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2. Unholy Economics and Environmental Impacts

Reading Revelation's Great Whore in the Climate Crisis

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Abstract

Wealth inequality and climate disruption are defining issues of our time. This article addresses ways in which dispensationalist interpretations of the book of Revelation shape decision making on these issues in the age of Trump. It argues that these modes of interpretation imitate the dynamics in capitalism by exploitatively extracting specific elements from the biblical text absent their socio-historical context. This article first surveys how extraction takes place in contemporary economy and ecology, and then provides examples of how dispensationalist interpretation imitates this dynamic. It concludes that alternative modes of interpretation rooted in the text's socio-historical context are needed in developing biblical resources to address the interwoven crises of capitalism and climate disruption.

Keywords: Revelation, dispensationalism, capitalism, climate change, economy, ecology

Introduction

This article explores how neoliberal capitalism, powered by the fossil fuel industry, shapes dispensationalist biblical interpretation through its replication of the logic of limitless extraction. It will explore the impacts of this mode of reading on environmental policy in the age of Trump. This article will first interrogate the theme of extraction through outlining the dynamics of neoliberal capitalism's extraction of human labor (humans exploiting one another), and then demonstrate how neoliberalism is intertwined with the extraction of fossil fuel (humans exploiting Earth). After outlining these intersections among contemporary economy and ecology, the book of Revelation will serve as a case study, both for understanding dispensationalism and possible alternatives. Dispensationalist biblical interpretation imitates capitalism's dynamics through extracting violence and militarism from Revelation abstracted from their socio-historical context. This mode of interpretation implicitly supports growing wealth inequality and climate disruption through influencing decision makers in the Trump administration who ascribe to a dispensationalist worldview. This article will conclude through a preliminary consideration of an alternative mode of interpretation that roots the biblical text back in its socio-historical context, and uses the already fallen great whore of Babylon as a case study.

Capitalist Extraction of Human Labor

This first section focuses on ways in which capitalism extracts human labor. Wealthy elites have obtained labor from their fellow human beings of lower social classes since antiquity. Not all extraction of human labor is of the same kind, as there are different levels of reciprocity in different forms of economic organization. The particular form under which this relationship currently functions is capitalism. While capitalism has taken different shapes since its inception in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, its particular mode today is neoliberalism. Unlike the Keynesian model which preceded it, neoliberalism, which began in the late 1970s and early 1980s, advocates intense government deregulation in favor of free, privatized, and globalized markets (Harvey 2005; Klein 2008; Picketty 2014). Neoliberalism has produced tremendous wealth for a small minority, and that wealth continues to concentrate in fewer and fewer hands. According to *Inequality.org*, a project of the Institute for Policy Studies, the three wealthiest men in the United States, Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos, and Warren Buffet, now own more than the bottom 50 percent of U.S. Americans combined.

This extreme concentration of wealth is possible in part through the ways people are compelled into a particular relationship with the economy in which their labor is sold as a commodity. Those who historically did not own farms and factories, and now also do not own digital servers and intellectual property rights, must work for the people who do. Under capitalism, in return for the commodification of their labor, selling it at price owners are willing to pay, people earn wages to buy the things they need (e.g., food, housing, medical care, etc.). When workers sell their labor and receive wages, the people to whom they sell their labor make a profit, because they do not pay workers the full value of their labor. The market plays a significant role, especially in neoliberal capitalism, to which both property owners and laborers are subject. The market not only determines the price of labor, but also the price of the things (goods and services) laborers produce.

