

MIMICRY AND HYBRIDITY IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION

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ABSTRACT

This postcolonial biblical critical analysis applies the constructs of mimicry and hybridity to analyse Revelation 1:1–6, 9:11, and 13:11. Certain symbols in Revelation 1:1–6 mimic Roman ideology in order to depict God as greater than Zeus. The passage subverts the social structures of the empire by identifying the audience as slaves and priests. The audience is invited to “hear” the book of Revelation since the concept of “seeing” enforces the empire’s values. Revelation 9:11 provides insight into how hybridity functions, while Revelation 13:11 provides an example of how mimicry and hybridity operate. John shrewdly mimics the dominant culture’s behaviour and values with the use of mimicry and hybridity by proposing that God’s empire subsumes the Roman Empire, based on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and that this godly empire is comprised of a new humanity of hearing slaves and priests (Rev 1:5–6).

KEYWORDS

book of Revelation, postcolonial, mimicry, hybridity, new humanity

The book of Revelation continues to be a resource for research and reflection and the application of new methodologies mine the richness of this ancient text.¹ This article will enlist the postcolonial constructs of mimicry and hybridity to analyse certain symbols in the book of Revelation.² The constructs of mimicry and hybridity are part of postcolonial criticism which emerged in the writings of the majority world, particularly the cultural critics Edward Said, Gayatri C. Spivak, and Homi K. Bhabha.³

I will proceed by briefly examining the scholarly discussions related to postcolonial theory and its use and applicability to the New Testament texts and situate the concept of the authorial audience. Thereafter I will introduce the central ideas of this article, namely, mimicry and hybridity, and seek to apply these concepts to the overlooked texts in postcolonial biblical debate of Rev 1:1–6, 9:11, and 13:11.

The main argument of this article is that John employs the text as covert resistance to the dominant values of the empire by suggesting an alternate reality that incorporates the Roman Empire and of which this empire is but a part. That alternate reality is the empire of God in which the audience are slaves (Rev 1:2) and priests

1 For a thorough review of more recent developments in Revelation studies, see Grant R. Osborne, “Recent Trends in the Study of the Apocalypse,” in *The Face of New Testament Studies: A Survey of Recent Research*, eds. Scot McKnight and Grant R. Osborne (Grand Rapids: Baker; Leicester: Apollos, 2004), 473–504. For a review of the major approaches preceding the last two decades, see Adela Yarbro Collins, “Reading the Book of Revelation in the Twentieth Century,” *Interpretation* 40 (1986): 229–42 and Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Revelation,” in *The New Testament and Its Modern Interpreters*, eds. Eldon J. Epp and George W. MacRae (Philadelphia: Fortress; Atlanta: Scholars, 1989), 407–27. For a more recent discussion, see Adela Yarbro Collins, ed., *New Perspectives on Revelation* (Leuven: Peeters, 2017).

2 For the application of postcolonial theory to Revelation, see the following: Jean Pierre Ruiz, “A Postcolonial Reading of Revelation 13,” in David Barr, ed., *Reading the Book of Revelation* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 119–35; Greg Carey, *Elusive Apocalypse: Reading Authority in the Revelation to John*, Studies in American Biblical Hermeneutics 15 (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1999), 69–76; Catherine Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World* (Boston: Beacon, 1996), also employs postcolonial criticism, though in a limited sense; and Jean K. Kim, “Uncovering Her Wickedness: An Inter (con)textual Reading of Revelation 17 From a Postcolonial Feminist Perspective,” *JSNT* 73 (1999): 61–81.

3 See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978); *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993); Gayatri C. Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Methuen, 1987); and Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994). For a critique of their views see Lynn St. Clair Darden, *Scripturalizing Revelation: An African American Postcolonial Reading of Empire* (Atlanta: SBL, 2015), 45–78.

(Rev 1:6a) and follow the Lamb (Rev 14:4–5).⁴ The fact that God’s empire subsumes the Roman Empire (Rev 11:15) requires the early Christians to navigate ambivalence and dissonance by creatively subverting the values and dictates of this hegemonic human empire.

I will argue that the symbolic categories of slave and priest (Rev 1:2, 6a) are identity markers that invite a postcolonial probe. The countercultural symbol of hearing (Rev 1:3) provides the means by which the audience enter the symbolic universe John has created for them in this narrative. John will do what the empire does. As the empire controls all the aspects of life, so will John control the reading and interpretation of the text, which is essential to the life of these early communities of faith.⁵

A BRIEF ANALYSIS OF SCHOLARLY DISCUSSIONS

The use of postcolonial theory in biblical studies has steadily increased over the last three decades, especially with the publication of a postcolonial commentary by R. S. Sugirtharajah and Fernando Segovia in 2007.⁶ Both of these scholars have lit the path for other postcolonial travellers to follow. Sugirtharajah understands a postcolonial reading of biblical texts as an oppositional reading involved in critiquing the totalising forms of Eurocentric thinking and is an attempt to reshape dominant Western meanings in texts.⁷ He avers that a postcolonial reading of biblical texts endeavours to study the ideologies texts embody and that are entrenched in them. Because of its

4 I follow Stephen D. Moore, *Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation: Sex, Gender, Empire and Ecology* (Atlanta: SBL, 2014), 16, who prefers to translate the term βασιλεία as empire.

