

Research Article

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The Deportation of Juan: Migration Rhetoric as Decolonial Strategy in Revelation

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Abstract: This article explores John's Exodus rhetoric as a decolonial strategy and maps its implications for contemporary migrants. Other scholars have convincingly argued that local authorities deported John to Patmos as a *vagus*, because his message opposed civic institutions, but they do not explain the nature and function of his preaching. Using migrant narratives and decolonial theory, I read John's call to come out of Babylon and his deployment of Exodus topoi as migration rhetoric. He uses topoi of liberation, wilderness wanderings, and promised land to subvert the colonial situation of the assemblies under Rome. Rather than migrating to a place, believers embody the eschatological Exodus by rejecting food offered to idols and upholding the boundaries of Jewish identity as they wait for the full realization of God's kingdom in the New Jerusalem. Regarding Latinx migrant communities, John's Exodus rhetoric informs how migrants legitimate their migration and how they negotiate identity and resist imperialism in the US/Mexico borderlands.

Keywords: migration, colonial situation, postcolonial theory, rhetorical analysis, the Book of Revelation, Exodus

1 Introduction

Exodus rhetoric in Revelation elucidates John's deportation to Patmos and informs the struggles for human flourishing of contemporary Latinx migrant communities. A migrant from Judea, John cites his preaching and faith in Jesus as the reason for his presence at Patmos (1:9). Because Rome is killing believers who embrace the same message (6:9; 22:9), John intimates that his presence at Patmos is not only involuntary but also potentially deadly. In view of the redemptive sacrifice of the Lamb, the provision of *manna*, and the upcoming arrival of the New Jerusalem, John calls believers to come out of Babylon (18:4).

Presupposing imperial persecution, early Christian authors already argued that Roman authorities deported John to Patmos, though there was no consensus on the type of sentence imposed on him.¹ Tertullian suggested that John received a sentence of *relegatio in insulam*, or banishment to an island (*De Praesc. Haer* 36), which was temporal and reserved for aristocrats who threatened public interest,² whereas Victorinus posited that authorities condemned John as *damnatio ad metalla* (*In Apoc. 10.11*), or hard labor in a quarry.³

1 Schüssler-Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation*, 194; see also Morris, *The Revelation of St. John*, 37; and Nwachukwu, *Beyond Vengeance and Protest*, 118.

2 Yarbrow Collins notes John's prophecies could have led to his deportation and cites a second-century edict banning sibylline oracles and Jewish prophets. See Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*, 102.

3 This sentence applied only to lower ranks in society and was invalidated once the convict was no longer able to work. Biguzzi, "John of Patmos and the 'Persecution' in the Apocalypse," 201–20.

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Due to the political implications of John's message, some modern authors have favored a sentence of *deportatio in insulam*, which was more severe and entailed the confiscation of wealth.⁴ Others, like Paul B. Duff, suggest John engaged in strategic crisis-mongering to gain the upper hand in a power struggle with local prophets.⁵ For Adela Yarbro-Collins, John's narrative reflects a perceived crisis rather than real tensions with the empire.⁶ Unconvinced by crisis theories altogether, Leonard Thompson suggests that John went to Patmos to receive revelations.⁷ According to Giancarlo Biguzzi, local Asian authorities deported John as a vagabond (*vagus*) because his prophetic messages opposing civic institutions had become disruptive.

Although these scenarios have their merits, they rely on external evidence and deserve interrogation. The first three types of sentences (*relegatio*, *deportatio*, and *damnatio*) applied only to Roman citizens. Authorities reserved *relegatio* and *deportatio* for members of upper classes, seizing property so the state would not incur any financial burdens. As a migrant prophet, John did not meet the juridical criteria or socio-economic background for such a sentence, despite speculation regarding a potentially higher pedigree. While creative, the notion that John was seeking revelations intends to fill the vacuum of a persecuting power, but it is untenable because *dia* plus accusative gives the cause and not purpose.⁸ With Thompson, others have presupposed that the absence of direct imperial persecution amounts to the absence of systemic violence. However, Frantz Fanon's analysis of colonial situations highlights how colonized subjects negotiate systemic violence to stay afloat within imperial hierarchies of power, often at the expense of one another.⁹ Biguzzi's notion that local authorities deported John as a vagabond due to his anti-imperial message is interesting because the sentence did not involve capital punishment and allowed for a more arbitrary application of the law.¹⁰ However, he presupposes the so-called parting of the ways and does not address the precarious situation of the Jewish Diaspora in Asia Minor. Most importantly, Biguzzi does not explain the nature of the message that so irritated the local authorities and led to John's deportation. Turning to internal evidence, a reassessment of John's use of Exodus material might offer a more comprehensive alternative.

Given his experience of forced migration, John's Exodus rhetoric can explain his presence at Patmos and how the seven assemblies negotiated Roman imperial power in Asia Minor. Although scholars have amply recorded John's use of the Exodus, they often portray it as echoes, references, or typologies. This obfuscates the human dimension, trauma, hope, and disenchantment that migration stories like the Exodus entail. Drawing from decolonial theory and contemporary migration narratives (intersubjective accounts that illustrate the struggle for human flourishing),¹¹ I will read John's Exodus rhetoric as migration rhetoric. Specifically, I argue that John used the theme of the eschatological Exodus and concomitant topoi of liberation, wilderness, and promised land as a decolonial strategy. Because some believers in the assemblies were consuming food offered to idols to negotiate the colonial situation under Rome, John deploys Exodus rhetoric to persuade them to embody an eschatological migration that: (1) anticipates the total liberation of God's people through plagues reminiscent of those that destroyed the Egyptians; (2) turns the colonial situation of the *ekklēsiai* under Rome into an eschatological wilderness; and (3) seeks to reorient believers' loyalties from Rome to the New Jerusalem. In doing so, John's message contravened the provincial drive to ingratiate themselves with Rome. Moreover, it undermined long-standing efforts by cities and municipalities to press the Jewish Diaspora in Asia Minor to acculturate.¹² As a result, local authorities in Asia Minor deported John as a *vagus* to Patmos.