To provide a contemporary example of this dynamic within neoliberalism, Walmart is the largest private employer in the US. According to its 2019 annual report, Walmart produced a gross profit of \$129 billion, but the average wage for a full-time, hourly worker at Walmart was \$14.26 an hour (Meyersohn 2019). That many Walmart workers have to apply for public assistance while working full-time is evidence that this wage is not enough to make ends meet in today's economy (Van Buren 2016). Walmart is able to produce such extraordinary profit in part through keeping the wages of its workers low, not paying workers the full value of their labor. Ironically, the productive capacity of the global economy today is such that, for the first time in human history, it is possible to feed, house, cloth, and provide medical care to every human being on this planet (Baptist and Rehmann 2011). Yet the very people who produce these goods and services are less and less able to afford them as wealth inequality continues to grow in the U.S. and worldwide. One of the contradictions built into the capitalist system is the exploitation of the very human beings on which it relies to produce profit through the commodification and exploitative use of their labor.

Capitalist Extraction of Fossil Fuels

Neoliberal capitalism's extraction of wealth from human labor is tied to the extraction of fossil fuels from Earth. In the same way wealthy elites have extracted human labor since antiquity, they likewise extracted from Earth, and used human labor to do so. All economic activity involves extraction from the earth, including that of hunter gatherers. The small, nomadic bands of hunter gatherers and the agriculturally-based economies of the settled civilizations that followed took from the earth in different ways and to varying degrees. They also, however, lived in relationships with the earth that allowed for its natural renewal within its (re)productive cycles. Humanity's practices, though extractive, mostly did not endanger the long-term sustainability of the land. Broadly speaking, humanity worked in symbiotic relationships with the planet in that what humanity extracted from the earth did not undermine the planet's ability to renew itself. These forms of extraction lived within the earth's limits.

One of the many dynamics that distinguishes the Roman imperial economy in the first century CE in which Revelation was written, and today's neoliberal capitalism, is that Rome's was agriculturally-based while today's economy is powered by fossil fuels. The invention of the coal-powered steam engine that drove the Industrial Revolution during capitalism's emergence laid the foundation for today's fossil fuel economy. Like human labor, fossil fuels are likewise extracted from Earth and commodified, bought and sold at a profit. What distinguishes neoliberalism's extraction from previous historical forms of economic organization is not only the global scale on which it occurs, enabled by modern technology, but the unprecedented ways in which it does not respect planetary limits.

Planet Earth has inherent built-in limits. There is only so much fresh water, so much arable soil, and so much fossil fuel that can be dug, drilled, and fracked from the ground. Capitalism is built on a model that compels endless growth, and is therefore incompatible with the physical realities of a planet that has finite resources (Simkins 2020). For hundreds of thousands of years humanity has been able to live within these boundaries in a more or less symbiotic relationship in which human beings have taken what they needed and put back into the earth. With that long perspective, that the planet's ability to right itself has been wildly disrupted within the past four hundred years is all the more incredible. Climate disruption

indicates that capitalism is already bumping up against planetary limits in catastrophic ways. Another systemic contradiction within capitalism is that, in addition to exploiting the human labor on which it relies, it exploits the earth to the point of degradation and without respect for planetary limits.

While there is an increasing shift to renewable energy sources such as solar and wind, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, the majority of the U.S.'s energy continues to be produced by burning fossil fuels such as natural gas and coal. Fully eighty percent of the global economy is powered by fossil fuels, the burning of which is accelerating climate disruption (Nunez 2019). Davis explains that this mode of production holds a number of implicit assumptions:

The productionist ethic [produce as much as possible regardless of ecological costs] assumes that humans, armed with technology, can control natural systems and direct them to our ends . . . it assumes that science and technology are both limitlessly powerful and benign . . . The productionist ethic is a way of thinking aimed solely at maximizing short-term profit for the relative few. (2009, 23–24)

The results of this ethic have been the extremes to which the capitalist extraction of fossil fuels is pushing Earth's climate, and may well be irreparably destroying the planet's complex ecosystems. Taken to its logical conclusion, to paraphrase adrienne maree brown, neoliberal capitalism and its production of climate change are not compatible with the continuation of the human species (brown and Reagon 2020).

