

Roman Apocalypses

Death, Doom, and Delight in the Early Empire

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For the 2013 Oscar telecast, electronics giant Samsung produced a series of six commercials centered on a single narrative. The plot of the tale involved an IT team who were using new Samsung products to create a movie from a video game. The name of the film and game? "Unicorn Apocalypse."¹ Of course we all chuckled knowingly—wouldn't this just be the ultimate entertainment extravaganza?

But let's pause for a moment and think about what lies behind the veil of the name: the unicorn, whose origin is a wild combination of Greek tales of an Indian ass, the rhinoceros displayed in the Roman beast shows, and the King James translation of a Hebrew word for the aurochs² and whose mythology roils together the Incarnation and Passion of Christ, courtly love, chastity and marital fidelity, a panacea for poisoning, and My Little Pony; and the apocalypse, with all its rich associations. Truly a multicultural *mélange*, and for the moment a name which perfectly evokes the tenor of our times.

To a certain degree the same process that is behind the creation of the name "Unicorn Apocalypse" was at play in the creation of the Book of Revelation. Here, too, associations from a variety of sources, from a variety of cultures, were flung together to form a text that served as its own kind of "video" entertainment system.³

Since Elaine Pagels in *Revelations: Visions, Prophecy, and Politics in the Book of Revelation* has so masterfully made us aware of how Revelation was interpreted by John's community, I thought I might add to the discussion by trying to uncover how the text might have revealed itself to an average Roman citizen. Since

1. See the spots online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5fcUf4d-Y3s>.

2. We now know that the aurochs (*Bos primigenius*) survived in Europe until 1627. Its identification with the unicorn is doubtless due to artistic depictions showing the animal in profile, with only one horn visible. See, e.g., an Indus Valley steatite seal, dated 2600–1900 BCE in the British Museum (BM AN345738001). The unicorn has also been identified with other animals, of course, such as the goat (the Samsung commercials refer to this theory). The Hebrew word translated nine times by the King James translators as "unicorn" is *re'em* (Gr. *monokeros*; Vulg. *unicornis*).

3. For the importance of the visual in Revelation, see Frilingos, *Spectacles of Empire, passim*.

I intend to imagine a character who has access to all the cultural information available, that is, access to political meetings, the army, entertainments, etc., I will have to imagine a Roman citizen, that is, a male. No inclusive language here.

In the pages that follow then I'll attempt to illustrate how the natural environment of the Mediterranean and political and socio-cultural developments of the early Empire may have shaped the reactions of the ordinary Roman to John's apocalypse. I'll conclude with some comments on the imperial mythmakers.

Natural Disasters

It has been observed many times that one of the factors shaping the American view of the world is the simple fact that northern Europeans coming from a reasonably stable temperate climate crossed the Atlantic to another area with a similarly stable temperate climate. It's this fact, it is noted, which makes us discuss average temperatures or average snowfalls. If we inhabited a more chaotic environment, if we simply had a monsoon season, for example, Middle Western placidity might be seriously discombobulated.

Moreover, the American Midwest, for example, sits on a very old, very cold craton of rock (which explains the lack of mountains, e.g.). Although the most powerful earthquake in the recorded history of the eastern United States had its epicenter at New Madrid, a Missouri town near St. Louis, geologists now argue that Midwestern earthquakes are aggravated by bounce-backs of the earth's crust, depressed by the weight of the Holocene glaciers.⁴

By contrast, consider the March 2011 Japanese earthquake, caused by the subduction of the Pacific tectonic plate under the Eurasian plate, the most studied natural disaster in human history. The 9.1 quake was so powerful it jolted the earth off its axis, caused the coast of Japan to subside about three feet, and lasted a full five minutes, rather than the 10–15 seconds geologists on the scene were anticipating. The major quake launched a tsunami, which would reach a height of thirty feet when it hit the Japanese mainland. The tsunami, meeting flat farmland for miles, spread what has been estimated as one cubic kilometer or ten billion tons of water over some areas. Whole towns were carried away by the wall of debris, the waves pushed forward; others were sucked into the sea when the waves pulled back. The quake generated more than 500 aftershocks in a month, some as violent as 6.5. More than 20,000 were killed, and this in a modern prosperous country as prepared for such a disaster as any country could be.⁵

4. See Grollmund, "Did deglaciation trigger intraplate seismicity," 175–78.

5. Data on the Japanese earthquake from a *Nova* telecast, "Japan's Killer Quake," which aired March 30, 2011. See <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/earth/japan-killer-quake.html> for more information.