⁴ Roloff, *The Revelation of John*, 32.

⁵ Duff, *Who Rides the Beast?*, 15.

⁶ Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*, 103.

⁷ Thompson, "Ordinary Lives," 33.

⁸ Ibid., 33.

⁹ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 5.

¹⁰ Biguzzi, "John of Patmos and the 'Persecution' in the Apocalypse," 201–20.

¹¹ Jackson et al., *The Wherewithal of Life*, 6.

¹² Trebilco, *Jewish Communities in Asia Minor*, 186.

At a time of global migrations and increased xenophobia, John's migration rhetoric contributes to conversations about how the Bible informs our understanding of migration and invites readers to consider how migrants may inform biblical interpretation. On the one hand, John's migration rhetoric highlights the power and appeal of the Exodus as an epic story of migration. On the other hand, the topos of liberation elucidates the way that migrants rhetorically vilify their home country while interrogating imperial narratives. In addition, the wilderness topos draws attention to issues of human trafficking and the role of coyotes. It also highlights how Latinx migrants turn food debates into a site for the negotiation of power, status, and identity.¹³ John's presentation of the New Jerusalem recalls Latinx notions of the American Dream that cast the US as a place of liberty and justice for all, where migrants are welcome and can start a new life. Nevertheless, migrants might see their journey to the US not as liberation but as a "harvest of empire" due to the long history of American intervention in Latin America. Given their vilification as Trump's "bad hombres," migrants may also question John's presentation of those outside the wall as cowardly, immoral, and impure. In doing so, they call John to account for how his migration rhetoric reproduces the imperial practices of exclusion it seeks to eradicate.

2 Theory and method: Exodus as migration rhetoric

2.1 Rhetorical analysis

John's use of Exodus topoi may help explain his deportation at Patmos while also contributing to long-standing conversations on his use of the Hebrew Bible. Traditionally, scholars have read John's use of Exodus material through various categories: (1) motifs, which are recurrent images in the literature that bridges century of elapsed time;¹⁴ (2) typologies or hermeneutical devices where a person or event in the Hebrew Bible corresponds with a person or event in the New Testament;¹⁵ and (3) themes which constitute the central idea of a text. However, as Elisabeth Lund reminds us, these categories are heuristic devices to analyze Exodus traditions' form, meaning, and function in biblical texts.¹⁶ While helpful and undoubtedly instructive, these literary categories obfuscate the human dimension of migration stories: the trauma of imperial violence, the dangers of border crossings, and the hope and disenchantments of failed utopias. Scholars often forget that the Exodus story was helpful for ancient authors and communities precisely because it articulates strategic agendas and struggles for human flourishing. Since John uses the Exodus to tell his story of deportation, one must analyze how it is part of his rhetorical intervention.

When speaking of Exodus rhetoric, I will refer here to topoi derived from the canonical book bearing the same name and that encompass: (1) the liberation from Egyptian oppression, (2) the Crossing of the Red Sea, (3) the wilderness wanderings, and (4) the conquest of the promised land, which appears first in the Song of Moses (Exod 14:30–31). By rhetoric, I do not refer to artistic tropes or simply compositional techniques.¹⁷ These approaches often assume that handbooks of ancient rhetoric, written speeches, and letters encapsulate a coherent understanding of rhetoric. Assuming that biblical texts constitute "well-greased," complete, and complex units; they set out to explore how devices of invention, arrangement, and style work to create proofs of persuasion.¹⁸ When imposed arbitrarily on New Testament text, these strategies act as straitjackets. Therefore, is essential to remember that these tools supplement but do not determine our biblical text analysis.¹⁹

¹³ Calvo and Rueda Esquibel, *Decolonize Your Diet*, 10.

¹⁴ Bryan, "Echoes of Exodus," 9.

¹⁵ Alsup, "Typology," 682.

¹⁶ Lund, *Out of Egypt*, 11.

¹⁷ Porter, *Handbook to Exegesis of the New Testament*, 220.

¹⁸ Watson and Hauser, *Rhetorical Criticism of the Bible*, 110.

¹⁹ Muilenburg, "Form Criticism and Beyond," 5.

Instead, I follow New Rhetoric formulations of rhetoric as a theory of argumentation that interrogates the values and strategies deployed in texts and social and political situations.²⁰ To complete a full rhetorical turn, it critically analyses approaches to biblical interpretation, particularly how social locations, theoretical frameworks, and theological commitments shape a scholar's perspectives. In doing so, one interrogates dominant paradigms of interpretation and their claims to objectivity and a value-free ethos within the guild.²¹ Because rhetoric strives to persuade and to move the reader to action by eliciting emotions, convictions, and identification,²² it is essential to identify the primary set of issues and exigencies that constitute the rhetorical situation.

Only then, if the discourse introduced into the situation – in this case, Exodus rhetoric – moves the audience towards change, would the speaker have successfully removed the exigencies and resolved the problem.²³ In mapping Revelation's use of Exodus topoi, the reader identifies its inscribed power relations and reconstruct silenced voices. Most importantly, a rhetorical analysis reads against the grain to interrogate John's flexible use of the Exodus rhetoric, particularly considering that ancient Jewish authors often grafted the Exodus story into their socio-political situation to highlight their agency in strategic ways.²⁴

2.2 Migrants in the Bible

Reading the Exodus as migration rhetoric brings to the forefront the trauma, social dislocation, and disenchantment that migration experiences entail. Every day migrants die during their journey to or at the US–Mexico border. Even once they have survived kidnappings or extortion from cartels or corrupt police, migrants risk of drowning in the Rio Grande or succumbing to heatstroke in the Arizona wilderness.²⁵ What kind of circumstances lead migrants to risk their own lives, and the lives of their spouses and children, for the dim prospects of a better life elsewhere? Considering the stakes, Harvard anthropologist Michael Jackson overrides simplistic definitions of migration as movement from one region of the globe to another. Instead, he defines migration as a struggle for “human flourishing.”²⁶