5 Robert R. Royalty, “Don’t Touch this Book!: Revelation 22:18–19 and the Rhetoric of Reading (in) the Apocalypse of John,” *Biblical Interpretation* (2004): 282–99 (295), states: “The author, a master reader of prophetic texts, attempts to circumscribe the way all future readers would read this text. Taking the voice of God, he claims to control interpretation. Indeed, he claims to control God’s retributive actions according to how the reader responds. This warning constructs a rhetoric of reading for the audience of the Apocalypse.”

6 Fernando F. Segovia and R. S. Sugirtharajah, eds., *Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings, Bible and Postcolonialism* (London: T&T Clark, 2007).

7 R. S. Sugirtharajah, ed., *The Postcolonial Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 93.

oppositional nature, a postcolonial reading is alert to the covert ways the marginalised protest, whether through subversion, silence, or sabotage, and how this emerges in the text.⁸ Segovia, on the other hand, has also argued for the centrality of the construct of social location, recognising that “the interpretation of biblical texts is framed by pre-understandings” and “distinctive interpretive choices.”⁹ Along similar lines, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza states that “one’s social location or rhetorical context is decisive of how one sees the world, constructs reality or interprets biblical texts.”¹⁰ Furthermore, Segovia challenges scholars to acknowledge that traditional scholarship has been bound to historical criticism with its positivistic truth claims for too long. He encourages scholars to approach the biblical text with a postmodern perspective so that traditional interpretations can be questioned and challenged and that, as a result, new meaning-making potential can be derived from the text.¹¹ Steven Friesen has contended that postcolonial studies are not entirely applicable to New Testament or Roman studies because postcolonial studies have been circumvented by academia in that its initial tirade against Eurocentric thinking and Western bias is now being used by the same typically Western academics possibly to subvert and neutralise

8 R. S. Sugitharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 79, 84. R. S. Sugitharajah, ed., *The Postcolonial Bible Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 11, also states it is difficult to absolutely define postcolonial as this “field of inquiry is not monolithic but rather a field which provides and caters to a variety of concerns, oppositional stances, and even contradictory positions.” For example, Fernando F. Segovia, “Reading-Across: Intercultural Criticism and Textual Posture,” in *Interpreting Beyond Borders*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 59–83, asserts that it is important to also look at the biblical texts as poetic, cultural, and ideological products or constructs of a socio-religious and politico-cultural reality—the reality of empire/imperialism/colonialism in what he terms “intercultural criticism.”

9 Daniel Patte, “Can One Be Critical without Being Autobiographical? The Case of Romans 1.26–27,” in Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger, ed., *Autobiographical Biblical Criticism: Academic Border Crossings? A Hermeneutical Challenge* (Leiden: Deo Publishing, 2002), 34–59. For a major study of the effect of social location on interpretation, see the works edited by Fernando Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, *Reading from this Place*, 2 vols. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

10 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “The Ethics of Interpretation: De-Centering Biblical Scholarship,” *JBL* 107 (1988): 3–17.

11 Fernando F. Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies: A View from the Margins* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000), 29–33.

it.¹² He also laments the inapplicability of postcolonial studies to “the dynamics of culture.”¹³ The work of Sugitharajah and Segovia, however, nullify Friesen’s concerns as they both demonstrate the applicability of the constructs of postcolonial studies to the biblical text.¹⁴ Jeremy Punt, following Sugitharajah, contends that postcolonial hermeneutics is also “interested in the relationships of power and domination and their effects” and I would add how these emerge in and from the text.¹⁵ Stephen D. Moore does some of this work in his chapter in *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings*. He canvasses the colonised churches of Rev 2 and 3, the well-known passages of Rev 4 and 5, and the concept of empire in Rev 11:15.¹⁶ He argues that his intended purpose for his chapter on the book of Revelation “is whether or to what extent Revelation merely reinscribes, rather than effectively resists, Roman imperial ideology.”¹⁷ In his more recent work, Moore sees Revelation as an anti-imperialistic text in that it announces the transfer of power from the Roman emperor to the heavenly emperor and his Son, Jesus Christ.¹⁸

While Moore engages the aforementioned passages, and Sugitharajah, Segovia and Punt examine a range of other New Testament texts by drawing on hermeneutical theory, the present study is an attempt to *exegete* the overlooked texts of Rev 1:1–6, 9:11, and 13:11. Moore and others, using their postcolonial lens, look at Revelation from above and hence have a wide-angle lens. This article, however, with its magnifying lens, is looking at specific texts. In contrast to those studies, I am seeking to advance the applicability of postcolonial theory to the book of Revelation

12 Steven J. Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 16.

13 Friesen, 16.

14 Friesen, 17.

15 Jeremy Punt, *Postcolonial Biblical Interpretation: Reframing Paul* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 27.

16 Stephen D. Moore, “The Revelation to John,” in Fernando F. Segovia and R. S. Sugirtharajah, eds., *Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings*, Bible and Postcolonialism, 2nd ed. (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 449–50, 442–43, 451 respectively.

17 Moore, “Revelation to John,” 437.

18 Moore, *Untold Tales*, 16.

by working more closely with the text itself. In this regard, I am attempting to advance postcolonial biblical criticism in a reassessment of the traditional interpretation of these texts.¹⁹ Postcolonial biblical criticism provides a provocative reading strategy that approaches the text with its emphasis on empire, nation, and ethnicity to explore issues of ideology, domination, and agency within the text.²⁰ Before discussing the postcolonial constructs I will enlist, however, it may be useful to articulate the heuristic literary feature of the authorial audience.

