive system” (115–16). The Book of Revelation is certainly close to the heart of various Christian communities located in so-called Third World countries, but because of its ambiguous nature, the same text is also used in ways that are devastating in various geographical and political contexts, such as Haiti.

The typical reading of the Book of Revelation in Haiti offers nothing that empowers people to change the present. The usual scenario for interpreting the Book of Revelation in Haiti is that we are literally living at the end of time in our devastated country (Charles). As Christians, we need to live a life pleasing to God and not miss the call of the last trumpets to be caught up in the sudden rapture of the Church. The rest who did not live up to the biblical standards will be left behind. As for those who did not

make it to heaven at the rapture, they are to endure the Great Tribulation and wait until the battle of Armageddon for the final victory of God. Then, those who resisted the Antichrist during the terrible years will be rescued by God and be saved through fire. Afterward, a thousand years of worldwide peace and security will be ushered in under the lordship and authority of Christ before the final release of Satan and the final victory of God. Woven into this narrative is the fantastic idea of leaving the mess behind, of going to glory to live a life of security and of plenty. Life, it is reasoned, is extremely difficult, and the best way out is to project oneself into a blissful kind of future. For most Haitian Christians, the Book of Revelation clearly evokes the final days of the world, the coming Antichrist, and the beast already at work in the world. It instills in the hearts of the faithful the fear of the evil number 666, the number of the enemy *par excellence*, that is Satan.<sup>8</sup>

The combat myth in the Book of Revelation is deployed in Haiti to combat the religion of Vodou, which many Haitian Christians consider the main curse that prevents Haiti from receiving God's blessings. Violent language against Vodou and its practitioners is a constant staple of the sermons delivered by many preachers (mostly Protestants). Many Vodou priests or *ougan* have been lynched, stoned, or burned alive, mainly shortly after the departure of the dictator Baby Doc in 1986, and those horrible acts were perpetuated with the blessings of the Church at large in Haiti. The Catholic Church in Haiti organized, with the acquiescence of the state, the horrific antisuperstitious campaign of 1942–44, which destroyed many Vodou places of worship and sites of pilgrimage (Desmangles; Michel and Bellegarde-Smith).

Many Haitian Christians, especially the so-called evangelicals, take a certain pleasure in pointing to the cataclysmic destruction that will befall unbelievers. Earthquakes and natural disasters are believed to be divine judgment, and those with different theological understandings are seen as deserving to go to hell. The world is conceived in Manichaean terms,<sup>9</sup> whereby those anointed to act as agents of God are good and the hypocrites, degenerates, Vodou practitioners, and other agents of Satan are evil. In Haiti, the combat myth is performed and articulated by othering Christian groups perceived to be different and by diabolizing other religions by means of discourses of fear, hatred, exclusion, and apocalyptic violence borrowed from the Book of Revelation.

### **Criticizing the Colonizing Reading in the Haitian Context**

In the context of Haiti, the Book of Revelation becomes a pacifying power in a situation where one is concerned only with one's survival against everybody else. Overwhelming and pressing issues such as environmental degradation, famine, cholera, COVID-19, proliferation of gangs controlling vast regions in the capital city and elsewhere, innumerable numbers of young Haitians fleeing the country, many of them to die during the perilous voyage or brutally arrested to be sent back to Haiti empty-handed to face the social, economic, and political nightmares, all these are understood through the lens of "end times" theology. White American fundamentalists, especially those of a Southern Baptist stripe and Pentecostal fervor who harbor no complex social and political insights, support many Haitian Christian institutions in their lethargy and discourage them from speaking up and seeking truth and justice.

A plethora of so-called prophets ceaselessly broadcast apocalyptic pronouncements, some more sinister and dire than others. In the meantime, the mercantile class (a conglomerate of six oligarchic families who immigrated to Haiti a few generations back, namely the Brandt, Acra, Madsen, Bigio, Apaid, and Mevs families) control everything from customs to drugs, from banking to security, from energy to gangs (Plummer; Casimir). They are also supported by their multinational friends and operate under the approving gaze of the foreign embassies in Port-au-Prince. Those families control the sea and the air. They tolerate or even encourage violence, destruction, kidnappings, the demolition of all democratic institutions, as long as it all accrues to a political system that maintains the status quo.