To support capitalism's endless demand for expansion and growth, an economy based on burning fossil fuel has caused such fundamental shifts in Earth's biosphere that humanity, along with countless other species, may be on the cusp of a mass extinction event of humanity's own making (Kolbert 2014). According to United Nations climate scientists, 2015 to 2018 were the four warmest years on record. Sea levels continue to rise. Arctic and Antarctic ice extent is well below average. In its 2019 Statement on the State of the Global Climate, the World Meteorological Organization asserted that extreme weather events will continue to have life and death consequences as a result of climate change.

One of the most insidious connections between neoliberalism and the climate crisis is the billions of dollars the fossil fuel industry has pumped into climate denial (Klein 2014, 44–95). In an increasingly post-fact world, how the climate is being thrown wildly out of balance due to human activity is not debatable, but, like so many aspects of U.S. American society, has become highly politicized. There are some important overlaps between the segments of U.S. American society that tend to deny climate change and those that tend to adhere to the theological system of dispensationalism that will be addressed in the next section.

While the focus of this essay will be on how evangelical dispensationalism, and particularly belief in the rapture, shapes faith-rooted responses to climate disruption, it is important to note that a majority of U.S. Americans ascribe, through a largely unconscious acceptance of capitalism, to an extractive logic in which both people and the planet are inherently subject to exploitation and commodification. However, this unquestioning acceptance that capitalism is the only way in which the economy can be organized is shifting in the U.S., especially among

younger generations shaped by the Great Recession of 2008–2009 and the unfolding recession in 2020 caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Thompson 2020). For these younger generations, capitalism has not produced the same standards of living and quality of life that it did for their parents and grandparents. While middle class white U.S. Americans achieved some prosperity under capitalism in the twentieth century, for minoritized groups – people of color, women, the poor – capitalism has never ensured the “American Dream.”

Dispensationalist Extraction from the Bible

Turning from the intersections among contemporary economy and ecology in the logic of extraction broadly, this section addresses how biblical interpretation is shaped by capitalism when it imitates this dynamic. This particular mode of interpretation is based in dispensationalism, and this section will focus specifically on dispensationalism’s expression in the rapture.

Dispensationalism, first articulated by John Nelson Darby in nineteenth-century England and popularized in the U.S. by the Scofield Study Bible, is a theological system that divides history into seven periods or dispensations. According to this mode of interpreting, Christians are currently living in the penultimate dispensation awaiting the rapture, an event which will signal the beginning of the end of the world. There is debate about when the rapture will occur in the sequence of events that transpire at the end. Post-millennialism argues the rapture will occur after the millennium, the thousand-year reign of Christ, while pre-millennialism, by contrast, posits the rapture will occur prior to the millennium. Pre-millennialism is characteristic of today’s dispensationalism, and conveniently, allows believers to avoid the suffering that will occur at *the end* through the rapture. The rapture, regardless of where it occurs in the timeline, is the event in which Christians will be lifted to heaven, literally extracted from Earth. While largely disavowed by Roman Catholic, mainline Protestant and Orthodox Christians, this belief system, and the centrality of the rapture in it, is widespread among Protestant Evangelicals.

According to the Pew Research Center’s Religious Landscape Study (2020), 70.6 percent of the U.S. population self-identifies as Christian. In the same study, Evangelical Protestants account for 25.4 percent of the U.S. population and are the largest grouping of Christian denominations in the U.S. Evangelical Protestants – which include Baptist, Church of God, Pentecostal, Reformed, and Presbyterian denominations – overwhelmingly ascribe to dispensationalist theology and an apocalyptic worldview, which has had an outsized influence on culture and politics in the U.S. Religious historian Matthew Avery Sutton cautions that people studying Evangelicals

need to take seriously the way the apocalyptic sensibilities of their subjects, refined by more than a century of global turmoil, [have] shaped modern American religion. Fundamentalists’ and evangelicals’ confidence that time was running out defined who they were, how they acted, and how they related to those around them. (2014, xiv)

