



2. A tale of two cities: Rome and Babylon in Revelation

Historia de dos ciudades: Roma y Babilonia en el Apocalipsis

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Abstract

The historical-contemporary or preterist approach has consecrated the Roman empire in the first century as the referent behind the spiritual Babylon of chapters 16 to 18 of Revelation. However, a reassessment of this theological motif from the document itself and in the light of certain hermeneutical, exegetical and historical considerations demonstrates a transtemporal referentiality in harmony with the chronologically multivalent and historically continuous character of biblical apocalyptic eschatology in general and Johannine eschatology in particular. The recurring apostasy of God's people at key moments in history emerges from such an analysis as the referent behind the great prostitute-city of the Apocalypse.

Keywords

Revelation – Babylon – Rome – Empire – Persecution – Apostasy

Resumen

La aproximación histórico-contemporánea o preterista ha consagrado al Imperio romano en el siglo primero como el referente detrás de la Babilonia espiritual de los capítulos 16 a 18 del Apocalipsis. No obstante, una relectura de ese motivo teológico desde el documento mismo y a la luz de ciertas consideraciones hermenéuticas, exegéticas e históricas demuestra una referencialidad de naturaleza transtemporal en armonía con el carácter cronológicamente multivalente e históricamente continuo de la escatología apocalíptica bíblica en general y joanina en particular. La apostasía recurrente del pueblo de Dios en momentos clave de la historia surge de tal análisis como el referente representado por la gran ciudad-prostituta del Apocalipsis.

Palabras claves

Apocalipsis – Babilonia – Roma – Imperio – Persecución – Apostasía



A tale of two cities. Such was the title of the famous historical novel that in 1859 the English writer Charles Dickens set in London and Paris on the eve of the French Revolution. Apocalypse also contrasts the capitals of two kingdoms: the new Jerusalem, of heavenly origin, and Babylon.

The Babylonian empire no longer existed when John wrote the last book of the Bible. It is, therefore, evident that the Babylon of chapters 17 and 18 (as well as the Sodom of 11,8) is there a symbol of something else. Of what? Of Rome, the capital of the homonymous empire? Most interpreters agree,¹ and no wonder. Doesn't Revelation 17 say that the great harlot-city sits on seven mountains, wears the distinctive color of royalty, is drunk with the blood of martyrs and reigns over the kings of the earth? What but first-century imperial Rome would best fit this description? Isn't imperial Rome derogatorily called "Babylon" in some writings of Judaism after the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70?

The only mention of Babylon in the New Testament, outside Revelation, is 1 Peter 5,13: "The church which is in Babylon...greet you." On that basis, it has traditionally been assumed that Peter is alluding to the capital of the Roman empire,² from where he would have written his

¹ E.g., Michael W. Holmes, *The apostolic fathers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 22: "...in Revelation Rome is presented as the great harlot whose attacks upon the church must be resisted (to the point of death if necessary)."

² Concerning the word Babylon as a veiled designation of Rome in Revelation in the light of 1 Pet 5,13, written around 67, it should be noted that such an onomastic association is first attested in the literature of postexilic Judaism (e.g., *4 Ezra* 3,1.2.2831; *2 Bar* 10,13; 11,1; 67,7; *SibOr* 5,143.159) after 70 and because of the fall of Jerusalem at the hands of Titus. See on this point Greg Carey, *Elusive Apocalypse: Reading authority in the Revelation to John*, *Studies in American Biblical Hermeneutics* 15 (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1999), 13. In addition, and unlike the Judaism that produced such literature, early Christianity seems to have seen the destruction of the city as an act of justice from God because of the rejection and execution of Jesus as Messiah and the persecution of the church. On this, see Colin J. Hemer, *The letters to the seven churches of Asia in their local setting*, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, Supplement Series 11 (Sheffield, GB: JSOT, 1986), 11; Richard Bauckham, *The theology of the book of Revelation* (Cambridge, GB: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 128, 129; Jon Paulien, *Decoding Revelation's trumpets: Literary allusions and the interpretation of Revelation 8:7-12*, *Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series* 11 (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1987), 418; cf. *Matt* 23,37.38 through 24,2; *1 Thess* 1,1416; *Rev* 11,8; Justin, *Trypho* 16.18; cf. *First apology* 7.31; Origen, *Homily on the book of Jeremiah* 13.1; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical history* 5.27. Therefore, the alleged equating of Rome with Babylon in 1 Pet 3,15 as an implicit show of sympathy on the part of the early church toward Judaism is unlikely.

letter before his martyrdom around AD 64 by Nero according to post-apostolic Christian tradition, and as a veiled criticism of the power persecuting the church in his day.³

From that premise, most interpreters of Revelation have been able to see all kinds of allusions to the empire and its capital in the last book

On the difficulty of distinguishing between the original Jewish material in those works and later Christian interpolations in documents such as the fifth book of the Sibylline Oracles, see Robert A. Kraft, "Christianization of ancient Jewish writings: Setting the stage and framing some central questions," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 32 (2001): 379, 381. Among the inherent problems to identify Babylon with Rome in 1 Peter as reflecting the same in Revelation are the following: 1) Peter does not identify the reality designated by him as Babylon; 2) The word appears only once in the NT (in 1 Pet 5,13), thus the biblical evidence is insufficient to arrive at a conclusion regarding its meaning; 3) The use of 1 Pet 5,13 to demonstrate that Babylon is Rome in Revelation and vice versa represents a circular argument, where an unproven premise is used as a foundation for a conclusion based on it. The interpretative option that seems most natural considering the context of the whole letter, and Peter's typological use of the history of God's people in the Old Testament from Abram to the Babylonian captivity, seems to be that "the church which is in Babylon" represents the same rhetorical strategy that Peter uses from the very beginning of the document (Christians as "expatriate" spiritual Israelites in 1,1). Namely, to refer to the disadvantaged and precarious situation of the church in the present of the apostle and his audience (first century in his case) as a temporary captivity that would give way to the great final liberation of God's people on the occasion of the second coming of Christ (*cf.* 1,313; see also the drying up of the Euphrates in preparation for the arrival of "the kings of the east" as an allusion to the liberation of the Jewish captives from Babylon by Cyrus and Darius in Rev 16,12). If this is so, the expression "the church which is in Babylon" could have its correlate and parallel in John's statement to the Christians of the same region: "I, John, your brother and fellow partaker in tribulation, in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ" (Rev 1,9).

³ For an illuminating review about the circumstances of 1 Peter's intended audience, see Travis B. Williams, "Suffering from a critical oversight: The persecutions of 1 Peter within modern scholarship," *Currents in Biblical Research* 10, No. 2 (2012): 275-292. Williams reevaluates the issue and concludes that there is no imperial persecution in the background of the letter. Robert M. Johnston says in agreement: "... the Christians to whom Peter wrote were experiencing the same kind of pressures that believers often face in our day" (*Peter and Jude* [Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1995], 30; see also 17). According to some interpreters, Rome may have been metaphorically designated as Babylon by the early Christians to avoid reprisals from the empire. The main problem with this hypothesis is that it represents an anachronism since the suppression of Christianity was only on the agenda of the empire as a state policy between the second half of the third century and the beginning of the fourth. The traditional idea that Rome systematically and officially persecuted the church during the first century has been seriously challenged by historiographical research for several decades. The very testimony of the New Testament (*e.g.*, the synoptic Gospels, Acts, Rom 13; 1 Pet 2,17-18) indicates that the empire was not an enemy (much less a declared and systematic enemy) of the church during the first century. On the contrary, it seems to have acted in general as a facilitator of the missionary work of the early Christians (*cf.* 2 Thess 2,6-7).

of the Bible, where Nero or Domitian would be the sinister character behind the beast that rises from the sea in chapter 13. In turn, the seven mountains on which the great harlot sits, whose attire has precisely the distinctive color of Roman royalty, would be none other than the seven hills on which the city of Rome extends.

The literary genre of Revelation, like much of the book of Daniel in the Old Testament, is eminently symbolic. That is to say, the “women” are not women, the “beasts” are not beasts, the “horns” are not horns, the “waters” are not waters and the “mountains” are not mountains. These words or literary images represent human groups and political and spiritual powers with a prominent role in the earthly conflict between good and evil.⁴ This symbolic use of terms and images is expressly recognized in Revelation: “The seven heads are seven mountains, on which the woman sits, and they are seven kings” (17,9);⁵ “The waters you saw, where the prostitute sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations and languages” (17,15; NIV).⁶

⁴ Some have argued that both Babylon and the new Jerusalem, its counterpart in Revelation, represent not places but spiritual conditions of both the original and future recipients of Revelation. In this respect, if, as Robert H. Gundry argues, the new Jerusalem of Rev 21,1 through 22,5 is a spiritual symbol of God’s redeemed, “not their future dwelling place, but... their future selves and state” (“The new Jerusalem: People as place, not place for people,” *Novum Testamentum* 29 [1987]: 264), we should expect something similar in regard to its counterpart, the harlot-city Babylon of chapters 14, 16, 17, and 18. Thus, Babylon would conversely stand for the unredeemed wicked, not for a literal city or an empire.

⁵ The word “kings” [οἱ βασιλεῖς] may also stand for “kingdoms” in this context (*cf.* the use of βασιλεία in LXX-Dan 2,39).