In Jackson's view, migration narratives are profoundly human, rhetorically crafted accounts that exhibit crucial characteristics relevant to this project. These include: (1) the impulse to migrate as an integral part of the human condition and something we embody (*moveo ergo sum*); (2) the hope, suffering, and disenchantment of the migration experience; and (3) the politics of storytelling – or “the everyday interplay of human subjects, coming together and moving apart, giving and taking, communicating and miscommunicating.” Finally, migration narratives often involve the transgression of legal or ethical norms to legitimate settling in a foreign country. Overall, migration narratives are “allegories of human existence” in that they epitomize human desire to transcend the “limit situations” that threaten one's life.²⁷

2.2.1 Decolonial analysis

As an exercise in contextual biblical interpretation, this exploration of Exodus rhetoric is also a decolonial turn, as far as it deploys what Anibal Quijano refers to as a *desprendimiento* (delinking) from Eurocentric approaches to the Exodus.²⁸ *Desprenderse*, or “delinking,” calls for epistemic disobedience using the

²⁰ Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric*, 513.

²¹ Schüssler-Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, 99.

²² Schüssler-Fiorenza, “Rhetorical Situation and Historical Reconstruction in 1 Corinthians,” 386–403.

²³ Bitzer, “The Rhetorical Situation,” 1–4.

²⁴ Gruen, “The Use and Abuse of the Exodus Story,” 197–228.

²⁵ Groody, *Border of Death/Valley of Life*, 16.

²⁶ Jackson et al., *The Wherewithal of Life*, 4.

²⁷ Ibid., 4.

²⁸ Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” 168–77.

knowledge, experiences, and cultures of peoples who were on the receiving end of modernity/coloniality.²⁹ This epistemic subversiveness reveals the limitations of the colonizer's narrative and calls for new ways of imagining the world.³⁰

How does *el desprendimiento* inform this interpretation of Exodus rhetoric as migration rhetoric? Methodologically, *el desprendimiento* critiques literary notions of Exodus that dismiss questions of migration. Furthermore, it calls for a border crossing of paradigms of biblical interpretation that invalidate modern questions and concerns in the name of objectivity.³¹ The delinking disrupts too the socialization of the reader to specific paradigms of biblical interpretation and perceptions of migration in the Bible.³² Thus, *el desprendimiento* here also calls for dialogue with Fernando Segovia's hermeneutics of Otherness and Engagement. On the one hand, this approach acknowledges the experiences of flesh and blood readers and their own experiences of empire and migration. On the other, it sees the text as an "other," allowing it to speak on its own, to unravel its narrative, and to define its own identity.³³ In doing so, this approach eschews what Jean-Pierre Ruiz refers to as "hermeneutics of correspondence," which make facile correlations between ancient and modern communities.³⁴

3 Overview of the rhetorical–historical situation of revelation

3.1 The rhetorical situation of revelation

John deploys his migration rhetoric to address the rhetorical situation of the seven churches of Asia Minor under Rome. He anticipates meeting the martyrdom of those believers who refuse to worship the beast and its image (16:9; 20:4). Uncompromising believers in the assemblies, too, were facing severe socio-economic hardship, imprisonment, and death. Antipas, whom John refers to as the faithful witness, has died in Pergamon, and believers in Smyrna face poverty and imprisonment. Having legitimated his common faith, suffering, and hope, John writes to the seven assemblies: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamon, Thyatira, Philadelphia, Sardis, and Laodicea. These are experiencing various issues that include: (1) the dwindling love in Ephesus (2:4; 3:1–2); (2) the presence of "false apostles" and prophets who promote *eidōlothyta* and *porneia* in Pergamon and Thyatira (2:14; 2:20); (3) the "blasphemy" of the so-called "Synagogue of Satan" in Smyrna (2:9; 3:9); and (4) the poverty of Philadelphia (2:9; 3:8) and affluence of some members within the *ekklēsiai* (2:9; 3:17–18).

These issues coalesce in the challenge that *eidōlothyta* posed for the seven assemblies.³⁵ This food was part of the emperor cult and available at local festivities and meat markets.³⁶ It also reflected the impetus of provincials in Asia Minor to connect with Roman power. As Philip Harland notes, voluntary associations often honored the emperor at gatherings to lobby Roman patrons and secure socio-economic rewards.³⁷

²⁹ Mignolo, "Epistemic Disobedience and The Decolonial Option," 44–66.

³⁰ Examples of this epistemic disobedience emerge in the works of José Carlos Mariátegui, Amílcar Cabral, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Rigoberta Menchú, Gloria Anzaldúa, who according to Mignolo represent not individuals but social movements. According to Mignolo Waman Puma de Ayala's *The First New Chronicle and Good Government*, which he sent to King Phillip III, is an example of epistemic disobedience. In his work, Waman Puma argues that a new chronicle must emerge because all chronicles, including those of the conquerors, have their limits. See Mignolo, "Epistemic Disobedience and The Decolonial Option," 47.

³¹ Schüssler-Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, 42.

³² Mata, "Beyond Socialization and Attrition," 252.

³³ Segovia, "Toward a Hermeneutics of the Diaspora," 59.

³⁴ Ruiz, *Reading from the Edges*, 7.

³⁵ Duff, *Who Rides the Beast?*, 52.

³⁶ Naylor, "The Roman Imperial Cult and Revelation," 207, 216.

³⁷ Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations*, 178.