The apocalyptic nature of the Book of Revelation has been used to promote a dualistic perspective whereby violence against the forces or agents of evil is deemed acceptable and the fatalities among God's people are celebrated as martyrs for the faith. Such a dualistic perspective is particularly dangerous in the sort of social and political system that prevails in Haiti. Following a scenario whereby the marginal groups take on the rulers in an eschatological and cosmic battle, as portrayed in the combat myth, uncritical Haitian readers can engage and indeed have engaged in violence against other groups perceived as the enemy. But the biblical narratives, one must remember, are about how the writers, creators, and editors of these texts understood and imagined their worlds and the place their deity played in the process of forming their own identities vis-à-vis the identities of others. These texts are products of specific spaces, times,



worldviews, prejudices, dreams, nightmares, and hopes. They cannot be uncritically adopted to suit one's time and space, which is very different from the space–time frameworks of the biblical narratives. Most needed now are critical voices that envision a more empowering message coming out of the struggles and tradition of revolutionary resistance of the Haitian people, with a fresh understanding of how to be in the world and for the world as a Haitian Christian (Casséus). One egregious colonizing effect of the previously discussed reading of the Book of Revelation in Haiti is that it fosters fear and not hope. The mystery of the book is played out as if one were captive to the fate of this present world, and as if the only way out was escapism, violence, and the belief that it is God's will to survive life as a constant nightmare.<sup>10</sup>

### **Decolonizing the Book of Revelation in the Haitian Context**

Reading to decolonize means taking the ideas regarding the Book of Revelation's original context and transferring them to the Haitian context while resignifying the text for the social, economic, and political liberation of the Haitian people. John's little communities existed in the margins of the power structure, where they were experiencing fear and apprehension.<sup>11</sup> The overall message of the Book of Revelation is that imagination and faith inspire other ways of tackling the practical problems of these marginalized groups. By renewing his audience's imagination, John aims to create an alternative reality to help his communities cope with the uncertainties of the present. The Book of Revelation is, in this sense, a call to resistance, to perseverance in times of persecution, and to faithfulness to God and to Jesus Christ. The Book of Revelation presents a critique of imperial power. It is a call to stand up against economic exploitation and to resist any political system of domination and of subjugation. The book offers a vision of Jerusalem descending from above to dwell with humans. Heaven is joined to earth since "here is the tent of God among human beings. He will make his home among them; they will be his people" (21:13).<sup>12</sup>

Christian churches in Haiti are caught up in endless debates about the end times, about identifying who the Antichrist might be, and looking at world events to figure out if the time of the rapture is close or not (Rossing). The Book of Revelation, however, presents a different vision: it is God who descends instead of people going up. In the Book of Revelation, the coming of God's kingdom is the advent of a social, public, and visible act of God expressed in markedly political terms here in history, on earth. The Seer's critique is a call to challenge political arrangements

that accept violence as “business as usual.” With the destruction of Babylon/Rome, wealth and peace come (21:22–26). Babylon is presented as a mirage; it is an empire of illusions; it is the tyranny of a fallen empire. The Seer envisions people drawn from all nations, tongues, and ethnic groups who would come to worship the Lamb (Rev. 7:9).

In rereading/resignifying the Book of Revelation in the Haitian context, Haitians need to understand that the number 666 should not lead to fear but to understanding how utterly foolish an empire of illusions is. The number 666 signifies total imperfection in a human system, truly and merely human and deficient, which will never attain seven, which expresses fulfillment and divine perfection. The empire of old, as the empire of today, is beastly and incomplete. Today’s empire is under the absolute rule of the market, with its prison industrial complex and military systems, multinational corporations and tech giants that exercise control over the lives of many. The great Beast today is the political, military, and economic systems that constitute a threat to life and to the sustainability of the whole planet.

The Seer presents a vision in which “the sea was no more” (21:1). Rome is understood as transient, hence faith in a sovereign God’s victory and in his promise to support the faithful is at the heart of the book. The call is to hope amid hopelessness and to be confident that God, and not the imperial regime, has the last word. The challenge is to resist, even when one’s act of resistance might seem foolish before the might of the powerful forces that are against the small communities and the voices standing up against injustices. The Seer takes the risk of speaking up against power by using coded language to point to the ugliness of the empire. The image of the beast is alluring, seductive, offering as it does spectacles of violence, might, and technologies. But the marginalized communities may also perceive the destructive reality of bowing to a system of exploitation and of annihilation that values market commodities and profits at the expense of life.