It is important to differentiate contemporary understandings the apocalyptic in U.S. American culture, shaped by evangelicalism, from how apocalypticism functioned in the New Testament in its first century CE socio-historical context. Contemporary notions of the

apocalypse, largely based on imagery extracted from the book of Revelation absent its socio-historical context, are understood as cataclysmic disasters that will lead to the collapse of human civilization and the end of the world. For dispensationalist evangelicals, natural disasters like forest fires that burn millions of acres, powerful hurricanes, and now the COVID-19 pandemic are understood as controlled by, and part of, the divine plan that signals the beginning of the end, that the world clock is about to strike midnight. From this perspective, these signs point to the nearness of the rapture, and are therefore, in some ways, inherently good, because they point to the imminence of Christian believers being eternally reconciled with God in heaven and escaping the suffering that will be endured by everyone else.

Left Behind

One of the most accessible expressions of dispensationalist theology in general, and the rapture in particular, is the *Left Behind* series, especially because of its outsized influence not only on Evangelical Protestants, but also on U.S. American culture broadly. “LaHaye and coauthor Jerry B. Jenkins began the series in 1995 with *Left Behind* . . . Sixteen books and dozens of ancillary products later, sales total over 80 million copies, according to publisher Tyndale House” (Byle 2016). In addition to the *New York Times* best-selling adult series, according to its own website, the *Left Behind* franchise has also spawned a 40-part children’s series, 4 feature-length films, graphic novels, and a video game. It turns out that, at least for some, biblical interpretation is extremely profitable.

Left Behind dramatizes a theology of escapism in which believers will be raptured up to heaven. The two feature-length *Left Behind* films from 2000 and 2014 depict the rapture similarly. Fiery explosions and mass chaos ensue as people flying airplanes and driving cars are suddenly absent. Babies disappear from their hospital cribs. Where there were once people are only clothing and wedding rings. Through the rapture, extraction is transposed from one plane to another. Under capitalism a small subset of humanity subjects the majority to the extraction of their labor, and extraction from the planet without limit, on the earthly plane. In the rapture *God* does the extracting from the earthly realm into the heavenly, a divine vacuuming into the sky of only righteous Christians. In the book series, according to a plot summary on the *Left Behind* Wiki, those left behind, post-rapture Christian converts, must then battle it out during the seven-year tribulation against the forces of the Anti-Christ. They gear up for battle in Hummers and hide out in bunkers with the latest communications tech. The books describe a kind of U.S. militarism on Christian steroids, and do little to challenge norms within dominant U.S. American culture. *Left Behind* is so successful because it expresses an existing popular understanding of the apocalyptic. It does not create it, though it does reinforce it. The prevalence of *Left Behind* in U.S. American culture has not only shaped popular understanding of the apocalyptic and the end, but has also shaped faith-rooted responses to the growing wealth inequality and climate disruption described above.

Political and Ecological Implications

The rapture theology dramatized by *Left Behind* has a direct impact on how dispensationalist Christians view the environment, specifically Evangelical Protestant decision makers in the Trump administration who will be addressed below. Rossing points out,

Long-term environmental sustainability is not a concern at all for some Rapture proponents whose chief preoccupation is counting down to earth's violent end. Even more extreme is a recent remark made by right-wing pundit Anne Coulter: "God gave us the earth. We have dominion over the plants, the animals, the trees. God said, 'Earth is yours. Take it. Rape it. It's yours.'" (2004, 7)

While this Anne Coulter quotation is perhaps an extreme example, it is indicative of a larger interpretive trend of extracting themes from the Bible absent their socio-historical context and using them as justification for the continued extraction of wealth from humans and Earth without limit for the benefit of the few and to the detriment of the many.