THE AUTHORIAL AUDIENCE

The concept of the authorial audience has been developed primarily by John Paul Heil and Warren Carter in biblical studies, and Peter Rabinowitz in literary theory.²¹ For Rabinowitz, the authorial audience is a hypothetical audience based on the assumed “beliefs, knowledge and familiarity with conventions” that the author has about their readers.²² The authorial audience is “the represented world of the text.”²³ The authorial audience refers to the readers and hearers John envisions in creating

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- 19 R. S. Sugatharaja, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 74–75. See the excellent comments in Darden, *Scripturalizing Revelation*, 51–52, about postcolonial biblical criticism.
 - 20 Gay Byron, “Ancient Ethiopia and the New Testament: Ethnic (Con)texts and Racialized (Sub) texts,” in *They Were all Together in One Place? Toward Minority Biblical Criticism*, Semeia 57, eds. Randall C. Bailey, Tat-siong Beny Liew, and Fernando F. Segovia (Atlanta: SBL, 2009), 161–90 (165–66).
 - 21 John Paul Heil, *Hebrews: Chiastic Structures and Audience Response*, CBQMS 46 (Washington: Catholic Biblical Association, 2010); *The Meal Scenes in Luke Acts: An Audience-Oriented Approach*, SBLMS (Atlanta: SBL, 1999); Warren Carter and John Paul Heil, *Matthew’s Parables: Audience-Oriented Perspectives*, CBQMS 30 (Washington: Catholic Biblical Association, 1998), 9–14; Warren Carter, *Matthew: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004), 3–4, 9, who states his indebtedness to Rabinowitz; and Peter J. Rabinowitz, *Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 15–46.
 - 22 Peter J. Rabinowitz, “Truth in Fiction,” 126; cf. Rabinowitz, “Whirl without End: Audience-Oriented Criticism,” in G. Douglas Atkins and Laura Morrow, eds., *Contemporary Literary Theory* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1989), 85.
 - 23 Vernon K. Robbins, *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse: Rhetoric, Society and Ideology* (London: Routledge, 1996), 34, 37.

his text. The authorial audience is thus a contextualised “implied reader.”²⁴ The implied reader is assumed by the narrative itself and is separate from the historical reader in the same way that the implied author is distinct from the historical author.²⁵ The authorial audience does not refer to the original audience but is a heuristic device determined by the relationship between the text and its context.

The audience makes meaning in their “cultural register,” which consists of the associated traditions, memories, experiences, and images they know from their worldview and environment.²⁶ Furthermore, the audience is divided along the lines of allegiance as some in the churches are loyal to John while others are loyal to the teachings of the Nicolaitans (Rev 2:15), Balaam (Rev 2:14), and to Jezebel (Rev 2:20).²⁷ In this article I will therefore refer to the loyal and disloyal audiences. While one might assume that the disloyal audience would be better described as the compromising audience from John’s apocalyptic vantage point there is no notion of compromise but only those who follow him and hence Christ and those who do not.²⁸

Furthermore, this construct is helpful as the audience themselves are a hybrid entity. Steven Friesen argues that:

Revelation had several social settings, not one; that these settings were characterized by distinct problems having mostly to do with relations to outsiders; that the assemblies agreed with John about abstention from imperial cults; and that John used their

24 Rabinowitz, “Whirl without End,” 84.

25 Mark Allan Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 1990), 19.

26 The term was developed by Werner Kelber, “Orality and Biblical Studies: A Review Essay,” *Review of Biblical Literature* (2007): 19.

27 Paul B. Duff, *Who Rides the Beast: Prophetic Rivalry and the Rhetoric of Crisis in the Churches of the Apocalypse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) provides the strongest case for prophetic rivalry among the seven churches.

28 The apocalyptic viewpoint is uncompromising. A community is either loyal or disloyal. There is no middle ground. See John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1998), 12, 41.

agreement about imperial cults as a theoretical tool in order to link their settings together within the framework of the rejection of mainstream Roman imperial society.²⁹

Beyond the complexity of these various social settings, the audience is also comprised of Jewish Christians and Christians who were once God-fearers and pagans. This construct will help us in the meaning-making exercise to distinguish between the different responses to the message of John based on audience allegiance.

POSTCOLONIAL CONSTRUCTS

Postcolonial discussion emerges in the intersection and interaction of the coloniser, who for my purposes is represented by the Roman Empire, with its values, norms, and dictates, and the colonised whom I describe as the authorial audience. It should be noted that the colonisation discussed here is an application of modern postcolonial theory, in distinction to the establishment of Roman colonies (which may be considered one form of the broader concept of colonising). These early Christians—the authorial audience—were colonised by the empire, not in a subjugating or oppressive manner, but rather in the sense that Rome dominated every part of their everyday lives, whether that be social, working, religious or personal.³⁰

MIMICRY

Mimicry describes the ambivalent relationship between the authorial audience and the dominant ideology. Mimicry is the behaviour or action of the authorial audience which is the result of the process of internalising the values and dictates of the empire. Mimicry results when the coloniser's culture, that of the empire, is imposed

29 Steven J. Friesen, "Satan's Throne, Imperial Cults and the Social Settings of Revelation," *JSNT* 27 (2005): 351–73 (353).