Since believers often participated in associations of diverse types, encountering *eidōlothyta* was inevitable. Hence, *eidōlothyta* posed a broader question of how believers should relate to Roman imperial culture.³⁸ Following Paul, who had relativized the issue to a matter of conscience and concern for the weak, the Balaamites and Jezebel might have argued that idols are nothing and seen *eidōlothyta* as a civic duty that did not compromise their faith.³⁹ For John, however, it is part of the beast's worship and a transgression of the commandment against idolatry. Beyond the vilification of his opponents, John's invective reveals cultic concerns over proper versus false worship and concomitant boundaries of identity and belonging. The Dragon and his beast persecute all those who embrace the word of God and the Testimony of Jesus (12:17; 19:10). As Revelation unfolds, John depicts Rome as a woman who drank the blood of the witnesses of Jesus (17:6) and charges Rome with the murder of God's prophets and saints (18:24). Therefore, John calls the assemblies to withdraw from what he perceives as a corrupt, murderous, and idolatrous system, lest they partake in its upcoming punishment.

3.2 Jewish diaspora communities

I view the seven assemblies not as Christian churches but as Jewish diaspora communities negotiating the colonial situation of Asia Minor under Rome. Traditionally, scholars have approached Revelation as an example of Jewish Christianity, often juxtaposing the *ekklēsia* with *sunagōgē* and importing second-century tensions between Christians and Jews.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, as Wayne McCready points out, the term *ekklēsia* is civic and refers to the voting assembly of free citizens engaged in the legislative processes of the polis.⁴¹ Furthermore, as John W. Marshall has argued, the so-called parting of the ways presupposes a teleology that sees Revelation as a transition from Judaism to Christianity.⁴² As Sarah Emmanuel points out, Revelation reflects the negotiation of a particular Jewishness and Christ-followings in the first century.⁴³ John's use of the eschatological Exodus to address the political situation of Jewish Christ-followers in the Diaspora of Asia Minor reflects such negotiation. Each of the *topoi* of the eschatological Exodus point to Jewish traditions that resonate with a Jewish diaspora audience. Recalling the theme of Davidic warrior and messiah (22:16), for instance, the lion-lamb ransoms believers and vanquishes the forces of the beast (19:11–21).⁴⁴ Through the wilderness topos John contrasts Israel's unity and specificity with the multiplicity of gentiles (10:11; 11:9; 17:15).⁴⁵ Through the topos of the Promised Land or New Jerusalem, John highlights the abiding value of the holy city for the Jewish diaspora,⁴⁶ and sets his halakhic concern as a concrete ritual boundary. Those who consume idol food and collude in the worship of the beast will not enter the city (21:27) but could still get a green card if they wash their robes (22:14).

3.3 The colonial situation of the Greek cities

Rather than imagining embattled Christian churches suffering imperial persecution or displaying Christian abhorrence of pagan practices, I suggest that believers and their host cities were experiencing a colonial

³⁸ Royalty, *The Streets of Heaven*, 27.

³⁹ Schüssler-Fiorenza, "The Words of Prophecy," 195.

⁴⁰ Duff, *The Synagogue of Satan*, 15.

⁴¹ McCready, "Ekklesia and Voluntary Associations," 60.

⁴² Marshall, *Parables of War*, 28.

⁴³ Emanuel, *Roasting Rome*, 33.

⁴⁴ Nickelsburg, *Ancient Judaism and Christian Origins*, 130; and Collins, *The Scepter, and the Star*, 16–20.

⁴⁵ In John's vision of the 144,000, the twelve tribes of Israel contrast the countless multitude "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" (7:9).

⁴⁶ Frankfurter, "The Revelation to John," 465.

situation. While the notion of imperial persecution lacks historical footing, postcolonial authors such as Frantz Fanon have observed the way that systemic violence forces the oppressed to engage in various negotiations of power, status, and ethnicity.⁴⁷ The very threat of violence serves as a powerful deterrent and undergirds the colonial situation, without the need for imperial persecution. Admittedly, it would be misleading to think of ancient Roman *coloniae* as European colonies of the early modern period. The former were towns or “civic communities” of Roman citizens, primarily military veterans, who settled outside the Italian Peninsula.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, as Stephen Moore observes, one may think of Roman Asia as “colonies of occupation,” since the number of Roman elite officials allotted to any one province was small compared to the amount of land they administered.⁴⁹ Despite a presence in Asia Minor dating back to Seleucid colonization, the political situation of diaspora Jews in the region was unstable at best.⁵⁰ From Ephesus to Laodicea and from Miletus to Sardis, the Greek cities resented: (1) Jewish refusal to integrate into the civic fabric of the city; (2) exemptions and privileges accorded to Jewish communities; and (3) monies collected for the temple in Jerusalem.⁵¹ Whenever the political situation across the empire changed, cities would press their Jewish communities by canceling privileges, exemptions, and rituals. Nevertheless, as Erich Gruen cautions, one should not readily presuppose Greek oppression and Roman deliverance.⁵² Although Roman authorities usually upheld precedent when ruling in favor of the Jews, the Jewish revolt demonstrated that protecting the Jewish way of life had always been a *beneficium* (a kindness), which Rome, as a satisfied Patron, bestowed upon clients who fulfilled their duties (*officia*).⁵³ Unable to appeal to Rome, the Jewish communities in Asia Minor had to rethink the relationship with their host cities.⁵⁴ Since some believers in the assemblies are acquiescing to the pressure of the Greek cities under Rome, John summons them not to all-out war, as John W. Marshall suggests, but to resist the colonial situation by affirming their identity as God’s migrants.