Environmentalism is deemed, from the perspective of some in the evangelical movement, contrary to God's will. (It is important here to distinguish between secular environmentalism, which is viewed quite negatively, and Christian "care for creation," which is typically understood positively.) A recent articulation of this idea is the Green Dragon series, which names environmentalism as no less than a demonic force on par with the satanic Dragon in Revelation. James Wanliss of the Cornwall Alliance claims,

The Litany of the Green Dragon [environmentalism] provides some certainty for people without God, who drift steadily from their rational moorings, and for whom there is an increasing sense of separation anxiety . . . We humans are special creatures, in a class of our own, quite separate from, and superior to, trees and animals . . . The Green Dragon must die . . . [There] is no excuse to become befuddled by the noxious Green odors and doctrines emanating from the foul beast. (Quoted in Hickman 2011)

Those belonging to the Cornwall Alliance also argue that environmentalism is bad for the poor, criticizing environmental regulation. The contention is that to restrict the expansion of capitalism through regulation is to limit the access of people in poverty to the markets. On its website the Cornwall Alliance calls "political leaders to abandon fruitless and harmful policies to control global temperature and instead adopt policies that simultaneously reflect responsible environmental stewardship, make energy and all its benefits more affordable, and so free the poor to rise out of poverty" (2021). Forty years of neoliberal economic policy that has largely deregulated markets and produced record wealth inequality suggests that it is not environmental policy standing in the way of people who are poor accessing the food, water, housing and medical care they need to live. The relationship between capitalism and climate disruption described above points to an inseparability of people and the planet, that the health and well-being of Earth, upon which humanity relies, cannot be as easily parsed out from the well-being of humanity as these dispensationalists would suggest.

The influence of dispensationalist interpretations of Revelation has not only made its mark through prevalence in U.S. American popular culture. These interpretations have had very real consequences through impacting the decision making of evangelical elected officials from the local to national levels of U.S. government. Prominent current and former self-identifying evangelicals in the Trump administration include, as of this writing, former Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Scott Pruitt, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo, and Vice President Michael Pence. While these individuals are particular examples,

the influence of dispensationalist Evangelical Protestantism on issues ranging from U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East (Rossing 2004, 47–80) to the rights of the LGBTQIA+ community is extensive.

It is important, however, to parse out Trump from the Protestant Evangelicals in his administration. Trump, not himself a dispensationalist, is committed to neoliberal economic policy. His concern is to remove any obstacles (e.g., environmental regulations) that might slow the economy. There is alignment between Trump’s neoliberal agenda to further deregulate environmental protections and his Evangelical Protestant supporters. Examples of the Trump administration’s decision making on environmental issues specifically include withdrawal from the Paris climate agreement, the rollback of regulations that would reduce carbon emissions, and the removal of climate change from the list of national security threats published by the U.S. government. As described above, the apocalyptic worldview of Evangelical Protestants, including those with decision making powers in the current administration, are based, in part, on dispensationalists interpretations of Revelation. What makes this mode of interpretation so dangerous is that it extracts the violence and militarism in the biblical text absent its literary and socio-historical context to bless and justify the endless extraction of human labor and earthly resources to the detriment of both people and the planet.

An Alternative Reading

It is ironic that a text with some of the strongest implicit critiques of power in the New Testament can also be used as theological justification for endless capitalist exploitation that has no respect for planetary limits. Interpretation of Revelation has the most significant gap between mainstream biblical scholarship and popular readings of any book of the Bible. According to Tyndale House Publishers’ “Left Behind: General FAQ,” the framework for “the entire series is based on the theology found primarily in the book of Revelation” (Rossing [2004] has extensively discussed why the rapture is not biblical, and I will not rehearse those arguments here.) While dispensationalism claims a biblical basis – citing careful, detailed analysis of the biblical text, including work in the original languages – it largely imitates the prevailing capitalist logic of extraction without limits by selecting specific verses absent their literary and socio-historical contexts for use in a broader theological project, as described above.