30 Nicholas Perrin, "The Imperial Cult," in Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald, eds., *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social and Historical Contexts* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 124–34.

on the colonised, the authorial audience, and the latter is enticed into internalising and replicating it.³¹ Moore is right when he suggests that his replication, this act of mimicry, is “never perfect.”³² In fact, the coloniser does not want the colonised to fully copy them because the classified distinction between them would become fuzzy.³³ Mimicry functions at the level of symbol in Revelation, replicating the Roman Empire’s pretensions to grandeur and glory. It seems that for John, it is a literary device which is a form of resistance to imperial power, whereas, for the audience, it amounts to compromise and is a sign of capitulation, so it is morally positive in the former and negative in the latter. Mimicry seeks, therefore, to manipulate the narrative of the Roman Empire’s dominance of the world so that early Christians can reconsider themselves and others in new ways—new ways brought about by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.³⁴ One of the central ideological features of the Roman Empire that John not only castigates but also mimics is the imperial cult.³⁵ I will demonstrate how he does this through his insistence on the loyalty of the audience. The legitimacy, depth, and influence of the imperial cult on the members of the seven churches are evidenced in the first century by an imperial temple being built in Smyrna (45 CE), Philadelphia (55 CE), and Sardis (56 CE). In my view, the erection of the imperial temples in Laodicea (87 CE) and Ephesus (89 CE) became

31 Moore, *Untold Tales*, 26.

32 Moore, 26.

33 Moore, 26.

34 Kate O’Niell, “Rewriting the Colonial Experience: Robertson Davies’ Use of Parody in *Tempest Tost*,” in *Studies on Themes and Motifs in Literature: Rewriting Texts, Remaking Images: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, eds. Leslie Boldt, Corrado Federici, and Ernesto Vergulti (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 121–32 (122).

35 For a discussion that situates Revelation on “the plane of first century imperial history,” see Ian Boxall, *Revelation: Vision and Insight* (London: SPCK, 2002), 39–42.

the catalytic spark that necessitated John's attack on Rome, whom he saw as the economic, political, and institutional incarnation of Satan, while exiled on Patmos.³⁶

HYBRIDITY

The term "hybridity" is a contested concept in the academic literature.³⁷ I will not enter into the complex discussions about this term but seek to draw a couple of key ideas from the creator of the term, Homi K. Bhabha.³⁸ Bhabha has advanced the concept of hybridity from literary and cultural theory to describe the construction of culture and identity within conditions of colonial antipathy and inequity. He maintains that hybridity is the process by which the colonial governing authority—mostly white power players—undertake to translate the identity of the colonised within a homogenous framework, but then fail to produce this and instead create something familiar but new. Bhabha argues that a new hybrid identity emerges from the intermingling of features of the coloniser and colonised challenging the validity and authenticity of any intrinsic cultural identity.³⁹

Moore and Segovia argue that hybridity should be at the heart of postcolonial biblical criticism by engaging the three strands of biblical interpretation, Marxist

36 For weighty evidence which includes primarily inscriptions for the establishment of the imperial cult in Ephesus under Domitian's rule, see Steven J. Friesen, *Twice Neokoros: Ephesus, Asia and the Cult of the Flavian Imperial Family* (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 41–49. He states that "the inscriptions reveal that the provincial cult of the Sebastoi in Ephesus occasioned concerns about the relationships among the cities of Asia. The free cities and the others used the opportunity of the temple dedication to make a statement about their role in the cult, their reverence for the emperor and their relationship to Ephesus." For other similar views, see Ben Witherington III, *Revelation*, NCBC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 23–25.

37 See Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2000).

38 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); Homi K. Bhabha, "Frontlines/Borderposts," in *Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question*, ed. A. Banner (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 269–72; and Homi K. Bhabha, "Cultures in Between," in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, eds. Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay (London: Sage, 1996), 53–61.

39 Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 33–35.

history, and postcolonial theory in the process of interpretation.⁴⁰ My approach is different as I am seeking to explore how the concept of hybridity can be applied to the text of Revelation with its polyvalent symbolism and complex historical background. For us, hybridity emerges in John's use of images from "two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor."⁴¹ These "two different linguistic consciousnesses" are the Graeco-Roman and Jewish background of the symbols John deploys to communicate the visions he received on Patmos.⁴²

According to Gregory Stevenson, "John constructs his work in a manner that takes *Jewish* tradition and language and simply presents it as *Christian* tradition and language. Allusions to Old Testament texts are embedded in virtually every point of the document."⁴³ Postcolonial meaning-making, especially with the concept of hybridity, is in the ideological tension between the applicability of the symbols to either the Jewish or Graeco-Roman background and the reception of these symbols by the colonised audience of the seven churches in light of the salvific actions of Jesus Christ. I turn now to examine the chosen texts.

40 Stephen D. Moore and Fernando F. Segovia, "Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: Beginnings, Trajectories and Intersections," in *Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: Interdisciplinary Intersections*, eds. Stephen D. Moore and Fernando Segovia (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 1–22 (19).

41 Michail Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Slavic Series, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 304–5. I am following Bakhtin here and not Homi K. Bhabha, who has a different conception of hybridity. Bhabha contends that all cultural systems and affirmations are constructed in a space he identifies as the "third space of enunciation." This third space is an ambivalent and contradictory space which makes cultural claims of superiority or purity untenable. Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 37.

42 It must be noted that there was also significant integration of Graeco-Roman and Judeo-Christian cultures often in ways that were not problematic.

43 Gregory Stevenson, *Power and Place: Temple and Identity in the Book of Revelation* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2001), 42.