The goal of resignifying the text is to let it speak comfort to the people of faith in Haiti so they can imagine, as the text intended for its first recipients, a new reality in opposition to the world of the present in its crisis. It is a vision of hope for Haiti and not destruction; a future, another possible world, where no one is left behind. Resignifying the Book of Revelation in the Haitian context is to let the text serve as a prophetic denunciation of those groups who hold power in Haiti and anybody who cooperates with them, including any Christians in Haiti who seek to benefit from it. Thus, the Book of Revelation can help the Christian church in Haiti articulate a political-religious resistance to any pretention

to divinization that modern neocolonial forces wish to impose on us. This rereading of the text appropriates the voice of John in denouncing the pretensions of any power or system which places terror, injustice, lies, and extermination at the forefront. It is most urgent to embrace this new reading that prods us to invest in and improve the lives of the wretched of the earth, such as peasants, slum-dwellers, and the uneducated who constitute the bulk of church members in Haiti.

Haitians can use the rich social and cultural fabric of *konbit* (collective work in Haitian Creole, which makes the toil of one's farmland less onerous with the help of others) to foster human flourishing. Haitians can resignify the Book of Revelation in the same spirit that inhabited the community of the Seer by doing what Haitians love to do: laughing, singing, and dancing in the face of oppression (Taylor). Haitians can also use the resources of songs that celebrate life, find resources in Haitian folktales that make fun of evil, and continue to be inspired by the use of the carnivalesque, as we have much of it in the Book of Revelation, to ridicule any oppressive system and create safe and healthy communities.

This reimagining/resignifying will, I hope, help marginalized groups, whose voices are seldom heard in the arena of the world's political gurus, find the possibility to create liberative readings and liberative communities. This kind of decolonizing reading is intended to inspire Haitian faith communities to decide for themselves what they want to do in their struggle for justice, basic human rights, dignity, and emancipation with a piece of early Christian literature they consider sacred Scripture. This reappropriation of the text may allow us to let the text speak to us within our specific cultural, social, and political context without the deafening drumming of the powerful. The reading of Revelation proposed here offers hope for the apocalyptic situation in Haiti, not just for tomorrow, but also for today. We can take this reading and be empowered by it for social, political, and economic change in the present.

### Conclusion: Then and Now

The Seer wrote his Apocalypse at a volatile time and space similar enough to the turbulent present Haiti that a comparison between the two social situations does not seem too farfetched. Because of the fragile situation of his communities, John employs the combat-myth scenario, where the marginal groups take over the rulers in an eschatological and cosmic battle, in order to empower his audience. In a new reading of Revelation in the Haitian context, some of the language used by John can be reappropriated

to create a new reality, where the imagination is renewed for social change and justice to deal with present issues while planning for future development in the interests of all. The Book of Revelation is an ambiguous text; along with its problematic scenes of violence and destruction aimed at the perceived “enemy,” it proclaims a liberating message of comfort and protest against the imperial forces of death; it aims to renew the readers’ imagination to create beauty and hope in the midst of ashes. One may, then, appreciate and/or embrace its liberating potential for faith communities in Haiti while rejecting the cycle of emperors and counteremperors that the book seems to propose in its Christian mythmaking.

In the Haitian context, the Book of Revelation has been perversely interpreted to keep Haitian Christians and others under oppression. The mythical hope of the Book of Revelation, with its mythical and futuristic space where there will be “no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb” (21:23–24), is not even a metaphor or image in a nation where electricity is a luxury. The culture of death, as opposed to the celebration of life, is what the new imperial forces and their minions offer the “little peoples” of the world. Death engulfs Haiti, although there are a few feeble lights and signs of life here and there in the resiliency of my people, in the many ways we resist and negotiate a nightmarish existence. The Book of Revelation offers hope for a new humanity where there “was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands” (7:9). It is a vision of celebration of life and of vindication that Haitians can incorporate. But we also need to be prudent in what we adopt from the Seer and how we adapt it to our own social and political realities.

Part of the process of decolonizing the Bible as literature may be in envisioning a future without the Bible (Petrella). That is, as long as the Bible remains central in the construction of identities, spaces, myths of origins, histories, and genealogies, the possibility for it to be used as tool of colonization and violence remains a real possibility. The plurality of beliefs and the complexities of our world may be best addressed by trying to understand this world and its variegated scriptures than by focusing on one book. Bibliolatry may well be *passé*. The collapse of many modern economies and worldviews may be a warning sign that no genuine solutions aimed at human flourishing and dignity will be coming from any new exodus thinking, apocalyptic understanding, a particular religious text and

tradition, or arrogant humanistic programs. That means that, on the one hand, running to the Bible in the pursuit of liberation is problematic, because the biblical text is a complex compilation of narratives with various answers or with no solutions to the problems we face today. But, on the other hand, grand pronouncements and narratives, political systems right or left with agendas that exclude many in the world fighting for survival, will not lead to liberation either. Decolonizing the Bible is a program that consists in learning and unlearning, in criticizing and of taking what may be useful, in collaging scriptures and traditions, in combating ideologies that are put in place to kill mentally, intellectually, and physically. This program of deconstruction and dismantling should not limit itself to the Bible, but must be pursued in such fields as classics, archaeology, economics, sociology, political science, history, medicine, religious studies, and other disciplines.