Now contemplate the Mediterranean basin. The Mediterranean was formed when, during the period when Pangaea, the mega-continent was splitting up, the Arabian peninsula swung up and captured part of the Tethys Sea between Eurasia and Africa. Essentially, the African continental plate—some of the oldest and heaviest rock on the planet—is crashing into the Eurasian plate at the rate of about four inches a year. Thus, the Mediterranean is one of the most seismically violent areas in the world. Greece alone, for example, annually accounts for about 15% of all the seismic events *on the planet*. The western Mediterranean is equally violent. There were thirteen quakes over 4.2 in 2012 alone in Italy, a country a little smaller than Arizona.⁶ Of the sixteen particularly dangerous volcanoes listed by the United Nations on the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction watch list, four are in the Mediterranean area, two (Etna and Vesuvius) in Italy, one in the Greek islands (Santorini).

Pagels and other commentators who date Revelation to the time of the Flavian emperors cite the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE as a possible model for the scenes of destruction in the text. This is certainly a “valence” the ancients felt; Vesuvius, as a stratovolcano, must have had an immeasurable impact on the topography, climate, and, hence, culture of the Mediterranean. When Krakatoa, between Java and Sumatra, another stratovolcano, erupted in 1883, it launched massive tsunamis and killed more than 36,000. The explosion was heard more than 3,000 miles away. The volcano ejected more than five cubic miles of material; ash was thrust more than fifty miles into the air. Average global temperatures fell, crops failed worldwide, the thirteen- and seventeen-year locusts came out early, and snow fell in summer.⁷ Global temperatures did not return to normal until 1888. Human corpses on pumice rafts washed up on the coast of Africa up to a year after the event.

It is often noted that chapters of Revelation seem to be evoking the plagues of Egypt from Exodus (7:8–12:36). It may be perhaps that John is echoing Exodus uncritically, as a sacred text with terrifying associations. But many find in the descriptions of the plagues in Exodus an evocation of the kinds of phenomena which may have been produced by a tremendous eruption of the volcano on Santorini (ancient Thera), a Cycladic island just north of Crete. A sampling of Greenland ice cores (which have never melted) and the discovery of a tree under the lava flow have permitted us to date reasonably reliably the eruption which destroyed half the island to the seventeenth century BCE (somewhere between 1627–1600 BCE). Once again, the eruption sent up massive amounts of debris that likely interfered significantly with weather worldwide. A tsunami

6. See Wikipedia, s. “List of Earthquakes in Italy.”

7. It is customary to equate the locusts of Rev 9:1–12 with the invading Parthian cavalry. As for the frequency of such occurrences in the chaos of the Mediterranean environment, please take note that on March 4, 2013, it was reported that Egypt had been overrun with some thirty million locusts.

was launched which may have affected the waters of the Red Sea. A large earthquake may have preceded the eruption.

The eruption of Vesuvius certainly left its mark on the Mediterranean, but, of course, the influence of the eruption on this text can only be adduced when we date the text to 79 CE or later. But Vesuvius isn't the only natural disaster to have occurred during the period in which we normally assign Revelation—it isn't even the only disaster to have struck the Campanian territory of Italy. Seventeen years before, in 62 CE, Pompeii and other areas were struck by a strong (5 or 6 on the Richter scale) earthquake that affected nearly all the buildings in the town. A large percentage (perhaps as much as one-third) of the population moved away. Moved away—because their homes and businesses were damaged or because they anticipated an eruption of the giant volcano looming over the area? We can't say, of course, although they must have understood the environment in which they lived. In 1956, an earthquake on the island of Santorini was enough to send more than 90% of the Greek population away.