4 Migration rhetoric as decolonial strategy

4.1 Redemption as liberation

From his location as Patmos, John calls for full-blown decolonization of the *oikoumenē* through an eschatological Exodus, in which God liberates believers, sustains them through the wilderness, and leads them into the Promised Land. Through his reference to the suffering of believers who died on account of the word of God and testimony of Jesus, John sets up the topos of liberation. Just as the blood of the Passover Lamb is a sign of protection and liberation for the Israelites in Exodus 12: 11–13, in Revelation, the Lamb’s blood liberates (1:5a) and redeems from all over the world (5:9). As John’s use of the verb ἀγοράζειν (to buy or purchase) makes clear, the Lamb has ransomed people to be his own and effectively ended the slavery from sin – and Rome,⁵⁵ whose participation in the exploitation of slaves is well known. As Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza observes, Jesus emerges here as God’s purchasing agent.⁵⁶ Indeed, this ransoming epitomizes God’s liberation of his people (Deut 7:8, 13) and sets up the expectation of a New Exodus.⁵⁷ Although John initially hides the identity of the oppressor, he dresses Rome in Egyptian garb through the topos of

⁴⁷ Fanon, *Black Skins/White Masks*, 26.

⁴⁸ Marshall suggests Rome was a colonial empire and its political project as colonialists based on its political, economic, cultural, and discursive elements. See Moore, *Gender and Empire*, 20.

⁴⁹ Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse*, 100.

⁵⁰ Gruen, *Diaspora*, 100.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 102.

⁵³ Williams, “Jews and Jewish Communities in the Roman Empire,” 328.

⁵⁴ Trebilco, *Jewish Communities in Asia Minor*, 175.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁵⁶ Schüssler-Fiorenza, “Redemption as Liberation,” 228.

⁵⁷ Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 70.

oppression and liberation. According to John, God will unleash upon Rome and its associates a series of plagues reminiscent of those in Exodus 7:14–12:36,⁵⁸ including sores (9:10–11), hail (9:26), water turned into blood (7:20–21), locusts (10:13), and darkness (10:22).⁵⁹ Since the blood of the Lamb has liberated them from Rome, believers can now join the eschatological migration. Recalling the border crossing of God's people at the Red Sea (Exod 15), John sees the conquering ones – cast here as border crossers – standing over a fiery sea of glass and singing the song of Moses and the Lamb (15:1–3).⁶⁰

Because of the Lamb's liberating act and the impending demise of empire, John calls believers in Asia Minor to undertake a new Exodus: "Then I heard another voice from heaven saying, 'Come out of her, my people, so that you do not take part in her sins, and so that you do not share in her plagues'" (18:4).⁶¹ Rather than withdrawing to Patmos, believers undertake this new Exodus by rejecting *eidōlothyta* and breaking any socio-economic and political ties with the empire.⁶² Presupposing Christian communities, scholars have defined the call to exit Babylon as a separation of the righteous from the wicked,⁶³ or as divorce from an evil city and its temptations.⁶⁴ In the context of the Jewish Diaspora in Asia Minor, the summons to migrate from Babylon calls for embodying what Harry O'Maier refers to as the "subversive hybridity of exile."⁶⁵ Believers reject the imperial cult and uphold the ritual boundaries between God's people and gentiles. Because the prophets at Pergamon and Thyatira are promoting *eidōlothyta*, John suggests they are partaking in Babylon's sins and complicit in the murder of prophets and saints who believe in Jesus (17:6).⁶⁶ The fortunes of John's opponents seem to rise and fall with those of the Roman empire. According to John, Jezebel will suffer while her followers will perish (2:22–23).⁶⁷ As God judges Rome and condemns it to the flames, its vassal kings lament (18:9–10), while merchants mourn the demise of their trading partner (18: 11–19).⁶⁸ To avoid colluding with Babylon in oppression of the God's people and to avoid its impending doom, believers must heed John's call to migrate.

4.2 The wilderness

If believers embody the Exodus through a subversive rejection of *eidōlothyta*, they traverse the eschatological wilderness, rejecting false prophets and relying on God's provision of "hidden *manna*" (2:17). The wilderness wanderings comprised a territory that included (1) the Sinai Peninsula, (2) the long Arabah rift valley extending from the Dead Sea to the Gulf of Aqabah, and (3) the wilderness of Zin.⁶⁹ During this time,

⁵⁸ Beale points out that, as with the Exodus plagues, the plagues of Revelation do not lead the opponents to repentance because they are recipients of divine judgment. See Beale, *Revelation*, 476.

⁵⁹ While certain scholars have identified Egypt with Jerusalem, the "place where the Lord was killed" refers to the violent Roman world order that killed Jesus and martyred God's prophets and saints (11:8; 18:24). That John uses Babylon rather than Egypt as a symbolic name for Rome underscores the importance of migration as central theme in Revelation. It appears he sees the eschatological exodus as a primordial return from captivity to the paradise of God; namely, the Jerusalem.

⁶⁰ Although the Song of Moses does not resemble the actual song in Exodus (15:1–18), it highlights the theme of liberation and praise. Bauckham has found at least five themes of continuity between the original song in Exodus 15 and Revelation 15. See Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 99–101.

⁶¹ Just as YHWH preserved the ancient Israelites from the angel of death by splashing the Lamb's blood on the doorposts, John suggests that the conquering ones and those God has sealed will not experience the plagues (7:1–17). In doing so, John is here reinterpreting the Exodus in view of the redemptive death of Christ. See Casey, *Exodus Typology in the Book of Revelation*, 239.

⁶² Richard, *A People's Commentary of Revelation*, 135.

⁶³ Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 327.

⁶⁴ Roloff, *Revelation*, 205.

⁶⁵ O'Maier, "Coming out of Babylon," 77–8.

⁶⁶ Duff, *Wolves in Sheep's Clothing*, 75.

⁶⁷ Easley, *Revelation*, 41.

⁶⁸ While Schüssler-Fiorenza interprets this passage as a universal court scene, the symbolism of deliverance from Egypt in the book of Exodus carries just as much explanatory power. See Schüssler-Fiorenza, *Revelation*, 99.