Recognizing how much is at stake in the interpretation of Revelation, particularly for addressing climate disruption, this final section outlines an alternative approach by rooting the text in its socio-historical context. Rootedness in human and planetary limits will provide an alternative to endless extraction. Instead of biblical interpretation that imitates a capitalist extraction compelled endlessly upward – of humans from Earth into heaven in the case of the rapture, and fossil fuels from Earth into the atmosphere the case of climate disruption – the mode of interpretation outlined here works to keep readers’ feet firmly planted on the ground. This paradigm understands Earth and human bodies as not something from which to escape, but good and worthy in and of themselves, including their limitations. It points to a sense of rootedness in the limited scope in which Revelation itself was written to specific communities in a specific historical context in which the end was not envisioned as a movement upward toward heaven. John the Seer recounts a vision that suggests the exact opposite, not as some

distant future prediction but as a prophetic challenge for his own time. In the new heaven and new earth, the New Jerusalem *comes down* from heaven to Earth, a watered garden in the midst of a city (Revelation 21:1-2; 21:10–22:2).

Historical critical biblical scholarship is certainly not without its own biases reflected in the white, male, middle- to upper-class, western, colonizing influences from which it originated. When read within the limits of its own time in the first century CE, however, Revelation presents the contrary of what dispensationalist interpreters claim. In its historical context Revelation unveils a prophetic critique specifically of the violence and militarism of the Roman empire that popular dispensationalist readings extract without the limitation of context from the text. Unlike Christianity in the United States, which largely aligns with the dominant culture, within its first century CE context the Jesus movement was an extremely small, marginalized sect treated with suspicion and persecuted by the powerful (Tacitus, *Annals* XV, 44; Tacitus, *Histories* V, 4–5). Martin explains,

It is essential to recognize that the Seer's social and world vision functioned as "protest" literature with a particular advocacy stance over against the Roman imperial context . . . *Revelation* reflects the standpoint of persons or groups who were marginalized and powerless and who appealed to visions, trances, and revelations to secure legitimation and status enhancement . . . Revelation is, in the worlds of Leonard Thompson, a "minority report." This minority report reflects "deviant knowledge" of Christian insiders in contradistinction to the hegemonic "public knowledge" of "outsiders" with imperial ties and allegiances. (2005, 91)

Read in this context, Revelation articulates a counter-logic to the dominant culture from the margins of Roman imperial society. It models through examples such as the nonviolence of the slaughtered lamb (5:6) and the solidarity of Earth opening her mouth to protect the church (12:16).

A brief case study of this societal- and even cosmic-level critique is the representation of Babylon the great whore, or sex slave, in Revelation 17–18. Babylon – or as Stephen Moore and Jennifer A. Glancy affectionately call her, "Babs" (2014) – is a thinly veiled reference to Rome, both the city itself and the empire as a whole. (The seven heads of the beast on which she sits are the seven mountains (17:9), or the seven hills, of Rome.) Babylon glorifies herself, living sensuously (18:7), bedecked in purple, scarlet, gold, and pearls (17:4). "The image expands so that John's hearers and readers recognize that the great whore's/city's allure comes from her intimate and illicit relationships, her commercial and political alliances with the nations and peoples of the world, alliances that create the great wealth and power that even now seduce them" (Blount 2009, 312). While Babylon is metaphorically represented through "prostituting sexuality," "the reality remains destructive economics" (Blount 2009, 326). Babylon appears to have all the power, both world ruler and world God (Moore 2014, 125–54), as she drunkenly drinks the blood of the saints – just as today it appears there are no alternatives to neoliberal capitalism or the leaders on either side of the political aisle who endorse it in the U.S.

Yet, an interpreting angel declares to John, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon” (18:2). Another voice from heaven cries, “Come out of her!” (18:4).¹ “John declares to a Rome that is at the height of its imperial power at the close of the first century that even as it luxuriates in its military, economic, and political might, its imperial center has already become a haunted wasteland, occupied by unclean beasts and spirits” (Blount 2009, 326). With Babylon declared fallen, the merchants of the earth mourn over her destruction (18:9). They weep because no one will buy their cargo anymore (18:11).