⁶ The sequence peoples-crowds-nations-languages (λαοὶ καὶ ὄχλοι καὶ ἔθνη καὶ γλώσσαι) in verse 15 appears, with variations in order, negatively connoted in Revelation as designating the majority of mankind opposed to God and his faithful witnesses (*e.g.*, 5,9; 7,9 [see, for instance, *English Revised Version* and *New International Version* for their translation of ἔκ]; 10,11 [see *New Jerusalem Bible*’s translation of ἐπί]; 11,9; 13,7; 14,6; 17,15), object, for that very reason, of the warnings and, in a last stage, of the divine retributive judgments, sometimes linked in the same negative sense with γῆ by means of the conjunction καὶ used exegetically (*e.g.*, 14,6). Note the following pattern of use of that formula, in which βασιλεὺς and ὄχλος occupy as an exception the place of φυλὴ in 10,11 and 17,15 respectively, suggesting that the three of them could work in Revelation as interchangeable symbolic motifs, especially within the fourfold sequence:

5,9: φυλῆς καὶ γλώσσης καὶ λαοῦ καὶ ἔθνους

7,9: ἔθνους καὶ φυλῶν καὶ λαῶν καὶ γλωσσῶν

10,11: λαοὶς καὶ ἔθνεσιν καὶ γλώσσαις καὶ βασιλεῦσιν

One of the basic principles of interpreting Bible prophecy is that symbols represent realities different from themselves. Thus, the woman of Revelation 12—as well as that of chapter 17—must represent something other than a woman of flesh and blood, just as the 1,260 days of Daniel 7,25 and Revelation 12 must represent something other than 1,260 literal days of twenty-four hours each since they are part of an eminently symbolic picture. Accordingly, the Babylon of Revelation does not point to another city such as Rome, either as such or as a designation of the capital of the empire.

The great harlot

The harlotry imagery and language employed in the visionary unit of Revelation 17-18 are clearly taken from the Old Testament, where it is used by the prophets almost exclusively to rebuke God's people in apostasy.⁷

In the Old Testament mindset, prostitution and adultery were seen basically as the same thing,⁸ and both conditions were conventionally

11,9: λαῶν καὶ φυλῶν καὶ γλωσσῶν καὶ ἔθνῶν
 13,7: φυλὴν καὶ λαὸν καὶ γλώσσαν καὶ ἔθνος
 14,6: ἔθνος καὶ φυλὴν καὶ γλώσσαν καὶ λαὸν
 17,15: λαοὶ καὶ ὄχλοι εἰσὶν καὶ ἔθνη καὶ γλώσσαι

⁷ E.g., Isa 1,21; Jer 2,1 through 3,5 (cf. Rev 2,4,5); Ezek 16, 23; Hos 1,2 through 13,13. The same imagery—although not so meaningful in extension and elaboration—is certainly also applied to Assyria (see Nah 3,4-6.11), Phoenicia (Isa 23,15-17)—birth place of Jezebel, daughter of an idolatrous priest; cf. Rev 2,20-22—and Babylon (Isa 47), for their idolatrous influence and hostility toward God's people. The pseudepigraphic literature characterizes in the same way Rome (e.g., *SibOr* 5,162-178, dated from the second half to the end of the 1st century AD; see James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols. [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983], 1:390; *SibOr* 3,356-358) and its eastern province of Asia Minor (e.g., *4 Ezra* 16,46-58). But the emphasis in these cases was not in the covenant-related adulterine dimension of the imagery, but on its alluring and leading astray side.

⁸ The Greek word πόρνη translated as "prostitute" in Rev 17 means, like its Hebrew equivalent פְּזִיזָה also "adulteress." See in this regard LXX-Prov 5,3; LXX-Isa 57,3; LXX-Jer 3,1-3; 5,7; LXX-Hos 4,14, etc. Cf. Prov 2,16.17; 5,3-6.8.15-20; 6; 7,5-27; 23,27.28. On the interchangeability and overlapping of both nuances—prostitution and adultery—in the Hebrew Old Testament and the NT, particularly Revelation, see Leon J. Wood, "פְּזִיזָה", in *Theological wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1980), 2:246; also Friedrich Hauck and Siegfried Schulz, "πόρνη", in *Theological dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. by Gerhard Friedrich

used as interchangeable symbols of religious apostasy. On the contrary, a faithful and virtuous married woman was the typical image to represent God's people in a right relationship with Him.

A woman can't become an adulteress without having been before a faithful wife. In the same way, no single woman can be a widow (*cf.* Rev 18,7). Transitively reasoning, the Old Testament harlotry/adultery imagery and its associated theological meaning imply some previous covenant relation with God. Nobody can be an apostate without being first a faithful believer. In this light, could the adulterine dimension of the metaphoric language of Revelation 17 and 18 be rightly applied to Rome or any other heathen nation? It seems unlikely since Romans were never God's special people. They were never "married" to Him within a special covenant relationship like the one established with Abram and then with the Hebrews on Mount Sinai.⁹ Therefore, they could not have been regarded as an adulteress or prostitute in Revelation, although the alluring dimension of that metaphor was still applicable to Rome as the counterpart of some prefigurative historical realities as Babylon, Tyre, Nineveh, and the seduction exerted by their power and culture, particularly on God's people.¹⁰

Therefore, there seem to be two dimensions of meaning converging in the image of the harlot-city of Revelation 17 and 18, a sort of a symbiosis between an alluring idolatrous power trying to draw God's people's affections from Him, and at the same time an adulterous—thus, formerly faithful—group of nominal believers claiming allegiance to Him while in open apostasy through their compromise with the prevailing *status quo*.

(Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968), 6:579-595. On the dual nuance of $\eta\eta$ and $\pi\acute{o}\rho\eta\eta$ (prostitution and adultery), the latter comments: "Examples show that $\eta\eta$ can be used of the married woman who is unfaithful to her husband (Hos 1, 2; Ezek 16, 23) or of the betrothed who by law already belongs to her husband, Gen 38:24" (584).

⁹ *Cf.* Eph 2,12.

¹⁰ Gregory K. Beale comments on this: "Nineveh and Tyre are harlots because they cause destruction and induce uncleanness among the nations by economically dominating them and influencing them through idolatry" (*The book of Revelation*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999], 850).

Chapter 17 reveals even more information about the mysterious, insatiably unfaithful and murderous woman. It says that her symbolic name is “Babylon” (verse 5), which immediately brings to mind the ancient capital of the Babylonian empire erected on both sides of the Euphrates river, the source of its wealth through international trade that summoned merchants from all over the Near East (see Jer 51,13). In Revelation 11,8, the same symbolic “great city” is also called Sodom (see Isa 1,1.10; 3,9) and Egypt. It says there that in it “our Lord was crucified,” which did not happen, of course, in Sodom, in Egypt, in Babylon or in Rome, but in Jerusalem.¹¹ This symbiosis or assimilation between most of God’s people throughout history and the pagan nations—at the same time God’s covenant further disciplinary agents and the object of redemption through a few faithful witnesses like Daniel—is certainly striking. It is a consubstantiation and appropriation of identity. Somehow, Sodom, Egypt and Babylon managed to perpetuate their morally dissolving essence within most of God’s own people. Such was the case of Lot and his daughters, of the mixed multitude coming out of Egypt, and of many who decided to stay in Babylon after its fall (*cf.* Rev 18,4) or to return to Judea with Babylon in their hearts. From such a perspective, could the prostitution-adultery imagery in Revelation somehow point to first-century Judaism? Interestingly, the Jews of Qumran represented the Jerusalem establishment as a prostitute in line with Old Testament prophets like Hosea (*e. g.*, chapter 4) and Ezekiel (*e. g.*, chapter 16) at least one century before Revelation.¹² In line with this, some sectors within Judaism itself regarded the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by Rome as a divine punishment for the infidelity of Israel toward the covenant with God. Such was the belief of the group behind the Apocalypse of Abraham (from I or II AD).¹³

¹¹ *Cf.* 18,20.24; Matt 23,30-37; Luke 13,33.34.

¹² On this, see Margaret Barker, *The revelation of Jesus Christ: Which God gave to him to show to his servants what must soon take place* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 227, 235, 237.