⁶⁹ Kitchen, "Wilderness of Wandering," 1239–40.

the Israelites faced several perils and temptations that assessed their obedience and trust in YHWH. As commentators note, Revelation's promise of the hidden *manna* to the conquering ones recalls the miraculous feeding of God's people in Exodus 16.⁷⁰ Similarly, in Revelation 12, John's vision relates how God has prepared a place in the wilderness to nourish and protect the woman fleeing the Dragon for a certain period (12:6). Although commentators typically interpret the woman as the church,⁷¹ it is a reference to Israel (Song 6:10) and the persecution of the elect.⁷² Casting the colonial situation as the wilderness, John underscores that it is a time of testing, rather than an actual place where God will nourish the descendants of the woman: those who keep the word of God and the testimony of Jesus (12:17). In this context, Paul B. Duff sees *manna* as a reference to the Eucharist and thereby the body of Christ.⁷³ As God's bread of life (John 6:51), Jesus offers believers victory over the second death. Since the Lamb has enabled their migration, it will also provide for the conquering ones as they sojourn through the colonial situation.⁷⁴ However, the wilderness entails dangers from false prophets who, according to John, are leading believers into immorality and idolatry (2:14). By juxtaposing *manna* and *eidōlothyta*, John also seeks to disrupt the allure of imperial cult participation in the assemblies.⁷⁵ Thus, cultic concerns also press believers to delineate their stance regarding the rulers these foods represent.⁷⁶

In the context of the colonial situation, John turns the food polemic into a site for contesting imperial power and negotiating identity boundaries. Indeed, as Michael Dietler observes, the link between commensality and politics has made food "a central arena for the working out of colonial struggles of the colonization of consciousness and strategies of appropriation and resistance."⁷⁷ For John, the colonial situation is a wilderness that calls for patient endurance (*hupomonē*) or, as Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza translates it, consistent resistance, leading to martyrdom (2:10).⁷⁸ Although the term *eidōlolatry* occurs only twice in Revelation (21:8; 22:15),⁷⁹ John links it with *eidōlothyta* and his critique of the imperial cult. The stakes are high. On the one hand, those who refuse *eidōlothyta* and the implied worship of the beast face the death penalty (13:15). On the other, those consuming *eidōlothyta* could transgress the commandment against idolatry and dilute their identity as God's people. Is this the *blasphēmia* of those who claim to be Jews but are not (2:9b)? Were these Jews attacking the Christian community, as commentators claim,⁸⁰ or had they apostatized? With David L. Barr, I suggest that their *blasphēmia* does not entail a slander of John's community, "but rather their claim to be Jewish while participating in the trappings of idolatry – they slander not John but God."⁸¹ Reading against the grain, the so-called opponents could have seen this transgression of cultic and ethnic boundaries as a strategy to face the political realities of the colonial situation. Thus, these migrants transgressed ethical boundaries to remain in Babylon. For John, such transgression amounted to collusion with Rome and *de facto* exclusion from the New Jerusalem.

⁷⁰ *Manna* tasted like honey wafers and resembled wheat flakes (Exod 16:31). God gave it to the Israelites for forty years until they reached the promised land (Exod 16:35).

⁷¹ Morris, *Revelation*, 153.

⁷² Walvoord, "Revelation," 2957.

⁷³ Duff, *Who Rides the Beast?*, 103.

⁷⁴ This view of the wilderness as a time of testing emerges in the Apocalypse of Baruch (circa 70–135 C.E.), where *manna* emerges as a sign of provision and the messiah's advent (2 Baruch 30:1).

⁷⁵ Frey, "The Relevance of The Roman Imperial Cult for The Book of Revelation," 224–50.

⁷⁶ Stephen Friesen argues against the importation of the imperial cult into the messages to the seven assemblies. However, he does not consider how food offered to idols sets up John's broader critique of the beast's worship. See Friesen, "Satan's Throne, Imperial Cults and the Social Settings of Revelation," 365.

⁷⁷ Dietler, "Culinary Encounters," 266.

⁷⁸ Schüssler-Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation*, 191.

⁷⁹ Büchsel, εἰδωλολατρίας, εἰδωλολατρία, 380.

⁸⁰ Duff, "The Synagogue of Satan," 161.

⁸¹ Barr, "Idol Meat and Satanic Synagogues," 1–11.

4.3 The promised land

John disrupts the Roman-centered view of some in the assemblies through the topos of Promised Land, offering believers an alternative vision of the world. Recalling God's covenantal promise to lead people to a "land flowing with milk and honey" (Exod 3:17; Num 13:27; Deut 6:3), John presents the New Jerusalem as a wealthy and prosperous place, a sign of the fulfillment of God's promise to his people. He showcases a golden city decorated with all kinds of precious stones (21:18–21). Nevertheless, the Exodus to the New Jerusalem is simultaneously a return to Eden. John situates the tree of life there and promises believers will have access to it (2:7). Through *manna* and their rejection of food offered to idols, believers then symbolically engage in a reverse migration to Eden, where the highlight is the presence of God.

Thus, John's presentation of the New Jerusalem as the promised land reflects Quijano's *desprendimiento* from imperial ideologies. He draws from colonized epistemologies to articulate a more just ordering of the world. Although the New Jerusalem displaces Rome in power and splendor, Schüssler-Fiorenza notes that God's world does not mimic the Roman empire. Conversely, it establishes an ethical dualism to persuade believers "to decide against the violent and destructive power of Rome."⁸² For instance, in contrast to the death-dealing power of Rome, the New Jerusalem offers the leaves of the tree of life, which are "for the healing of the nations" (22:2).⁸³ Hence, Jackie Hidalgo suggests that, by invoking a mythic past through Exodus rhetoric, the New Jerusalem becomes a homing device, or a mobile center, that orients believers away from Roman imperial structures, even as they still live within them. In her view, the city functions as a polytemporal and polyspatial utopia that provides "a sense of power over history by writing a version of history that a dominating power has denied."⁸⁴

4.4 Constructing the other

Moreover, the New Jerusalem not only surpasses Rome in wealth and splendor but adheres to strict codes of purity, with its extremely high walls concretizing the ritual boundaries between the conquering ones and the cowardly, between Jews and those who claim to be Jews. In a clear warning for those negotiating the colonial situation through *eidōlothyta* and *porneia*, John notes that nothing impure will enter the city. To ensure that this is the case, John's New Jerusalem features impressive walls that establish precise ritual and ethical boundaries between God's people and the nations. Affirming ethnic and religious differences through shared consumption patterns, John characterizes those consuming *eidōlothyta* as dogs, sorcerers, immoral, murderers, idolaters, and liars (22:14–15). They are now foreigners and thereby outsiders.