REV 1:1–6

1 The revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants (δούλοις) what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, 2 who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. 3 Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it (ἀκούοντες) and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near. 4 John, To the seven churches in the province of Asia: Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne (θρόνου), 5 and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, 6 and has made us to be a kingdom (βασιλείαν) and priests (ἱερείς) to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

There are several symbols that invite a postcolonial probe as I seek to retrieve fresh meaning from the traditional interpretation of these texts.⁴⁴ For one thing, the audience understands themselves as slaves (Rev 1:1) and priests (Rev 1:6a) living in God's kingdom (Rev 1:6a) who have been granted a message from God about their present situation and immediate future that will bless them as they hear and keep it (Rev 1:3).⁴⁵ The notion of kingdom points to a realm within which God is king. To be a priest points to direct access to God, while a slave only has limited access, and only

44 See George Aichele et al., *The Postmodern Bible: The Bible and Culture Collective* (New Haven: Yale, 1995), 275.

45 Bruce J. Malina, "Christ and Time: Swiss or Mediteranean?" *CBQ* 51 (1989):1–31 (5).

to human beings.⁴⁶ From the outset, John indirectly informs the audience that God is their king and they are his subjects. David E. Aune states that being a slave of a deity was not a Greek idea. However, a person can be a slave of a god “in a strictly religious sense.”⁴⁷ Since it is generally acknowledged that the majority of the early Christians were artisans and tradespeople then these identity markers of slave and priest, on the one hand, lower their status and, on the other hand, exalt their status.⁴⁸ These identity markers are in themselves ambivalent in that they point both to notions of power and legitimacy, but also weakness and servitude. John also identifies with the audience in that he too is a slave.⁴⁹ I turn now to explore the identity marker of priest more carefully. The audience are “priests of God” (Rev 1:6). Their loyalty is unquestioned. The mandate of the priest was to lead the people into the presence of God, to be the mediator between God and the people, to lead them in worship, and indeed to represent the people to God.⁵⁰ This identity marker would have reminded the early Christians that they were not like the priests of the temples of Artemis, Zeus, and other local deities but rather priests of God who had conquered death in and through Jesus Christ. They belonged to a new priesthood in which male and female were equal and had equal access to God.⁵¹ Just as local pagan priests are devoted to the paraphernalia and insignia of the empire and their local deities, so the audience is to

46 It must be noted that in Rev 22:9 an angel calls himself a fellow-servant/slave of John and his brothers the prophets. This points to the tradition in the Hebrew Bible of the servant of God as a person in a privileged position in relation to God with special knowledge of his will, e.g. the prophets, and so in this instance it refers to special access to God rather than limited access. Each use of the term fellow-servant/slave must be contextually examined.

47 David E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, WBC 52A (Dallas: Word, 1997), 13.

48 Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale, 1983), 64–65. Paul B. Duff, *Who Rides the Beast: Prophetic Rivalry and the Rhetoric of Crisis in the Churches of the Apocalypse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 143, identifies most early Christians as “the upper lower class.”

49 Greg Carey, *Elusive Apocalypse: Reading Authority in the Revelation to John*, Studies in American Biblical Hermeneutics 15 (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1999), 95, “John seeks to identify himself with things his audience would value, concepts such as endurance, faithfulness and humility.”

50 Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, 48.

51 Ian Boxall, *The Revelation of Saint John* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2006), 34.

be devoted to John and to the God of Jesus Christ.⁵² The identity markers of slave and priest challenge the audience in relation to their devotion and loyalty. David Aune and Ian Boxall, following Ugo Vanni, suggest that Rev 1:4–8 reflects a liturgical dialogue which introduces the message of Revelation and the worship service.⁵³ The liturgical flavour of the passage is evident in the change of person between 1:4–5a “grace to *you*” and 1:5b–6 “to the one who loved *us*.” The Apocalypse was written primarily for a hearing audience living in Western Asia Minor.⁵⁴ While scholars acknowledge that the vast majority of people in John’s day could not read “and therefore learned aurally,” traditional scholarship often assumes that his audience were readers and would have approached and understood the text in a similar fashion to us.⁵⁵ The verb “to hear” (ἀκούω) is found on forty-six occasions in Revelation.⁵⁶ These forty-six references reinforce the prominent place the concept of hearing has in Revelation.⁵⁷ The first reference in Rev 1:3 sets the tone and pace for all that is to follow. Hearers are exhorted to keep the words of the prophecy. The book ends in Rev 22:8 with a similar appeal but this time appealing for judgement on those who do not keep what

52 David A. de Silva, *Seeing Things John’s Way: The Rhetoric of the Book of Revelation* (Louisville: Westminster, 2009), 85.

53 Aune, *Revelation* 1–5, 28–29 and Boxall, *Revelation of Saint John*, 33. They build their case on Ugo Vanni, “Liturgical Dialogue in the Book of Revelation,” *NTS* 37 (1991): 348–72.

54 After examining Rev 1:3, Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 144, is correct when she states, “it is better to speak of the first ‘hearers’ of Revelation, rather than the ‘readers.’” Examples of others who reach similar conclusions include: R. H. Charles, *Revelation*, ICC, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1920), 6; David L. Barr, “The Apocalypse as Oral Enactment,” *Interpretation* 40 (1984): 243–56; Aune, *Revelation* 1–5, 20–21 and Stephen Pattermore, *The People of God in the Apocalypse: Discourse, Structure and Exegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 53.

55 According to John D. Harvey, “Orality and Its implications for Biblical Studies: Recapturing an Ancient Paradigm,” *JETS* 45 (2002): 99, “most biblical scholars continue to examine the NT documents using presuppositions that apply more to nineteenth and twentieth-century literary/print culture than to the culture in which those documents were originally produced. For similar comments see Joanna Dewey, “Textuality in an Oral Culture: A Survey of the Pauline Traditions,” *Semeia* 65 (1994): 37–65 and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, “The Social Location of the Markan Audience,” *Interpretation* (1993): 380–95.