A long list of luxury items follows: precious metals, fine fabrics, the choicest foods, and at the end of the list, souls and human lives (18:12–13). Each of these luxury items has been extracted from Earth through Rome’s economy, which not only produced immense environmental devastation but enslaved millions (Kiel 2017, 29–88; Koester 2008). While Rome’s agriculturally-based economy around the Mediterranean basin was organized on a different scale and in a different form than today’s global neoliberal capitalism, this list of luxury goods does point to the Roman elite’s willingness to go to extremes in its pursuit of wealth, although they existed within the technological limits of the first century CE. What John the Seer does, in an economy which views, not only human labor, but human beings themselves as expendable, is affirm “the full humanity of the vast number of people who were sold and held as slaves” (Martin 2005, 89). The Seer’s affirmation of the humanity of slaves in a society that assumes an ability to buy and sell their bodies points to a logic counter to the prevailing ideology of Roman empire.

In this text Babylon is apocalyptically revealed not as world ruler and god, but as a slave economically exploited by a master extracting sexual gratification from her body.² Babylon, despite the appearance of overwhelming power, is just as subject to exploitation as other beings in the empire. This message resonates today beyond the existence of modern-day slavery within neoliberalism, which is an appropriate and relevant application of this text. For example, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers has done extensive work calling attention to and prosecuting modern-day slavery rings in Florida’s agricultural industry, and has become a leader in holding fast food and grocery store corporations accountable through worker-driven social responsibility programs. What distinguishes this kind of hermeneutical leap, itself admittedly a form of extraction, from dispensationalist interpretation, is that it reads the biblical text within the limits of its socio-historical context before making a comparison to the contemporary.

This image of a fallen Babylon provides a glimpse into a theological understanding that, despite what seems like an overwhelming empire, the powers that govern this world have already fallen, revealed for what they truly are as enslaving and passing away. Revelation reveals Babylon’s God-like presence guaranteeing power and wealth as not ultimate, but idolatrous,

¹ I would need another essay to address the highly sexualized rape imagery in this passage, which largely functions as a revenge fantasy. For these interpretive issues concerning sexualized violence, I refer you to Tina Pippin’s (2005) apt scholarship on the topic, as well as Menéndez-Antuña’s (2018) work on deviant sexualities under empire.

² For a parallel to the economic dimensions of contemporary sex work, see Gallant 2019. Thank you to Jason Churchill for pointing out that the most appropriate parallel between sexual slavery in the Roman and the contemporary U.S. context is not sex work, but human trafficking.

that she is just as enslaved to the demands of the imperial system as anyone else. Likewise, this text provides a biblical resource for considering how neoliberal capitalism, and its handmaidens in the Trump administration, are likewise not eternal, but a product of history and subject to prophetic critique. How might the discourses in churches look different today if they took seriously the notion that the seemingly unchanging and unsurmountable powers of this world only appear to be so? What would it look like for churches to rest in the assurance, that because these death-dealing systems are already passing away, that they are free to enact the transformation that is already unfolding?

Revelation – when read on its own terms in a first century CE context as critiquing the dominant Roman imperial society and providing alternatives from the margins for addressing the intersections among economy and ecology – provides a template for seeking alternative epistemologies on the margins of the dominant U.S. American culture. Examples of these types of knowledge include, but are by no means limited to, communities of the organizing poor and indigenous First Nations working towards environmental justice. Reading Revelation in its socio-historical context of marginalization points churches in the U.S., which largely align with the dominant culture, toward the challenge and opportunities of returning to their socio-historical roots through developing relationships of solidarity and accountability with the marginalized, including the environmental movement. The work of scholars, educators, and ministers is to leverage Revelation among students and congregants toward transforming endlessly extractive logics with no respect for planetary limits and providing rooted alternatives. Indeed, for God, as well as for ourselves, there is no planet B.

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