The description of the New Jerusalem as a city with exceedingly high walls (about two hundred feet) and guardian angels stationed at the gates introduces a dualism that complicates its role as an alternative vision of the world.⁸⁵ Through its exclusion of the other, the New Jerusalem reproduces some dynamics of the empire. Whereas the conquering ones inherit and inhabit the New Jerusalem (21:7), the cowardly are outside the walls and set to burn in the lake of fire, which the author frames as a second death (21:8). Tongue in cheek, some commentators suggest that the walls imply neither the need for security nor the separation of believers from the rest of the world.⁸⁶ Eager to underscore the inclusive ethos of the city, others suggest that the gates of the city always keep their doors open.⁸⁷ Yet, it is evident that John's immigration rhetoric has inadvertently created what Albert Memmi calls a portrait of wretchedness: the

⁸² Schüssler-Fiorenza, *The Power of the Word*, 141.

⁸³ By placing the tree of life in the New Jerusalem (21:1–2), John makes the city of God interchangeable with paradise (Genesis 2:4–3:24).

⁸⁴ Hidalgo, *Revelation in Aztlán*, 91.

⁸⁵ Schüssler-Fiorenza, *The Power of the Word*, 141.

⁸⁶ Roloff, *Revelation*, 242.

⁸⁷ Mounce, *Revelation*, 397.

construction of the other as lazy, backward, or immoral, as a means of legitimating their oppression and exclusion.⁸⁸

5 Migration rhetoric and Latinx migrants

5.1 Coming into Babylon

Because of the continuing challenges of mass migration across the globe and the rising anti-immigrant ethos in the global north, we must ask how biblical interpretation informs contemporary conversations about migration and how migrants inform the Bible's take on migration. Reading John's call to undertake an exodus exposes the trauma, suffering, and dilemmas migrants face. At shelters for deportees, members of migrant caravans often share traumatizing accounts of political repression, kidnapping, and abject poverty in their countries.

Vilifying their home nation to legitimate seeking refuge in the US represents a significant dilemma. Given the long history of US interventionist policies in Latin America, how much should migrants exalt a nation contributing to their socio-political and economic instability? The CIA's overthrow of Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala and its military support for the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua are but two examples. According to Juan Gonzalez, migration to the US is, in fact, a "harvest" of the US's imperialistic policies.⁸⁹

From the historical location of migrants, therefore, John's Exodus rhetoric may appear counterproductive. It calls them not to exit the empire but to enter it, and thereby to collude in exploiting the world's peoples. Nevertheless, the socio-economic hardships are such that when Pueblo Sin Fronteras organizes a caravan, thousands of desperate families quickly join. From this location, to migrate – to abandon one's home – means to acquiesce to the empire; to stay means to resist. Read this way, those who reject John's call to embody the Exodus, who choose to work with the political realities of their time, might be resisting a double humiliation. If Rome has already destroyed their home, why should they expose the entire community to martyrdom, however glorious John makes it to be?

5.2 The dangers of the wilderness

John's migration rhetoric also speaks to three fundamental issues migrants face in the contemporary wilderness: sustenance, human trafficking, and negotiation of identity.⁹⁰ Revelation's call for believers to rely on God's *manna*, or Jesus as the bread of life, epitomizes how migrants rely on the goodwill of locals for food, but also on their faith traditions and spiritualities to sustain their way.⁹¹

However, presence of Balaamites or false guides in Revelation's wilderness draws attention to the infamous role of coyotes and issues of human trafficking in US–Mexico borderlands. In recent years, cartels and coyotes have turned to various methods to transport migrants to the US, exposing them to kidnappings, execution, suffocation in unventilated trailer trucks, drowning at the Rio Grande, and heat stroke in the Arizona wilderness. A recent Border Patrol report suggests that 245 migrants died in 2020 and that 550 died in the 2021 fiscal year (which ends in September); this represents an unprecedented increase. As Daniel C. Groody observes, several migrants have died for each mile of the 1,954-mile border; many go unburied, unrecognized, and unmourned.⁹²

⁸⁸ Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, 82.

⁸⁹ González, *Harvest of Empire*, 70.

⁹⁰ Spener, *Clandestine Crossings* 201–29.

⁹¹ Mata, "Exodus Testimonios."

⁹² Groody, *Border of Death, Valley of Life*, 14.

While uncritical readings romanticize Revelation's call to embody migration through resistance, it must be recognized that migration is a perilous journey – and one that might entail martyrdom, as John makes clear (2:10). Using Exodus rhetoric, John has framed those who have the teaching of Balaam as guides for hire. Nevertheless, the colonial situation of the Jewish Diaspora, one must wonder who is playing the coyote's role and misleading migrants. The leaders opposing John's call to embody the eschatological migration might have done so, on the grounds that this call posed significant dangers for the community.