56 Rev 1:3, 10; 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:3, 6, 13, 20, 22; 4:1; 5:11, 13; 6:1, 3, 5, 6, 7; 7:4; 8:13; 9:13, 16, 20; 10:4, 8; 11:12; 12:10; 13:9; 14:2, 13; 16:1, 5, 7; 18:4, 22, 23; 19:1, 6; 21:3; 22:8, 17, 18.

57 De Silva, *Seeing Things John’s Way*, 125.

has been heard.⁵⁸ James Resseguie states that “hearing brings out the inner reality, the spirit and essence of what he sees.”⁵⁹ I would argue that seeing was important in Hellenistic culture while hearing and hence conduct and obedience were significant in early Christianity (Luke 11:28; Col 4:16; 1 Thess 5:27).⁶⁰ John’s invitation to the audience to hear Revelation is, therefore, a countercultural challenge and hence a form of resistance. Hearing provides an alternative to the stories and traditions of the Roman Empire that use icons, coins, and images to communicate and impose Roman hegemony.⁶¹ The audience hears the *acclamatio* of Rev 1:4b (who is, and who was, and who is to come) and associate it with the shout of approval, praise, or protest so common among the ordinary people and even the Roman soldiers, for example, when their commander was hailed as the new emperor.⁶² Further, the audience notices that John is focusing on the theme of God’s eternity and that this contrasts with the Roman ideology of *aeterna*. In the first century CE, this ideology was applied to emperors, cities (*urbs aeterna*), the Roman people (*Aeternitas Populi Romani*), and the empire itself (*pax aeterna*). Roman rulers presented themselves as guarantors of all that was good about Rome.⁶³ The audience would detect with the use of this phrase a combative element in that only God is eternal and has the right to claim eternity. The audience notes the contrast with the Hellenistic formulas of Zeus as he is also

58 Stephen H. Webb, *The Divine Voice: Christian Proclamation and the Theology of Sound* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2004), 199.

59 James L. Resseguie, *The Revelation of John: A Narrative Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 33.

60 Kayle B. de Waal, *An Aural-Performance Analysis of Revelation 1 and 11*, *Studies in Biblical Literature* 163 (New York: Peter Lang, 2015), 64.

61 De Waal, 129.

62 Gregory S. Aldrete, *Gestures and Acclamations in Ancient Rome* (Washington DC: Johns Hopkins, 1999), 101–2; and Ernst Badian, “Acclamation,” in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd ed., eds. S. Hornblower and A. Spawforth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 27. Contra G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 187–88, who argues for the centrality of the Old Testament background of this verse.

63 Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999), 233. According to Cassius, *Dio* LXII 20.5, Nero was hailed as “the only one from the beginning of time” when returning to Rome in 68 CE.

defined as “the one who was and who is and who will be.”⁶⁴ Again they would detect here a polemical use of the phrase by John in which he is declaring that God is greater than Zeus.⁶⁵ Since it is widely acknowledged in antiquity that a writer set the narrative stage and gave hints of the direction of their work in the introduction, John is outlining his view of the world and the situation the audience is in this prologue.⁶⁶ From John’s apocalyptic viewpoint, there is a sharp division between them as members of God’s empire and the human hegemonic empire. The audience hears the symbol of the throne (Rev 1:4c) and perceives God’s omnipotence, authority, and sovereignty because of their cultural register.⁶⁷ While they would not have seen the emperor’s throne, they would have known about it from the coins that circulated widely. Many of these coins that were minted by Domitian used the throne motif. Through their dissemination, it was possible for people in the provinces to become familiar with the titles and image of the emperor through the coins. Indeed, these coins functioned as broadcasting and propaganda tools for the empire.⁶⁸ The throne motif used on Domitianic mints had other gods such as Tyche, Apollo, Minerva, Pluto, Cybele, Athena, or Dionysus.⁶⁹ The symbol of the throne would evoke issues of loyalty and allegiance for the audience. In sum, the symbols of slave, priest, hearing, and throne highlight features of the text that have been neglected in traditional

64 Mounce, *Revelation*, 46. For further helpful discussion regarding the use of the phrase, see Osborne, *Revelation*, 60–61 and Beale, *Book of Revelation*, 188 who argues that John may have been aware of these Hellenistic formulas and that they would have inspired his appeal to Jewish formulas as an apologetic.

65 Beale, *Book of Revelation*, 188.

66 Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1414b; Lucian, *Hist.*, 53; Quintillian, *Institutionis*, 10.1.48.

67 George Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine*, BNTC (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1966), 62.

68 Ernest P. Janzen, “The Jesus of the Apocalypse Wears the Emperor’s Clothes,” in SBL Seminar Papers 33 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1994), 637–57 (647). Contra Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, “Image and Authority in the Coinage of Augustus,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 76 (1986): 66–87.

69 See the following: Andrew Burnett, Michel Amandy, and Pere Pau Ripollès, *The Roman Provincial Coinage II: From the Death of Caesar to the Death of Vespasian 44 BC–AD 69* (London: British Museum Press/Paris Bibliothèque Nationale, 1992), 1012, 1057, 1073, 1094, 1095, 1123, 1214, 1262, 1385, 1391, 1393, 406, 464, 985, 1039, 1052, 1294, 1326, 1109, 1113, 867, 1021, 1324, 1343.

scholarship. The audience is being called to engage John's message and hence the Roman Empire as hearers that march to a different drum. As hearers of God's Word, they are to adhere to John's message and not allow the sights of the empire to entice or ensnare them. As slaves and priests, they are to follow John and serve Christ alone. The symbol of the throne is an important one that brings sociopolitical allegiance to the fore at this early stage and will grow in intensity as the narrative unfolds (Rev 13). Let us now examine John's use of two languages in Rev 9:11 as I build my case for the use of hybridity.