### Notes

1. To reiterate the point, while the Bible has been used to endorse colonial projects and wage colonial violence, it has also been used to resist these applications in various ways by a variety of peoples. A decolonizing account points to hybridity and the ways in which people have entered into complex negotiations with the Bible that includes uses of the Bible for colonialism but also alternative readings to resist and reject colonization.
2. A similar discursive development occurred as well in Catholic Spanish and French colonies in the same period.
3. It may be that the audience of the Book of Revelation consists also some members capitulating to certain features of the Roman Empire, specifically participating in religious rites for the sake of economic gain in various associations (civic, cultic, professional, and trade), and that the text uses apocalypse as a genre to convince those who are compromising their identity to take up a different stance. See Friesen, 23–131; Harland.
4. See the now-classic definition of what constitutes an apocalypse in Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination*. Collins defines an apocalypse as “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” (5).
5. The discussion on the dating of the Book of Revelation is enormous. One of the reasons for these heated scholarly debates is that the interpretation of the work is contingent on its dating. The majority views seem to locate the work during either the reign of Nero (54–68 CE) or the reign of Domitian (81–96 CE). The last years of Nero’s reign seem to make more sense of the conflict with the empire as portrayed in the book. See Marshall.

6. One may also see that the work is functioning as a rhetorical exhortation urging people too comfortable amidst the local sacrificial edifice of imperial cities (i.e. in trades associations, for example) to leave off their participation and remove themselves and thereby end their integration with society. It does so in a way that challenges the audience with the tropes drawn from the Hebrew scriptures of idolatrous outsiders who are subject to God's judgment. As a rhetorical device, it creates profiles of heroes and villains to shore up a resistance that the author sees is entirely lacking except in a couple of instances mentioned in the seven messages (namely the messages to Sardis and Philadelphia), the second and sixth messages. There alone do we see the kind of resistance and persecution John champions.
7. The reason why economics figures so large in Revelation (chapters 13 and 18, as well as 19) is because the text aims to curtail economic participation. In that regard, it is precisely decolonizing of an economic system that exploits, and in which exploitation some of its audience is participating. At the end of the story, the kings of the earth bring their "glory" into a city where there is water without price and where all of the things that were used in Rev. 18 to exploit people economically have been transformed into a new city of justice.
8. This kind of reading is commonplace in other Third World contexts as well. The sociopolitical context of the Seer is abstracted into an allegory of the end times. Satan is in the economic details and the details of moral deficit that Christians have to fight against in order to ascend into glory. This reading is also applied to entirely exclusionary ends, such as to attack strong women or to curtail sexual and gender rights.
9. Mani (216–76 CE) was a religious prophet of Persian origin and a self-described apostle of Jesus Christ. The core of Manichaean belief is a strict call to an ascetic way of life (no sex, no wine, and no meat) and a revulsion against the material world. Mani taught his followers that there is an ongoing and cosmic struggle between light and darkness, and between good and evil. Evil is conceived as an eternal and powerful presence in the world; without vigorous exertion, people are not able to escape the grip of evil. The Manichaeans are taught to disentangle the good and the evil in their own lives and to return the good to its rightful place. They need to live in and for what is good while shunning what is evil and those who continually sin because they are trapped in the sphere of evil. For a recent and scholarly treatment on the topic, see Teigen.
10. Aimé Césaire's observation on how the power of the colonizer is perceived as divine will in some colonized settings and religious traditions is a very pertinent one. See his *Discourse on Colonialism*, 39–42.
11. They might have had a perceived fear and tension, which could have been far from actual reality. See Collins, *Combat Myth*.
12. It is worth noticing, however, that the Heavenly Jerusalem of Rev. 21 is purged of idolaters and sorcerers. There is no room in this city for dissent. Thus, even while showing the potential for a more liberative alternative, the lack of room for dissent in the image of heaven on earth points to a colonizing gesture embedded in the text.

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