5.3 Negotiating identity

John's debate over food offered to idols brings further attention to the function of food as a site for resisting imperial power and negotiating identity boundaries. Thus, John calls the assemblies to uphold identity boundaries by decolonizing their diet, rejecting *eidōlothyta*, and turning to *manna*. Even if not every Jew subscribed to this distinction in food consumption in the assemblies, it still buttressed Jewish ethnic identity on a daily basis.⁹³ Furthermore, John's vilification of cultic meat as idol food – as blasphemous, as something gentiles do, as something unpleasing to God – affirms how shared consumption patterns became a way for the community to articulate ethnic difference.⁹⁴

Similarly, Latinx scholars call on migrants to decolonize their diet by integrating their cultural cuisine and rejecting the American food industry, which exploits migrant workers, contaminates waterways, and puts their health at risk.⁹⁵ Evoking John's use of *manna* and concomitant mythologies, Latinx migrants appropriate Mesoamerican mythologies inscribed in their traditional foods.⁹⁶ Consumption of *maize tortillas* not only recalls the diet of Aztec or Mayan ancestors and their deities but, through a culinary *desprendimiento*, embodies a symbolic return to migrants' ancestral lands of origins: Tenochtitlan, Copan, or Wirikuta.⁹⁷

In doing so, they also resist imperialist modes of food production that erase the topology and topography of food to construct a narrative of the US as a melting pot.⁹⁸ From this perspective, a change in eating patterns among Mexican immigrants – from “huevos con chorizo” to pancakes – may signal the transgression of identity boundaries and elicit charges that one is “becoming too gringo.”⁹⁹ Hence, participation or abstinence from certain foods in the US borderlands adds concreteness to the boundaries of ethnic identity.¹⁰⁰ As the link between *manna* and Jerusalem, or *eidōlothyta* and Rome, shows, John likewise inscribes food with specific topologies and topographies. To ingest *manna* is a way to uphold John's notion of Jewishness and obtain a green card to enter the New Jerusalem.

5.4 “Walled utopias”

John's use of the promised land topos draws attention to the ambivalent role that utopias such as the American Dream play in Latinx migrant communities. On the one hand, the city is an overly wealthy place, full of gold and precious stones with a river for healing the nations. On the other, it excludes those rejecting

⁹³ Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 437.

⁹⁴ Caplan, *Food, Health, and Identity*, 10.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 12.

⁹⁶ Calvo and Rueda Esquibel, *Decolonize Your Diet*, 10.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 12.

⁹⁸ Coles, “Ingesting Places,” 6.

⁹⁹ Mintz et al., “The Anthropology of Food and Eating,” 99–119.

¹⁰⁰ Caplan, *Food, Health, and Identity*, 48.

food offered to idols. Characterizing the latter as unclean, immoral, and idolatrous, John places his opponents outside the gates. The high walls and guarding angels are there to ensure they do not enter the city.¹⁰¹

Similarly, for many migrants embracing the so-called American Dream, the United States is a promised land where migrants can find a well-paying job, buy a house and a truck, and send their children to decent schools.¹⁰² Yet, despite initial enthusiasm, most first-generation migrants eventually become disenchanted with the American Dream.¹⁰³ Green card or not, they soon realize how unpopular they are in the United States. Conservative politicians have become adept at scapegoating migrants and, as media coverage of the migrant caravans shows, migrants are often depicted as the embodiment of ignorance, disease, crime, and immorality.¹⁰⁴ The efforts of former president Donald Trump to build a wall across the US Mexico border concretized the separation between the “civilized” White European citizen and the criminal and ignorant migrants from Latin America. For Americans who subscribe to Samuel P. Huntington’s theory of a “clash of civilizations,” Latinx migrants threaten to dilute America’s core identity and Protestant values; the physical wall at the border is the last line of defense.¹⁰⁵ Racist academics also argue that Latinx immigrants have a lower IQ than Whites and would take a long time and extensive resources to reach IQ parity with Whites.¹⁰⁶ Therefore, they call for restrictions on immigration from the Global South. From the perspective of those outside the gates, John’s presentation of the New Jerusalem as a walled paradise might reinforce xenophobic views in the so-called Global North.

6 Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that John deploys Exodus rhetoric as a decolonial strategy to address the colonial situation of the seven assemblies of Asia Minor. Reconstructing the latter as Jewish diaspora communities who believed in Jesus, I suggest some believers participated in *eidōlothyta* to ease the pressure of Greek cities to acculturate and negotiate the colonial situation under Rome. Because John’s Exodus rhetoric calls for radical opposition to imperial socio-economic interests, local authorities sentenced John to Patmos as a *vagus*. Drawing on the Exodus tradition, he calls believers to come out of Babylon, embodying an eschatological migration by upholding the religious and ethnic boundaries of the community as God’s people. To persuade the assemblies, John characterizes Rome as an oppressive Egypt which God will judge with various plagues. He also frames the colonial situation of the assemblies as a wilderness, calling believers to exercise patient endurance, and calling on divine sustenance as he juxtaposes *manna* with *eidōlothyta*. To disrupt the Rome-centered view of believers in the assemblies, John uses the topos of the Promised Land to warn that those promoting food offered to idols are pursuing their own exclusion. Through his *desprendimiento* (unlinking) from Rome, John uses Jewish epistemologies to articulate alternative world visions. This migration rhetoric offers critical insights into contemporary issues faced by Latinx migrants, drawing attention to the trauma migrants experience at leaving their homes, issues of human trafficking, and their ultimate disenchantment with American utopias. As Haitian immigrants at the U.S./Mexico border wittingly point out, “We came looking for the American Dream, but under the present circumstances, the Mexican Dream will have to do.”

¹⁰¹ Mata, “And I Saw Googleville Descend from Heaven,” 320.

¹⁰² Diaz McConnell and Marcelli Enrico, “Buying into the American Dream?,” 199–221.

¹⁰³ Alba, “Mexicans and the Mexican-American Dream,” 289.

¹⁰⁴ Steinberg, “Undocumented Immigrants or Illegal Aliens?,” 109–33.

¹⁰⁵ Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” 22–49.

¹⁰⁶ Richwine, *IQ, and Immigration Policy*, 35.

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