¹³ See Ryszard Rubinkiewicz, *The Apocalypse of Abraham: A new translation and introduction*, in *The Old Testament pseudepigrapha*, ed. by James H. Charlesworth (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983), 1:685; see also *4 Baruch* 6,23 [from between I-II AD] on the Babylonian captivity as a historical prefiguration of AD 70; *Jub* 16,26.34; 23,16-21 (reflecting via allusion some

In close connection with the above said, the language and imagery of Revelation 17 and 18 find a natural antecedent within the same book, in the letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor, particularly those to Pergamum, Thyatira, and Laodicea. The same imagery, language and theme are found in both places. The relationship between the church of Pergamum and its pagan realm is defined as the figurative prostitution or adultery of idolatry (2,14) and accordingly illustrated through the illicit relations of the Israelites with the Moabite and Midianite women, which resulted in the worship of Baal-Peor.¹⁴ The seducing spiritual harlotry of the Thyatiran Jezebel was also leading the church there to the prostitution or adultery of idolatry (2,20). Finally, the disdain of the Christian citizens of Laodicea toward God and their blind pride certainly resemble the adulteress of Revelation 17 and 18. Both are wrongly yet costly dressed.¹⁵ In both cases, nakedness is God's perception of the real situation and part of Babylon's final punishment ironically inflicted by her former lovers. An impure kind of gold is also a common factor. Furthermore, being externally attired like a queen instead of effectively

Old Testament passages as Deut 5,31ff; Jer 8,2; Hos 4,3; Ezek 9,6; 38,20; Zeph 1,3; see also Orval S. Wintermute, *Jubilees: A new translation and introduction*, in Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2:101, 102; *Pseudo Philo* 19,2f [from 1 AD]; *Pss. Sol.* 2,2-20, especially 6, 20, where the exile and enslaving by Rome is depicted in the terms and images of the Babylonian conquest and deportation. See on this postexilic Jewish perception of God's dealings with his people in covenantal terms especially Barker, *Revelation*, 227, 235, 237 (she quotes *1 Enoch* 89,59-64; 90,22.25; *Tg. Pseudo Jonathan Deut* 32,8; *Pss. Sol.* 8,15, and *Josephus Wars* 3.351-354; 5.412; 6.110). On idolatry, incest and murder among the moral impurities God would punish by allowing the desecration of the land and of the sanctuary, and ultimately through exile according to some Jewish postexilic literature as 4Q381, Jubilees, the Temple Scroll, and the Damascus Document, see Jonathan Klawans, "Idolatry, incest, and impurity: Moral defilement in ancient Judaism," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 29 (1998): 394, 414. On the long lasting and pervading religious influence of Babylonian thought in the Near East in general—including Judaism—and in the West as probably also behind John's use of Babylon to some degree, cf. Franz Cumont, *The Oriental religions in Roman paganism* (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1911), 122-125. In this respect, Cumont calls Babylon "the perennial source of the Near Eastern and the Mediterranean paganism" (p. 133). On the harlot of Rev 17 as a reference to the faithless Jerusalem rather than Rome, Josephine Massyngberde Ford states: "There is no clear indication [in Rev 17] that Babylon is Rome as in the Christian Sibyllines" (*Revelation*, Anchor Bible 38 [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975], 27).

¹⁴ See Num 23 through 25; 31,16; cf. Rev 14,4.

¹⁵ Cf. Matt 22,11-13.

sharing the throne with *the* Husband-King (3,21) sounds like an echo of the self-deceiving pseudo-royal boasting of the prostitute/adulteress.

The many linguistic parallels between the woman of chapter 12 and the one in chapter 17 suggest an antithetic relationship between them—certainly common in the book—,¹⁶ two historically consecutive phases of the same entity,¹⁷ and/or even two simultaneous but opposed constitutive elements within the same ontological continuum.¹⁸ There are some elements both internal and external to the text seemingly stress the last two options. For example, there is no explicit and direct confrontation between both women.¹⁹ They never perform on stage together. In biblical prophetic literature, when two simultaneous symbols stand for different ontological realities opposed to each other, they usually interact in the

¹⁶ *E.g.*, the devilish trinity versus the heavenly true one, the mark of the beast versus the seal of God, the lamb-like beast versus the seven-eyed and seven-horned Lamb, the slaughtered but risen Lamb versus the sea-beast's slain and healed head, etc.

¹⁷ For an Old Testament prophetic antecedent of the imagery of a virtuous woman turned into an adulteress and prostitute, and finally restored through repentance and forgiveness—thus, an ontological continuum constituted by three consecutive antithetic stages—, see Ezekiel 16.

¹⁸ The historical continuous approach is the closest to this proposed identification since it holds that the harlot-adulteress is in fact the Christian church in its medieval condition of nominalism and apostasy (*e.g.*, Jacques B. Doukhan, *Secrets of Revelation: The Apocalypse through Hebrew eyes* [Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2002], 161). While the imminence pervading the book and the need of first century contemporary relevance to some degree, plus several hermeneutical and exegetical considerations, would render that identification unviable as the *only* or the *primary* one, such an approach is not incompatible with a Christian identity of the harlot-adulteress within the scope of John's past and contemporaneous historical frame. A murderous harlot-adulteress Babylon far in the future of his and his first century audience has a place in the picture, although typologically prefigured or illustrated by manifestations both former and present to him. While the beast—the harlot's condition for existence and action—is said to no longer be (*ἔν καὶ οὐκ ἔσται*) in verses 8, 11, is implied to partially be in verse 10 (*ὁ εἶς ἔσται*; cf. 2 Thess 2,7a). This could only mean two things: either a contradiction or an already somehow present entity not yet fully developed, whose heyday and final demise were still in the future (cf. 2 Thess 2,1-12; 1 John 2,18ff).

¹⁹ Nevertheless, it must be recognized an implied confrontation in the fact that the harlot-adulteress is said to be drunk with the blood of the martyrs (17,3), but even that does not necessarily presuppose two ontologically different entities. The apostate majorities within God's people along the history of salvation were never represented in the Bible as realities ontologically different from the faithful remnants, yet both groups were always distinctly characterized as clearly opposed. That is also evident in the letters to most of the seven churches in chapters 2 and 3.

scene.²⁰ Thus, in the two dreams of Pharaoh, the seven scrawny and ugly cows devoured the seven fat and sleeky ones, and the seven withered and thin heads of grain ate the full and good ones. In both cases, each group of elements represented a neatly differentiated reality, two chronologically separated groups of agricultural qualitatively opposed years. The same is true about the mutual relationship among the several elements in the visions of Daniel 2, 7, and 8. In each case, the differentiation among the elements is made clear either through the chronologic consecutiveness (“and *after* this one, it will come *another* [thus, different] one”) or by a confrontation like the one between the ram and the male goat in chapter 8. Even contextually closer to Revelation 17, in chapter 12, two groups of angels, each one commanded by a leader, make war with each other. Unlike this, there is no explicit or implicit ontological disruption or differentiation between the virtuous woman of Revelation 12 and the wicked one in chapter 17.²¹ That seems not to favor the ontologically antithetic approach according to which the woman of Revelation 12 represents God’s faithful people while the harlot-adulteress stands for their non-Christian foes; namely, first century heathen Rome.

In 1886, the English writer Robert Louis Stevenson became famous with his book *The strange case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. In it, he narrated the fictional story of a respected doctor who was eager to find the formula that would endow him with superhuman powers. After several failed attempts, one day he thought he had finally found the desired potion. But what was his surprise when he discovered that it did not turn him into a superman but into a villain, a despicable and unrecognizable being who from then on hid in the shadows of the night to commit repugnant crimes in the deserted streets.

In the vision of chapter 12, the woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars, undoubtedly brought to John’s mind the description of the people of God that appears in Genesis 37,9.10. In turn, the woman of chapter 17 must have evoked in him

²⁰ Even though not in a symbolic realm, remember Moses’s snake-rod devouring those of the Pharaoh’s court sorcerers.

²¹ On this, see the linguistic connections between Revelation 12 and 17.

the image of God's people in a state of apostasy, represented in the Old Testament as an unfaithful woman who cheats on her husband with one and another lover, like a prostitute (Isa 1,21; 2; 3; 57,3; Jer 3,13; 5,7; Ezek 16; 23; Hosea, esp. 4,14).²²

God delivered his people from Egypt and led them into the wilderness to make them safe from their enemies (*cf.* Rev 12,6.1316). It was the perfect place for the loving intimacy of a honeymoon (Hos 13,46). But although they left Egypt, Egypt had not left the hearts of many of them, and soon after, in the same wilderness, they committed spiritual adultery against their Bridegroom by worshiping other gods (Exod 32; Acts 7,39). A new generation did the same at the very threshold of the Promised Land (Num 25). Those who finally entered Canaan yielded again to the seduction of paganism, and God had to discipline them by delivering them into the hands of their enslaving pagan "lovers": Assyria and Babylon (Deut 28,4768; Dan 1,1.2; 9). The seduction that the Babylonian culture exerted on them was so intense that most of them decided to stay there after the fall of the empire. And even those who returned to Judea were later strongly influenced by the pagan culture of the Greeks. No wonder, then, that the prophets identified the apostate majority among God's people with Sodom, Egypt and even Babylon, the nations by which he disciplined them, from which he delivered them, but from which they chose to remain spiritually captive (Isa 1,10; 3,9; Jer 23,14; Ezek 16,46ff; Amos 4,10.11; *cf.* Rev 18,24).

Later on, that which had originally been God's chosen people become, by its rejection of the Messiah and its alliance with the secular power, the declared enemy of a remnant from its bosom, Christian Israel called to fulfill the pending mission of proclaiming the good news of God's love to humanity.²³

Thus, the composite complexity of the images of Revelation 17 and 18, and its inherently transtemporal or fluid referentiality, seems

²² The Greek πόρνη, translated as "prostitute" or "harlot" in Rev 17, also means "adulteress" (*cf.* LXX-Prov 5,3; Isa 57,3; Jer 3,1-3; 5,7; Hos 4,14).

²³ *Cf.* Rev 2,9; 3,9; Matt 23,34; Mark 13,9; Luke 12,11; 21,12; Acts 5-8; 13; 14; 21-24; 1 Thess 1,14-16.

not to be exhausted by only one historical referent, neither past nor contemporaneous or future from John's perspective. There seems to be several—conscious for John or not—layers of retrospective evocative and/or prospective referents overlapping in some of the symbolic-metaphoric images and motifs used by him, particularly in the case of the women of chapters 12 and 17. Granted that, and in sum, it could be said that those representations have a manifold or polyvalent historical-continuous relevance as it is suggested, for instance, by the “no longer-now-not yet” formula in 17,10 (*cf.* 1,19; 18,24).