REVELATION 9:11

The text reads: "They had as king over them the angel of the Abyss, whose name in Hebrew is Abaddon (Ἀβαδδὼν), and in Greek, Apollyon (Ἀπολλύων)." Postcolonial biblical criticism seeks to question and challenge traditional interpretations. For example, scholars that follow a grammatical-historical methodology, like Jacques Doukhan, explore the Hebrew and Greek meanings of Abaddon and Apollyon respectively.⁷⁰ He argues that Abaddon refers to damnation and points to the fate of the wicked in the Hebrew Scriptures. The Greek word Apollyon comes from the verb *apollynai* and means ruin or destroy. For him, both words share the same idea "of negation of God."⁷¹ The king of Rev 9:11 leads the locust host in opposition to God.

On the other hand, the audience would understand the symbol of Apollyon as a depiction of the Greek god Apollo. The symbol is important because this is the first place in Revelation where an angel is named.⁷² Apollo was the archetypal

70 Jacques B. Doukhan, *Secrets of Revelation: The Apocalypse Through Hebrew Eyes* (Hagerstown: Review and Herald, 2002), 85.

71 Doukhan, 85.

72 Matthias Reinhard Hoffmann, *The Destroyer and the Lamb*, WUNT 2, Reihe 203 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 125.

divine representative of classical Greek culture.⁷³ Domitian saw himself as this god.⁷⁴ George Beasley-Murray states that “John’s last word about the fifth trumpet was a masterstroke of irony: the destructive host of hell has as its king the emperor of Rome.”⁷⁵ The views of Doukhan and Beasley-Murray are correct, but it is their one-sided position that concerns us. With my postcolonial lens, I understand that hybridity emerges when a writer introduces words and ideas that may be familiar to readers but may not be intelligible in the culture.⁷⁶ John introduces the Hebrew word Abaddon to create tension for the audience. The term would have been familiar to his Jewish Christian audience but would not usually have been understood by the wider culture. By identifying the emperor with this term, John is in fact claiming that he is going to meet the same fate as the wicked did in the Hebrew Scriptures, namely death.

I have contended that postcolonial meaning-making is in the ideological tension between the applicability of the symbols to either the Jewish or Graeco-Roman background. John’s use of Hebrew and Greek to name this king, therefore, highlights its unique place in the narrative. The use of Hebrew leads some of the audience to *hear* their Jewish past and the fact that this symbol points to opposition to God and ultimately death, while at the same time the use of Greek lures other members of the audience to *see* the prestige associated with the god Apollo.

While the Roman Empire was not characterised by claims for exclusive loyalty to its gods or emperors, but rather honour alongside existing “loyalties,” it still expected loyalty from its populace. It is in expecting loyalty that John acted like

73 Roelof van den Broek, “Apollo,” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, eds., Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Peter W. van der Horst (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 138–43 (138). See further, Allen Kerkeslager, “Apollo, Greco-Roman Prophecy and the Rider on the White Horse in Rev 6.2,” *JBL* 112 (1993): 116–21.

74 Osborne, *Revelation*, 374. *Contra* M. Eugene Boring and Fred B. Craddock, *The People’s New Testament Commentary* (London: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 792 and Mark Wilson, “Revelation,” in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Background Commentary*, ed. Clinton E. Arnold, Vol. 4, Hebrews to Revelation (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 309.

75 Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, 162–63.

76 Peter Burke, *Cultural Hybridity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), 17.

the Roman Empire. As an apocalyptic writer, he constructs the world dualistically, and for him the audience, as slaves and priests, ought to be in loyalty to Christ.⁷⁷ It is this loyalty that provides the homogenous framework within which he desires the audience to be found. John seeks to challenge the identity of the disloyal audience by alerting them to the final outcome of this king of the locust hoard and by persuading them to join him and the loyal audience in following Christ. Another possible avenue of interpretation for the authorial audience is that while the king of the abyss is referenced using two languages in Rev 9:11, at Jesus' death where he became king three languages were used, namely, Aramaic, Latin, and Greek (John 19:20).⁷⁸ This does not resolve the tension, but if, as I have suggested that the concept of hybridity must be understood in the context of the salvific actions of Jesus Christ, then it is worth considering. The polyvalent nature of the text allows for different interpretations.

REVELATION 13:11

The text reads: "Then I saw a second beast, coming out of the earth (γῆς). It had two horns like a lamb (ἀρνίω), but it spoke like a dragon (δράκων)." The beast first emerges in Rev 11:7 in opposition to the two witnesses and again in Rev 13:2, where it is given the power and authority of the dragon. This earth beast is an entity who encourages devotion to the Roman sea beast and to the religiopolitical networks and structures that institutionally represented Asia Minor's dedication to the imperial

77 The Roman Empire was not characterized by claims for exclusive loyalty to its gods or emperors, but rather honour alongside existing "loyalties."