In this respect, the adulteress/prostitute of Revelation 17 and 18 seems to point to several spiritual crises in the history of God's people, including the one underwent by those in the Christian Asian communities that were partaking, either happily or out of pressure,²⁴ in the prevailing assimilation trend to the pagan way of life and culture, plus all and every subsequent development evolving from God's people as instruments of evil against their faithful few brethren until the very end of history (*cf.* Rev 1,19; 17,10; see also 2 Thess 2,6-11; 1 John 2,18ff).

Sitting on a beast, on seven mountains and upon many waters

The woman John saw in vision was sitting upon many waters (verses 1 and 15), upon a beast with many heads and horns (verse 3) and upon seven mountains (verse 9), representing kings or kingdoms (verse 10), “peoples, multitudes, nations and tongues” (verse 15; *cf.* 18,3,9).

The action of “sitting upon” (*κάθηναι ἐπί*) is the common factor that links the three descriptions and makes the waters, the mountains and the beast function as synonyms, as different representations of the same reality, namely the “peoples, multitudes, nations and tongues” of verse 15, and the “kings and inhabitants of the earth” of verse 2.

In the Old Testament, the haughty pagan nations are sometimes depicted as mountains.²⁵ In line with this, the intertestamental apocalyptic

²⁴ *Cf.* Rev 13.

²⁵ *E.g.*, Ps 46,2,3,6; Isa 2,2; Jer 51,24-26; Hab 3,6,10; *cf.* Rev 8,8.

Enoch metaphorically describes the kingdoms of the earth, whose ungodly haughtiness would be brought down by the Messiah on the occasion of the final judgment, as mountains of gold, silver, copper and iron (chaps. 52, 53; cf. Dan 2; Rev 8,8).²⁶ In Ezek 16,15.16; 23,30; cf. Rev 2,2023; 6,1517; Isa 24,1923; Hos 10,8).

In turn, the many and/or powerful²⁷ waters are in the Old Testament a frequent metaphorical representation of belligerent pagan nations driven by an insatiable voracity for conquest.²⁸ The same is true of ferocious beasts,²⁹ especially in the cause-effect covenant context of Scripture as a whole, with Revelation and its main Old Testament sources in particular. From this perspective, it seems probable that behind the harlot's "sitting on many waters" (*ἐπί*³⁰ *ὑδάτων πολλῶν*) in Revelation 17,1.15, the Hebrew *עַל-מַיִם רַבִּים* could be read, mostly since *ὑδάτα πολλά* is the LXX's chosen rendering of the Hebrew *מַיִם רַבִּים* in passages dealing with the rage of Israel's classic enemies (Isa 17,13) and with their settlement beside courses of water such as the Nile (Jer 28,13) and the Euphrates (Jer 51,13). In this respect, even Israel is characterized in the OT as a vine planted by God beside many waters (Ezek 17,5.8; cf. 31,7). Since *רַב* means "great," "chief" or "mighty," as well as "many,"³¹ the probable Hebrew behind Revelation 17,1 and 15 in John's mind could perhaps be rendered also as "mighty waters," which would be fitting to the "peoples, multitudes, nations and languages" of 15b and with the kings of the earth in 17,18.³²

²⁶ Hence the translation of *ορος* as "hills" hardly reflects John's intended meaning in light of his Old Testament sources, unlike the rendering "mountains" by most versions.

²⁷ In light of the Old Testament passages evoked in Rev 17 (*e.g.*, Jer 51,13), it is very likely that *מַיִם רַבִּים* is behind *ὑδάτων πολλῶν* in verse 1.

²⁸ *E.g.*, Ps 46,3.6; Isa 17,12.13.

²⁹ *E.g.*, Jer 4,7; 50,17; Dan 7, 8.

³⁰ Interestingly, the LXX always renders the Hebrew *עַל* in *עַל-מַיִם רַבִּים* for *ἐπί*, which can be rendered as "by," "beside" or "near" as well as "on" or "over." On this, see, for instance, Ps 29,3; Jer 28,13; 41,12 (about Egypt); Ezek 17,5.8 (regarding Israel).

³¹ *E.g.*, Exod 15,10; Pss 18,16.17; 29,3; 93,4; *Tg. Isa* 17,12; Ezek 1,24; 43,2.

³² Cf. 1,10 for *רַב* as also probably behind *μεγάλην*. On the pagan nations enraged against God's people compared to the "strong" or "mighty" waters of a roaring sea, see the *Tg. Isa* 17,12.

The action of sitting works in the vision of chapters 17 and 18 as a euphemism for “cohabiting,”³³ something similar to what it means in English “to sleep” with a person in a sexual context. This is clear not only in the light of some related texts of the Old Testament (*e. g.*, Jer 2,20; 3,2,3) but also by the parallel between the verbs “sit” (κάθηναι) and “fornicate” (πορνεύω) throughout chapter 17. The beast thus acts in the symbolic scene as the illegitimate consort of the woman,³⁴ in parallel and as a symbolic reinforcement within the triad beast/watermountains/kings/heads.

In turn, the association between prostitution and adultery communicated indistinctly and simultaneously by the word πόρνη, and its Hebrew counterpart פְּנִי in intertextually relevant passages of the OT, evokes the oracles addressed by the prophets of old to God’s people in times of national apostasy, especially on the eve of the divine disciplinary visitation mediated precisely by the same pagan powers with which Israel and Judah had incurred in illegitimate political/religious relations.

As already mentioned, the symbolic figure of the adulteress/prostitute in Revelation comes from the Old Testament, where it sometimes represents the idolatrous seduction exerted on God’s people (*e. g.*, Isa 23; Nah 3), but above all Israel himself as the unfaithful consort of God committing spiritual adultery against him with the gods of the pagan nations.³⁵ The literary, thematic and linguistic link between the corrupt and corrupting Babylon of Revelation and the Christian pseudoprophetess Jezebel of the church of Thyatira (Rev 2,20,23) indicates that the former paradoxically represents a previously faithful group of people now in apostasy (*cf.* 2 Thess 2,311; 1 John 2,18ff).

³³ Other examples of this typically biblical linguistic modesty are the expressions “to know,” “to come out of the loins,” “to uncover the nakedness,” “to come to someone,” etc.

³⁴ Amy J. Levine and María Mayo Robbins, eds., *A companion to the Apocalypse of John* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 10.

³⁵ *E. g.*, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Micah; *cf.* Exod 20,3-5; Deut 5,7-9.

Dressed in purple

Every culture and era has witnessed an association between certain colors and different situations, conditions, moods and virtues (or lack of them). “White and radiant goes the bride,” say the lyrics of an old song, thus inherently emphasizing the sexual purity of the happy bride. “The issue is still quite green,” we say of something premature or unfinished. “Everything has been rosy so far” describes the perfect or ideal. On the other hand, the color black has been consecrated as that of the nefarious or sinister. The plague that devastated Europe during the Middle Ages went down in history as “black.” A bad day is a “black day,” the same as ill-gotten money, the rebellious sheep in the flock, the anonymous hand behind an unsolved crime, macabre humor, and any day of the week when international markets collapse.

These chromatic associations vary according to culture, time, and place. Unlike the tendency in the West, wedding dresses are not white but red in certain regions of the Far East, as are the walls of hospitals. Even there, and again unlike in the West, mourning is expressed by the color white. In English, melancholy is blue: “When I’m feeling blue, all I have to do is take a look at you,” says a wellknown song. Blues are precisely pieces of music that express melancholy, something that other cultures would perhaps associate with a color like gray.

Some colors are sometimes even redefined at the behest of fashion or the ideological agendas of the day. For instance, there are those who today strive to turn the color of hope into a symbol of the premeditated suppression of intrauterine human life, paradoxically in the name of life. At the same time, the traditional color of mourning in the West currently prevails in sporty and informal attire, without any relation to death or mourning. Red, always associated with fire and danger (traffic lights, fire engines, fire extinguishers, alarms, emergency exits) has become the color par excellence of sports cars. All of this cautions us against translating too fast and lightly the conventions of one society to another, or from one time to another, especially in the case of the Bible, written in a period and a setting so different from our own.

Did John intend to communicate something through the colors of the beast and the woman in chapter 17? If so, what was that chromatically coded message?

The codes of Revelation are those of John and his original audience and are found primarily in the Old Testament and the culture of the ancient Near East. It is there and then that we should look for the answer to the question what does this or that color represent?

An additional clue to the message implicit in the colors seen and used by John in the symbolic frescoes of the Apocalypse are the additional visual elements that surround the color in question and reinforce some of its various representative shades. For example, while white symbolizes wisdom, experience and knowledge when it appears associated with the attire and hair of a venerable Elder in a forensic context (Dan 7,10; *cf.* Rev 1,14), it represents purity in keeping with snow (*e. g.*, Isa 1,18b; *cf.* Rev 3,4.5; 7,9.13.14), and is in other settings a symbol of triumph, especially when worn by a steed ridden by a victorious soldier (*e. g.*, 6,2; *cf.* 19,11). In turn, the intense red sometimes represents a notorious, strident sinful condition (*e. g.*, Isa 1,18a), but it is also a symbol of cruelty and bloodshed if it is linked to the horse of a warrior brandishing a sword and who is authorized to take away the peace from among human beings (Rev 6,4). On the other hand, ochre or yellowish represents death if it is associated with lifeless vegetation, which is inevitably subject to fire (8,7; *cf.* 6,8).

The color of the attire of the cruel and immoral woman sitting upon the beast in Revelation 17 has traditionally been interpreted in connection with opulence and imperial majesty. There is no doubt that in antiquity, purple or purplish-red was certainly distinctive of royalty and the upper classes.³⁶ However, it was also associated with the Jewish tabernacle or sanctuary and with the priestly garments³⁷ besides characterizing the

³⁶ In this sense, the stem πορφυρ and its derivatives are widely present in contexts of kingship in the Septuagint (*e. g.*, Judg 8:6; Est 8,15; Dan 5,7.16.29; 6,4; 1 Macc 8,14; 10,62.64; 11,58; Judith 10,21; 1 Esdras 3,6); see also Alfred Zimmern, *The Greek Commonwealth: Politics and economics in fifth-century Athens* (Oxford, GB: Clarendon Press, 1931), 35.

³⁷ *E. g.*, LXX-1 Macc 10,20; 2 Macc 4,38; 14,43.44.

metaphorical attire of the virtuous Jewish woman and wife³⁸ as well as being also linked to idolatry by the pagan custom of dressing cultic images in that color.³⁹

On the one hand, this chromaticsymbolic and referential polyvalence is in tune with John's deliberate style, especially given the different circumstances of his diverse audience, both contemporary and later. On the other hand, it is in harmony with a certain degree of variety and vagueness characteristic of the nomenclature of the time, in which the names of colors were used with great laxity and freedom. Thus, the term translated as 'purple' (πορφυροῦς) designated colors from deep red to violet.⁴⁰ Perhaps this variety explains in part the lack of consensus among biblical translators on what color the Greek term πορφυροῦς designates. The options proposed have included blue, violet, and dark red.

In turn, the actual color red is also present in the extrabiblical literature of postexilic Judaism as a representation of a sinful condition⁴¹ and bloodshed through persecution or warfare.⁴²

Therefore, the colors of the attire of the symbolic duo of Revelation 17 could be operating as a visual intensification tending in part to reinforce the explicit mention of the blood of the martyrs (17,6), thus highlighting the persecutory activity of both figures, in addition, as we shall see, to the idolatrous and apostate condition of the woman.

³⁸ See LXX-Prov 31,22.

³⁹ On this, see LXX-Jer 10,9 and *Epistle of Jeremiah* 1,11.71, whose language is particularly akin to that of Rev 17.

⁴⁰ On the purplish or purplishred dye produced in Thyatira, see Zimmern, *Greek Commonwealth*.

⁴¹ *E.g.*, that is the word used in LXX-Isa 1,18 to illustrate sin metaphorically and as a metonymy for purplish red, since the dye of that color and so designated was mainly obtained from the coast of Phoenicia [Greek Φοινίκη], in the eastern Mediterranean (*cf.* 2 Chr 2,14; Ezek 27,7.8); see in this respect Zimmern, *Greek Commonwealth*, 35; William M. Ramsay, *The letters to the seven churches of Asia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1963), 325.

⁴² *E.g.*, the second horse of Rev 6,4 is red or scarlet (πυρρός), as is the persecuting dragon in Rev 12,3. In *1 Enoch* 85,3.4, Abel, killed by Cain, is represented as a red calf, a sacrificial victim. Regarding the red color as a symbol of martyrdom or persecutory violence, see the comments on *1 Enoch* 85,3 by Alejandro Diez Macho in *Apócrifos del Antiguo Testamento* (Madrid: Ediciones Cristiandad, 1983), 4:111. Japheth and his descendants are also represented as red bulls in *1 Enoch* 89,1.9.

The emphasis and the key to deciphering what is represented by the colors in Revelation 17 would not be, then, so much in the color itself as in the allusions, associations or links created by those colors between different texts.

The relationship between the symbolic villainess of Revelation 17 and the false prophetess of the church of Thyatira (2,2023) as anticipation or historical prefiguration of the former is evident in the light of all that they have in common. Both are female figures (γυνή), have figurative children or disciples, are spiritually adulterous or fornicators (πορνεύω) because they promote idolatry (εἰδωλόθυτον, βδέλυγμα), and are nominally part of God's people (cf. Rev 12,1.2.5).⁴³ In addition, both are related to the Mediterranean region where famous dark red dyes linked to opulence and idolatry were produced from certain mollusks. The association between one of the variants of this color and its origin (Phoenicia, the birthplace of the bloodthirsty queen Jezebel, a devotee of Baal and declared enemy of God and his worship) was such that the same Greek word (Φοινίκη) was used interchangeably as a designation for both (the place for the product and vice versa). Today we would perhaps say "Phoenicia-red" or "Jezebel-red" or "persecuting apostasy-red."

The reality represented by the affair of the beauty and the beast in Revelation 17 would not be, then, a persecuting empire of the church at the dawn of Christianity, but the betrayal ("sitting" as a euphemism for "fornication") of the Lamb's former wife with the secular power of the day, and the consequent violent suppression of any denunciation against such betrayal. In that case, the visionary fresco in question would describe the generalized apostasy that characterized God's people at different moments in the history of the conflict between good and evil, such as when the leadership of Palestinian Judaism rejected the Messiah and persecuted the church, and when the church later departed from the teaching of

⁴³ The image of a married woman is frequently applied in the Bible to God's people, both in their faithful condition to their heavenly Bridegroom and when they metaphorically prostituted themselves in pursuit of their lovers, the idols of the pagan nations (cf. Heb. Baal ["husband"] and Jezebel ["Baal is a shame"]); on this, see Larry G. Herr, "Is the spelling of Baalis in Jeremiah 40:14 a mutilation?," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 23 [1985]: 190.

the Nazarene to ally itself with the political power to silence the claims of reform in its midst during the Dark or Medieval Ages.

Gorged on the blood of the saints

Among the endless debates surrounding the Apocalypse, perhaps one of the most persistent has to do with the date when it saw the light. Was it written before or after AD 70? In the mid 60's or at the end of the 90's? Like one side of a coin, this question is inseparable from another: What circumstances motivated the writing and sending of this sevenfold circular letter to the Christians of Asia Minor in the first century? Were they being persecuted by the Roman empire? Were they being socially marginalized or excluded because of their faith? Were they being seduced by pagan culture?

Some of the most dazzling symbolic pictures painted by John in his book have for centuries inclined interpreters to the first option. The great scene of cultic coercion in chapter 13 and the symbolic woman in chapter 17, gorged on human blood and seated on seven mountains, have suggested to many the capital of the Roman empire and the persecutions launched by some of its emperors against the church. Among them, history and Christian tradition have consecrated two as villains par excellence: Nero and Domitian. The former cruelly persecuted the Christians of the capital in the mid 60's, although not for religious reasons, but presumably to divert suspicion from himself for the burning of a part of the city where he planned to build his new palace. Some sources even suggest that the scapegoat originally chosen would have been the Jewish community, instead of which the Christians of the capital were sacrificed thanks to the timely mediation of Poppea Sabina, Nero's wife and sympathizer of Judaism.⁴⁴ Domitian, the other one consecrated as a villain by tradition,

⁴⁴ Eugene M. Boring, *Revelation*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1989), 20; Hanns Lilje, *The last book of the Bible: The meaning of the Revelation of St. John* (Philadelphia, PA: Muhlenberg, 1957), 32; Martin Kiddle, *The Revelation of St. John*, The Moffat New Testament Commentary (New York: Harper, 1940), xl; William Riley, *The spiritual adventure of the Apocalypse* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1997), 112. Regarding the Neronian persecution of the year 64, confined to the capital, as a personal rather than official or institutional initiative on the part of the empire, the Roman

would have insisted on being worshipped as a god and sent to exile or the scaffold those who resisted him, according to the overloaded testimony of his aristocratic senatorial detractors after his death. It seems rather that his demand for worship was aimed at some of the elite suspected of disloyalty and conspiracy.⁴⁵

In short, at least in the first century, neither the Roman senate nor the emperors, perhaps with the short-termed exception of Caligula (37-41 AD), demanded or even willingly accepted public worship on the part of the citizens and subjects of the empire.⁴⁶

historian Gaius Cornelius Tacitus referred in the second century to the Christians killed as: "People whose lives were taken... to satisfy the cruelty of a single one" (*Annals* 15.44). Regarding Poppea's alleged secret conversion to Judaism, see art. Popea Sabina, *Gran enciclopedia universal Espasa Calpe* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Planeta, 2005), 31:9488.

⁴⁵ On the problems of this biased portrayal of Domitian and the true motivations and scope of some of his measures, especially for the Christians of Asia, see David E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 52a (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1997), lxxvii-lxix; Leonard L. Thompson, *The book of Revelation: Apocalypse and empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 101-110; 463-469; David Maggie, *Roman rule in Asia Minor, to the end of the third century after Christ* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1950), 576-582; Henri W. Pleket, "Domitian, the senate and the provinces," *Mnemosyne* 14 (1961): 296-315; Richard B. Vinson, "The social world of the book of Revelation," *Review and Expositor* 98 (2001): 11-33; W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and persecution in the early Church* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 159-162.