78 Since the groundbreaking essay and edited work of Richard Bauckham, ed., *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audience* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), scholars have come to realise that the gospels were indeed written for a wider Christian audience and hence I contend that John and the churches knew or had heard the gospels. For an overview of the discussion, see Edward Klink III, "The Gospel Community Debate: State of the Question," *CBR* 3 (2004):60–85. For a critique of Bauckham's view, see David Sim, "The Gospel for All Christians: A Response to Richard Bauckham," *JSNT* 84 (2001): 3–27.

cult.⁷⁹ The beast is a hybrid figure as it is part animal and part human.⁸⁰ In Rev 13:14, John, in writing of this beast, states, “He told . . .” and uses the masculine participle rather than the neuter.⁸¹ The beast arose from the earth. The symbol of earth can be either a positive symbol as in Rev 12:18, where it helps the woman, or it can be a negative symbol as it is here.⁸² This beast has two horns that depict political power and provide antithetical mimicry of the two lampstands, the two olive trees, and the two witnesses.⁸³ John uses the symbol of the lamb in Rev 13:11, a symbol that normally points to Jesus Christ elsewhere in Revelation, to depict the earth beast.⁸⁴ The lamb, now as a symbol of the Roman Empire, mimics Jesus Christ in Rev 13:11.⁸⁵ I have suggested, following Moore, that mimicry results when the coloniser’s culture is imposed on the colonised, and the latter is enticed into co-opting and imitating it.⁸⁶ I need to examine if the colonised—the authorial audience—internalise and replicate the coloniser—the Roman Empire. The nature of mimicry can only be attained by probing the symbol itself. Based on their cultural register, the audience perceives the symbol of the lamb, conveying the ideas of meekness, sacrifice, dependence, and death.⁸⁷ The earth beast is a dangerous entity because it looks

79 Brian Blount, *Revelation*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox), 257. There is slight disagreement in scholarship on the identity of this earth beast. For example, David Aune, *Revelation 6–16* (Dallas: Word, 1997), 756, asserts “that the beast from the earth represents the imperial priesthood.” Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 203, contends that the land beast points to the elite families in Asia Minor that supported the imperial cult.

80 Resseguie, *Revelation of John*, 186.

81 Resseguie, 187.

82 Sigve K. Tonstad, *Revelation*, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 194.

83 Beale, *Book of Revelation*, 707.

84 Loren Johns, *The Lamb Christology of the Apocalypse of John* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 22, maintains that among its twenty-eight uses in Revelation, this is only place where it is used as a “counter figure.” Contra J. Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 213, who does not see the earth beast as a parody of the lamb but rather of the two witnesses.

85 Wilfrid J. Harrington, *Revelation*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2008), 144.

86 Moore, *Untold Tales*, 26.

87 Johns, *Lamb Christology*, 23.

and acts like Jesus, but it speaks like a dragon (Rev 13:11). The disloyal audience—the followers of the Nicolaitans, Balaam, and Jezebel—are co-opting the values and imitating the ideas of the earth beast in that they associate with the lamb-like Christians and compromise with the dragon-like empire. Moreover, John does what the empire does, all the while calling on the audience to not do what the empire does. He manipulates the symbol to alert the audience to the dangers of fraternising with the empire. The authorial audience receives the message so that those who are loyal to John do not mimic the empire.

CONCLUSION

It may appear that the authorial audience is being called on to adopt the values, habits, and assumptions of the dominant ideology in the place John gives to it in the text of Revelation. However, John has located “a crack in the certainty” of dominance exuded by the Roman Empire based on the apocalyptic vision of Jesus that is given to him.⁸⁸ John is therefore not protesting in an outright manner but is rather employing the text as covert resistance by suggesting an alternate culture that is “almost the same, but not quite.”⁸⁹

Following the counsel of other postmodern interpreters I have sought to challenge traditional views of the text and hence focused on the symbols of slave, priest, hearing, and throne in Rev 1:1–6 to make fresh meaning from this passage. Traditional scholarship has identified the early Christians within Revelation as the martyrs, the bride, the saints, the witnesses, the church, and the remnant. It has also broadly assumed that early Christians were readers of Revelation as we are today.⁹⁰ Furthermore, traditional interpretation has not simultaneously understood the early

88 Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies*, 139.

89 Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 86.

90 See for example, Pattermore, *People of God*, in relation to the various symbols for the people of God.

Christians in Western Asia Minor as slaves (Rev 1:1) and priests (Rev 1:6a). While the traditional categories are valid, I have attempted something different in this postcolonial study.

The audience is being called on to hear John's voice and John's message and not to be enticed by what they see in relation to the power and prestige of the empire. They are being invited to be slaves and priests of a different kind, slaves who have been set free by Christ and priests that serve God and humanity. The early Christians are almost the same as slaves and priests of the empire, but not quite. The difference lies in the master they serve. These ambivalent identity markers contend that the audience must navigate their role and place in the empire. Mimicry functions at the level of the audience and of the author. The audience that is loyal to John does not internalise or replicate the behaviours or practises of the empire. John mimics the empire so that his audience does not have to. The disloyal audience, on the other hand, mimics the empire, and John seeks to persuade them to exclusive allegiance to Christ. Hybridity is also applicable at both the level of the audience and that of John. It functions at John's level because of his use of symbols from both the Jewish and Graeco-Roman background and even his use of intrinsic hybridity as in the nature of the earth beast. This hybrid text, therefore, has a range of referents. Hybridity functions at the level of the audience because they are divided. The loyal audience has formed a new cultural identity because they have appropriated the death and resurrection of Jesus. The disloyal audience is still experiencing ambivalence and hence has a fragmented identity.⁹¹ John subtly mocks the dominant culture's behaviour and values. While Rome asserts eternity in their propaganda, true eternity is found in Christ who has conquered death (Rev 1:18). In this sense, hybridity and mimicry serve at once both as resemblance and menace.⁹²

91 Darden, *Scripturalizing Revelation*, 66.

92 Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 86.