⁴⁶ Martin P. Charlesworth, *The Roman empire* (London, GB: Oxford University Press, 1954), 139-141. Unlike, for instance, Bruce W. Winter, *Divine honours for the caesars: The first Christians responses* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015). On the problems inherent to forceful emperor-worship as part of the scenario of first-century Christianity, including Revelation, see Maggie, *Roman rule in Asia Minor*, 576-582; Pleket, "Domitian," 296-315; Frederick C. Grant, *Roman hellenism and the New Testament* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), 17; Isbon T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John: Studies in introduction with a critical and exegetical commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1967), 642; Sean P. Kealy, *The Apocalypse of John* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1987), 179; Barker, *Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 239; Mathias Rissi, *Time and history: A study on the Revelation* (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1966), 68; George E. Ladd, *A commentary on the book of Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 162; Antoninus King Wai Siew, *The war between the two beasts and the two witnesses: A chiastic reading of Revelation 11.1-14.5* (Edinburgh, GB: T&T Clark, 2005), 254, 268; Ramsay, *The letters to the seven churches of Asia*, 121; Alan J. P. Garrow, *Revelation*, New Testament Readings Series (New York, NY: Routledge, 1997), 88, 89; Henry B. Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John: The Greek text with introduction, notes, and indices* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1951), lxi, 25, 26, 31; Steven J. Friesen, "Revelation, realia, and religion: Archaeology in the interpretation of the Apocalypse," *Harvard Theological Review* 88 (1995): 300; David E. Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, WBC 52b (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1998), 756; Beale, *Revelation*, 6, 714; Kenneth Cukrowski, "The influence of the emperor cult on the book of Revelation," *Römische Quartalschrift für*

Hence, the picture the New Testament paints of the Roman empire in the first century is far from critical.⁴⁷ According to the Gospels, Pilate, the Roman governor in Judea during the trial and crucifixion of Christ, tried until the last moment to spare the Nazarene from death.⁴⁸ Paul, for his part, was wrested several times by the Roman provincial authorities from the clutches of his former coreligionists.⁴⁹ The last we know of him from the biblical record is that he preached “openly and without hindrance” for two years in a rented house on the outskirts of Rome while awaiting an audience requested by himself to appear before Nero (Acts 28,30.31). During his ministry, his religious affiliation, public and notorious to all, was not an obstacle for the provincial authorities to lavish him with friendship (Acts 19,31). In fact, Christianity seems then to have penetrated even into “Caesar’s house” (Phil 4,22). Whatever the rank of those thus alluded to, it is unthinkable that a generalized and systematic imperial policy against the church, if it had existed then, would not have made them its first victims.

Rome systematically persecuted the church in the midthird and early fourth centuries, but it would not be correct to retrospectively project that circumstance as if it had occurred in the first century, two hundred years earlier. Hostility against the church in the first century was rather sporadic, local and sponsored by social and religious sectors other than the State (*cf.* Rev 2,9; 3,9).⁵⁰ Historically, the predominantly gentile population of Asia Minor showed intolerant—though on a sporadic,

christliche Altertumskunde und Kirchengeschichte 45 (2003): 64; Colin Miller, “The imperial cult in the Pauline cities of Asia Minor and Greece,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 72 (2010): 316-332; *cf.* C. L. Brinks, “Great Is Artemis of the Ephesians’: Acts 19:23-41 in Light of Goddess Worship in Ephesus,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 71 (2009): 784. See also Travis B. Williams, “Suffering from a critical oversight: The persecutions of 1 Peter within modern scholarship,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 10 (2012): 275-292.

⁴⁷ *E. g.*, Matt 22,21 and par.; Rom 13,1-7; 1 Pet 2,13.14.

⁴⁸ Mark 15,14; Luke 23,20.22; John 18,29.31.38; 19,12.

⁴⁹ Acts 21,27.36; 23,10.17.35.

⁵⁰ See also Acts 4,1-3.15-18; 5,17.18.27-33.40; 6,8-15; 7,51-60; 9,23.29; 13,10.45-50; 14,2-5.19; 17,5-8.13; 18,6.12.13.17; 19,9; 20,3; 21,10-36; 22,22.23; 23,12.20.21; 24,1-9.27; 25,2.3.7; 26,21; 28,17-29; Frend, *Martyrdom and persecution in the early Church*, 252-253.

localized and short-term basis—toward the Jews and later on toward the Christians, even before Rome’s generalized hostile policy against both groups (see Acts 19,23-34).⁵¹

The period of supremacy of the main prophetic power opposed to God’s faithful amongst his people is the same both in Daniel and Revelation,⁵² as well as its spiritual agenda centered on blasphemy.⁵³ Both Judaism and early Christianity interpreted the fourth beast of Daniel 7 and the iron of the statue of Daniel 2 as symbols of the Roman empire. Therefore, the sea beast of Revelation 13, so clearly modeled after Daniel 7, as well as the duo of Revelation 17, so clearly related to chapter 13, cannot represent the Roman empire in the first century, but, like the little horn, a power arising from that empire *a posteriori*, after its fragmentation in the fifth century, after the fall of three of the ten horns (kingdoms) linked to the fourth beast (see Dan 7,8.20) according to the historical continuous view.

If the image of a persecuting female figure insatiably unfaithful to her husband and in collusion with a beast as a symbol of powerful political-religious lovers is an extension of the same Old Testament theological motifs applied by the prophets to Israel’s flirting with Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, etc., then the fullness (μεθύουσιν)⁵⁴ of the woman with the blood

⁵¹ On this, see Joseph B. Tyson, *A study of early Christianity* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1973), 66. The worship to the Dea Roma and its emperors was a pre-Christian, Asian—not roman—initiative originated in Ephesus in the year 48 BC. See Eugene Boring, K. Berger and C. Colpe, eds., *Hellenistic commentary to the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 548; Eduard Lohse, *The New Testament environment* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1976), 219.

⁵² Dan 7,25; Rev 13,5; cf. 11,2,3; 12,14.

⁵³ Provided βλασφημία has in 17,3.5 the nuance of misrepresenting God before the unbelievers through a purely nominal profession of faith by an apostate entity (cf. 2 Thess 2,4; 1 John 2,18b.19; Rev 2,9; 3,9; 13,5.6; see also Rom 2,17-29), this would reinforce the non-imperial Roman nature of both the woman and the beast in the unit.

⁵⁴ Rather than “drunkenness” in this context; cf. the use of μεθύω in LXX 36,8; LXX-Hag 1,6; etc. with the nuance of fullness instead of intoxication. In 17,2a, ἐπόρνευσαν οἱ βασιλεῖς τῆς γῆς is paralleled to ἐμεθύθησαν οἱ κατοικοῦντες τὴν γῆν in 17,2b by the conjunction καί, probably with either an exegetical (“with her the kings of the earth committed adultery, that is the inhabitants of the earth were fully satiated with the wine of her adulteries”) or an ascensive nuance of intensification (“with her the kings of the earth committed adultery, yea the inhabitants of the earth adulterated to the hilt with her”).

of God's spokesmen shed by the unrepentant majority of God's people, especially by their leaders, exempts the Roman empire of the first century from being the reality behind the scene of Revelation 17. The place is, instead, naturally filled by the politicalreligious leadership of the covenant people in its successive historical manifestations, already from the first century, after becoming an instrument of evil with the concurrence of the state to silence the faithful witness of the successive remnants paradoxically coming out from its own bosom.

John, as well as Paul, fight on several battlefronts simultaneously in their writings: the opposition of Judaism, the Judaizing Christians, various forms of paganism, the philosophies in vogue in their day, pseudo-Christian mysticism, etc. The New Testament must therefore be read against these simultaneous backdrops to recover the original intent of its inspired writers and the perennial relevance of its messages. Revelation is no exception to this rule. Read as a polemic with paganism, one sees one of the multiple dimensions of its meaning. The same is true when it is read in the context of the strained relationship that the young church maintained with the synagogue in different parts of the empire, Asia Minor among them. In this sense, according to a tradition recorded in the anonymous secondcentury Christian document known as "The Acts of John," the apostle had been banished by the Roman emperor Domitian (81-97 AD) to the island of Patmos to silence his testimony in favor of Christ and despite his admiration for the virtue and miracles of the beloved disciple. The same source says that Domitian would have been instigated to it by a sector of Judaism in Asia Minor.⁵⁵

The hostility of the leaders of Judaism against Christianity in the first century was not a novelty when John wrote to the churches of Smyrna

⁵⁵ On this, see Hans Lietzmann, *A history of the early Church: The founding of the Church universal* (Cleveland/New York: The World Publishing Company, 1953), 2:83. Regarding the New Testament testimony about the hostility of certain sectors of Judaism against Christianity in the first century, see, for instance, Acts 4,1-3.15-18; 5,17.18.27-33.40; 6,8-15; 7,51-60; 9,23.,29; 13,10.45-50; 14,2-5.19; 17,5-8.13; 18,6.12.13.17; 19,9; 20,3; 21,10-36; 22,22.23; 23,12.20.21; 24,1-9.27; 25,2.3.7; 26,21; 28,17-29; 1 Thess 2,14-16; Rev 2,9; 3,9.

and Philadelphia.⁵⁶ Decades earlier, Jesus had warned his disciples about it before his death (Matt 23,2939; John 16,2). He himself ended up on a Roman cross at the behest of the Sanhedrin.⁵⁷ A few decades later, the once persecuting Paul, now an apostle to the Gentiles, was frequently the object of the wrath of the Jewish rulers during his missionary journeys in the Mediterranean.⁵⁸

The book of Revelation itself is, among other things, a polemic with a Judaism reluctant to be overshadowed by the thriving church coming out of its own entrails. The missionary success of Christ's followers among the heathen, many of them hitherto sympathetic to Judaism, coupled with the young church's emphasis on its mission as the messenger of divine grace through the Nazarene Messiah were more than Israel after the flesh was willing to bear.⁵⁹ It is no surprise, then, that Revelation is strewn with titles and expressions distinctive of Judaism, now claimed by Christian Israel as their own. The animal sacrifices of the earthly sanctuary are implicitly rendered and declared ineffective by the slain Lamb who "washed us from our sins in his blood" (1,5). The same happens with the Levitical priesthood, tacitly suppressed by the one who makes his followers "priests to God" (1,6). Those who crucified him were to be, much to their regret, preferential witnesses of his return in glory to earth (1,7). In the Apocalypse, Jesus Christ is declared "he who is and who was

⁵⁶ Note the link made in Rev 2,9; 3,9 between the synagogue and the local hostility against the church through the name "Satan" (Heb. accuser, adversary).

⁵⁷ John 18,35; 19,11; Acts 3,15; 7,52; 13,27.28; 1 Thess 2,14.15; Rev 11,8.

⁵⁸ Acts 4,1-3.15-18; 5,17.18.27-33.40; 6,8-15; 7,51-60; 9,23.29; 13,10.45-50; 14,2-5.19; 17,5-8.13; 18,6.12.13.17; 19,9; 20,3; 21,10-36; 22,22.23; 23,12.20.21; 24,1-9.27; 25,2.3.7; 26,21; 28,17-29.

⁵⁹ Acts 5,14.17; 13,45; 17,4.5; cf. Dan 9,24.27. The nuptial language implied in Rev 3,9 ("I will cause them to come... and acknowledge that I have loved you;" cf. 2,4; Ezek 16,43) is interesting. If, according to some interpreters, the opening of the seven times sealed scroll of chapter 4 represents among other things the breaking of the marriage covenant between God and his people because of their unfaithfulness and their rejection of the Messiah, the announced recognition by the synagogue of Satan of God's love for the church in Philadelphia can be interpreted as an implicit new marriage covenant between God and the Christian church as his new bride in place of the former one. See on this subject, for example, Josephine Massyngberde Ford, "The divorce bill of the Lamb and the scroll of the suspended adulteress: A note on Ap. 5:1 and 10:8-11," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 2 (1971): 136-143.

and who is to come, the Almighty” (1,8), an intolerable blasphemy for Judaism (*cf.* John 5,18). Such was also the case with labels as “the Sovereign of God’s creation” (Rev 3,14; NIV) and such messianic titles as “the one who holds the key of David” (Rev 3,7), “the lion of the tribe of Judah” (Rev 5,5), “the male child of the woman” (Rev 12,5; *cf.* Gen 3,15; Ps 2,9; Gal 4,4), “the root and the offspring of David” (Rev 22,16), “the shining star of David” (Rev 22,16; *cf.* Gen 3,15; Ps 2,9; Gal 4,4), “the root and offspring of David” (Rev 22,16) and “the bright and morning star” (Rev 22,16; *cf.* Num 24,17). The implied supersession of everything connected with the Jerusalem temple by the heavenly sanctuary and Christ’s ministry as High Priest in it appear everywhere in the book (Rev 21,22; *cf.* Heb 8,5; 9,23.24).

Further evidence of this conflict as part of the background of Revelation is John’s use of certain key words. For example, the Greek verb σφάζω (lit. “to slit the throat” in a sacrificial sense)⁶⁰ is reserved in Revelation for the slain and resurrected Lamb (Rev 5,6.9.12), for his witnesses violently slain by his adversaries as meek and defenseless lambs (Rev 6,4.9; 14,14; 18,24), including the martyrs of the first century, and for the antichrist as a pseudolamb (Rev 13,3.8; *cf.* verse 11). Outside of Revelation, the verb is only used in the New Testament by John in a context of opposition to Jesus as divinehuman Messiah (1 John 3,12; *cf.* 2,22.24). The same is true of the verb “to pierce” (ἐκκεντέω), which only appears in Revelation 1,7 and John 19,37 as a designation of the crucifixion of Christ at the hands of Rome at the instigation of the leaders of Palestinian Judaism.

It is striking that throughout the intense but brief romance between the beauty and the beast, and even in the abrupt and violent ending of their honeymoon, the symbolic action of drinking the blood of the faithful witnesses is attributed to the woman, not to the beast, the explicit object of whose wrath is not the saints, but the harlotcity, whom the fire devours. And although this does not absolve the kings of the

⁶⁰ Matthias Rissi, *Time and history: A study on the Revelation* (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1966), 66; John P. Sweet, *Revelation*, Westminster Pelican Commentaries (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1979), 23; Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8-22: An exegetical commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1995), 158.

earth for their facilitating assistance in the persecutory action of the woman against God's faithful, it certainly recalls the balance of responsibilities between first-century imperial Rome and the Sanhedrin in the case of Christ and of his early witnesses later. The same is true of Paul in the Mediterranean according to Acts and of John on Patmos according to the Christian tradition of the second century.⁶¹

All the above said prevents us from seeing in first-century imperial Rome the reality behind the symbolism of chapters 17 and 18. On the contrary, there are other realities—contemporary to the author yet prefigurative of the future—which historically fit better into the picture depicted there (*cf.* 17,10). Unlike the rather sporadic and focalized pagan hostility against the Christian church in the first and second centuries, the political and religious vernacular leadership in Jerusalem, as well as its satellites in the Diaspora, was particularly hostile to the church both inside and outside Palestine, especially in Asia Minor,⁶² from the very beginning.

There are also biblical antecedents of Jerusalem being depicted as an innocent blood-shedding city.⁶³ Moreover, some meaningful segments of the history of Israel during the monarchic period are evoked in the imagery of chapters 12 through 19, especially in chapter 13. Characters such as Ahab, Jezebel and Elijah are explicitly or implicitly there.⁶⁴ Jezebel—even though never identified with the city of Jerusalem or with a city in

⁶¹ On the role of local Judaism in the episodes of pagan anti-Christian hostility in the Mediterranean in general, including Asia Minor, during the first centuries of the Christian era, see Frend, *Martyrdom and persecution in the early Church*, especially 252-253, 305.

⁶² See Acts 7,52; 8,1-3; *cf.* 2,9; 14,19; 25,1-7; Rev 2,9.10; 3,9; *cf.* Mark 13,9.

⁶³ *E.g.*, Matt 21,33-45; 23,37; Luke 11,49.50; Acts 7,52; 18,24. The context in all these instances is the religious leadership of Jerusalem, not Rome. In Rev 11,8, Jerusalem—the precise spot on earth where the Messiah was actually put to death—is circumloquially alluded as “the great city where also their Lord [the Lord of the two witnesses] was crucified.” This could be an *inclusive* literary device embracing future Rome—although not excluding Jerusalem—, but hardly an *exclusive* allusion to first century Rome.

⁶⁴ For a study on the symbolic correspondence between Ahab, Jezebel, and Elijah on the one side, and the sea-beast, the earth-beast/false prophet, the faithful remnant, and the kings from the east of chapters 13 through 20 on the other, see William H. Shea, “The location and significance of Armageddon in Rev 16:16,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 18 (1980): 157-162.

general in the Old Testament—was certainly a “harlot,” at least religiously speaking, “drunken with” [or rather “full of”] the blood of God’s witnesses, the faithful prophets (*cf.* 18,24; see also Neh 9,26).

She reigns over the kings of the earth

In verses 1, 3, 9 and 15, the adulteressprostitute Babylon is seen “sitting upon” (*κάθηναι ἐπί*) many and/or mighty waters, upon a beast, and upon seven mountains. If the already discussed on the nuance of spiritual adultery of *κάθηναι ἐπί* regarding the woman’s lovers is correct, this should apply also to the construction *ἔχω βασιλείαν ἐπί* in verse 18. Granted this, the cumulative idea communicated by the construction *ἔχουσα βασιλείαν ἐπί τῶν βασιλέων τῆς γῆς* would not be so much that of regency or supremacy,⁶⁵ but rather one of adulterous contumacy, of consubstantiation and participation in the same nature rather than of hierarchical ranking. “She who reigns sustained or backed up by the kings of the earth,” would, in that case, be a translation perhaps more according to John’s intent. In that case, the relationship between the woman and the beast expressed by the construction *κάθηναι ἐπί* in verse 3 would not be one of subordinating rider-subordinated beast,⁶⁶ but rather one of dominant beast-pleased rider or, following Ami Levin, one of adulteressillegitimate consort.⁶⁷ The woman is, so to say, the favorite concubine of the powers represented by the waters, the mountains, and the beast.

The thematic link between 17,18 and 18,7 is made textually evident by the presence of both *κάθηναι* and the feminine form of the noun *βασιλεῦς*. About the kind of symbolic link existing between the royal beast and the woman seated on it, the clarification of the prostituteadulteress in 18,7b: “I am not a widow,” is striking because this ultimately makes her position dependent on that of someone else; namely, the kings who sustain her. Then it is not she who exercises dominion over the beast

⁶⁵ On this reading centered at Rome, see, for instance, *The New Living Translation*: “Seven hills where the woman rules.”

⁶⁶ Contrary to some versions reading “a woman riding a beast” (*e.g.*, New Jerusalem Bible).

⁶⁷ Levine and Mayo Robbins, *A companion to the Apocalypse of John*, 10.

of political power, but the other way around. She benefits from her relationship with her lovers. In this sense, if the conjunction *καί* functions exegetically in the clause, which is frequent in Revelation, this would allow the following translation: “I am sitting as a queen; that is, I am not a widow.” In other words, her status depends on the existence of her lovers and the sustenance they choose to give her in exchange for the favors she lavishes on them.⁶⁸ Hence a translation of verse 18 that would perhaps better reflect John’s original intention could be: “She is the one who exerts her power astride the kings of the earth,” thus highlighting a relational rather hierarchical emphasis of *ἐπί* in the picture. An explicit and unequivocal confirmation of who’s who in this symbiotic relationship, and of the balance of power existing between the two characters, is the denouement of the visionary scene in 17,16: “The beast and the ten horns you saw will hate the prostitute. They will bring her to ruin and leave her naked; they will eat her flesh and burn her with fire.”⁶⁹ It is interesting in this respect that, according to verse 17, the transference or delegation of power does not flow from the horns (kings/kingdoms) to the prostitute, but from the horns to the beast.

John resorts to hendiadys to represent a same reality in different ways in several related parts of his work, like chapters 13 and 17. While symbolic Babylon is described as a city and, at the same time, as a murderous adulteressprostitute in chapters 17 and 18, chapter 13 portrays the same entity as a fearsome monster rising from the sea, in turn, another

⁶⁸ On the commercial items enumerated in Rev 18 as also able to reflect a first century Babylonian Jerusalem rather than or as well as Rome, see Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem at the time of Jesus*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1967), 35-51, where Josephus is quoted on the altar of the incense in Jerusalem’s temple, and “its thirteen kinds of sweet smelling spices with which the sea [i.e., the maritime commerce] replenished it” (*Wars* 5.218). On Jerusalem as behind the Babylon of Rev 18, see Janice E. Leonard, *Come out of Her, my people: A study of the Revelation to John* (Chicago, IL: Laudemont Press, 1991), 122; cf. Sophie Laws, *In the light of the Lamb: Imagery, parody, and theology in the Apocalypse of John*, Good News Studies 31 (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1988), 38. On the “slaves” (*συνούτων*) mentioned in Rev 18,13b, Rome, unlike Jerusalem, seems to have been a large-scale producer and seller of them (captives from wars, orphans for trade, etc.) rather than a buyer (on this, see Charlesworth, *The Roman Empire*, 129).

⁶⁹ In passing, and unlike the Old Testament Babylon, neither the Roman Empire nor its capital ended abruptly, as the metaphoric language of 18,8.10.17.19 implies. On the contrary, Rome is known precisely as “the eternal city.”

portrait of the power illustrated as the last horn of the fourth beast of Daniel⁷ and as the second phase of the horn coming from the west in Daniel 8,913.2325.

The judgment of Babylon

The vision of chapter 17 is, from the very beginning, explicitly a scene of judgment, the divine verdict proleptically pronounced against symbolic or spiritual Babylon: δείξω σοι τὸ κρίμα τῆς πόρνης (verse 1),⁷⁰ hence the one in charge of presenting the scene to John is one of the seven angels bearing the vials of the final divine vindication.

Another confirmation of the forensic nature of the fresco is the desert (ἔρημος) as the setting of the vision. The desert is a manifold theological motif with a long tradition in biblical literature. In its versatility, it represents the realm of evil, temptation, and deception,⁷¹ as well as the ideal setting for the metaphorical nuptial intimacy between God and his corporate bride, the covenant people (Hos 13,4-6). As such, it serves as a refuge for the latter in times of persecution,⁷² but it stands also for the desolation of the promised land as a consequence of Israel's disloyalty to the covenant.⁷³

Even another crucial piece in the scene is the blood-drinking imagery within a judgment setting. The adulteress/harlot of chapter 17 is said to be drunken or fully satiated with the blood of Jesus' witnesses. The figurative drinking of human blood in a judgment setting could represent retribution in response to previous blood-shedding rather than *current* intense persecution. The waters of the Nile turned into human blood (Exod 7,17-21) were God's sent judgment fitting to the former systematic annihilation of God's children in the same river. Since the Nile was

⁷⁰ Numerous versions account for this fact by translating κρίμα not as "judgment," but as "sentence," "condemnation," "punishment," etc.

⁷¹ Exod 32; Lev 16,10; Mark 1,12.13; Acts 7,39; 8,29; 21,38.

⁷² Exod 19,4; Deut 29,5.6; Rev 12,6.14.

⁷³ Lev 26,22.31-34.43; 1 Kgs 9,6-9; 2 Chr 36,21; Jer 12,4.10.11; Lam 5,18; 25,3; Dan 9,17.18.26.27; Hos 2,1ff; Zac 7,14; cf. Matt 23,38; Acts 1,20.

the main source of drinking water for the Egyptians, they were forced in that way to suffer from thirst. Symbolically elaborating on that Old Testament precedent, the second and third calamities of Revelation 16,3-6 consists in all the sources of water turning into blood “like that of a dead man” (verse 3). The retributive nature of that divine action in response to previous hostility against God’s people is clearly stated in verses 5b and 6: “You [God] are just in these judgments... for they have shed the blood of your saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink as they deserve.”

As it was already seen, John echoes in Revelation 11,8 the OT literary device of giving God’s wayward people the names of the heathen powers they fell in love with in the past: Sodom and Egypt.⁷⁴ Is he doing the same thing with Babylon in chapters 17 and 18? Granted that, this would be all the more noticeable as the link between Babylon as a saint blood-shedding entity on the one hand and the land (γῆ) in 18,24 as a metonym for God’s faithful witnesses put to death by her (*cf.* 11,18) on the other.

This same image of giving someone blood as his or her only beverage in retribution for having shed innocent blood before is also present in the postexilic Jewish apocalyptic literature. For instance, *4Ezra* 16,46-58 depicts Asia Minor—and Rome—as a drunk prostitute who is about to be visited by God with poverty, famine, sword, and pestilence: “And those... in the mountains... shall perish of hunger, and... shall eat their own flesh... and *drink their own blood in thirst for water*” (italics supplied). The reason given for such a hard punishment is that the eastern roman province killed God’s chosen people (the Jews). Unlike *4Ezra*, Revelation is a book written by a Christian addressing a Christian audience, one of whose main circumstances was Jewish local hostility (2,9; 3,9), probably in the form of instigation of harassment from the also local pagan authorities.

In the case of Revelation’s harlot/adulteress, her persecution of the saints is certainly one of the charges pronounced against her and her

⁷⁴ *Cf.* Isa 1,9.10; 3,9; Jer 23,14; Lam 4,6; Ezek 16; Acts 7,39.

bestly lovers, but not necessarily as a full-scale activity ongoing at the time the vision is seen—as the Roman hypothesis requires. The same fact that she is seen drunken—or fully satiate—implies a still present condition resulting from a previous and protracted “drinking” activity, not necessarily a *currently* full-scale “drinking” activity.

This progressive guilt of shedding blood is stressed in other related blocks of the book as the fifth seal, where the victims of οἱ κατοικοῦντες ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς claim to God for their vindication. As an answer, “they were told to wait a little longer, until the full number of their fellow servants, their brothers and sisters, were killed just as they had been” (Rev 6,11; NIV). The content itself points to a reality chronologically past as well as present (*e.g.*, 17,1.8.15.18) and also future (see 17,10.12) from the author’s perspective. Thus, it could be said that it is a reality transcending a specific time and space and somehow encompassing, through a selection of paradigmatic past, present and future moments, the climax of the history of the conflict between God and his loyal subjects on the one side, and evil in all its supra-human and out-of-the-world (*cf.* 12,7-13) as well as incarnated, institutionalized embodiments (see 18,24) on the other. This supposes a cumulative, transtemporal blood-shedding by a body of apostate former or nominal believers against actual believers, which leaves imperial first-century Rome out of the picture.

The pouring out of the seven bowls of chapters 15 and 16—one of whose angels in charge introduced John to the vision of chapter 17—is God’s answer to the martyrs’ claim. The third bowl consists precisely in making οἱ ἄνθρωποι—another designation of οἱ κατοικοῦντες ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς in Revelation—to metaphorically drink human blood in retaliation for their former shedding of God’s faithful witnesses one.

Conclusion

In sum and in the light of all the above discussed, first-century imperial Rome does not meet the requirements to be the historical referent behind the language and imagery of the wicked Babylon harlot-city of Revelation. Instead, God’s people compromising with worldly power and

acting as an instrument of evil against His actual faithful witnesses in several moments of history—past, present, and future from John’s standpoint—seems the most natural reality he had in mind.

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Recibido: 9 de marzo de 2022
Aceptado: 16 de mayo de 2022