Thus, we may argue that our Roman citizen is likely to have witnessed or heard of some cataclysmic natural disaster in his lifetime, whether he lived in the western or the eastern Mediterranean—not that it's necessary for someone to witness a natural disaster in the Mediterranean for that disaster to make its way into his/her imagination. The past record of catastrophic events pockmarks the Mediterranean landscape, and many sacred places (perhaps even the Temple Mount itself) have been sanctified by geologic or climatic upheavals. Thus, for example, Delphi is sanctified by the presence of the Phaedriades ("the Shining Rocks"), where a slab of the mountain has slid past another slab, just as if pushed by a gigantic hand. The ancients honored the geologic anomalies: the Temple of Apollo was located just where two major geologic faults cross.⁸ Elsewhere in the Mediterranean environment, sacred spots are lone hills, unconnected to mountain chains, where the earth gives off sulfurous odors, and strange creaks and bellows issue from the earth. These are unexploded volcanic caps, and the landscape of Greece, for example, is littered with them.

In other areas, it is easy to see calamitous, world-changing (world-ending?) events have taken place: when one is sailing into the harbor of Santorini, it is impossible to miss that the harbor is the caldera of a volcano—or that a new cap is forming. At some point fully one-third of Sicily's Mt. Etna was swept by lava into the Mediterranean, causing (no doubt) a huge tsunami and leaving signs of its slide to the sea. Etna, by the way, erupted explosively in 122 BCE, causing so much damage to nearby Catania that Roman officials forwent taxes for ten years. Etna has its place in the myth record: Typhon (Typhoeus), the monster defeated by Zeus, was confined under the mountain as a punishment. The duel

8. The crossing of the faults, it has been argued, created a kind of tube, through which ether-ish substances escape. This is where the Pythia's tripod was placed. See the work of Hale and de Boer, "New Evidence," 707–11.

of Typhon and Zeus is the Greco-Roman version of the duel of the *Enuma Elish*, which Pagels evokes as a model for the heavenly war chapters of Revelation.⁹

Another geological phenomenon that may have contributed to Mediterranean myths of the end-times: the bedrock of the Mediterranean is, for the most part, limestone, a porous easily eroded stone. Mediterranean hillsides collapse in periods of heavy rain, often revealing layers containing the remains of extinct animals. The bones of giant mammals or dinosaurs were often taken as the bones of giant humans (it's possible to rearrange the bones of almost any large animal into a shape which appears human), thus giving rise to myths of titanic battles between gods and giants or other supernatural beings, which end in the destruction of one world or period of this world. We know of such instances from the historical period. Plutarch reports that after the Persian War Kimon recovered the gigantic bones of the Athenian hero Theseus and brought them back to the city; it is generally assumed the bones were of some prehistoric giant mammal or dinosaur.¹⁰

Tales of world-ending calamity somehow feel at home in such an environment. Thus, for example, the Santorini eruption is thought to have been recorded in the myth record, not only of the Greeks and Hebrews, but of peoples as far away as the Chinese (the *Bamboo Annals*; ca. 1618 BCE).¹¹ Similarly, it was likely to be expected that it would be Hollywood, the crown of California with its chaotic geology and bizarre climate (there have been hundreds of tornados in Los Angeles—did you realize that?), which would produce films like our *Unicorn Apocalypse*.

The Political Context

But when Zeus had driven the Titans from heaven, huge Earth bore her youngest child Typhoeus of the love of Tartarus, by the aid of golden Aphrodite. Strength was with his hands in all that he did and the feet of the strong god were untiring. From his shoulders [825] grew a hundred heads of a snake, a fearful dragon, with dark, flickering tongues, and from under the brows of his eyes in his marvellous heads flashed fire, and fire burned from his heads as he glared. And there were voices in all his dreadful heads [830] which uttered every kind of sound unspeakable; for at one time they made sounds such that the gods understood, but at another, the noise of a bull bellowing aloud in proud ungovernable fury; and at another, the sound of a lion, relentless of heart; and at another, sounds like whelps, wonderful to hear; [835] and again, at another, he would hiss, so that the high mountains re-echoed. And truly a thing past help would

9. Pagels, *Revelations*, 24–25. Hesiod's description of the battle (*Theogony* 820–52) clearly describes earthquake and tidal wave activity. Further, see below under The Political Context.

10. Plutarch, *Theseus* 36.1–2.

11. The destruction of Santorini (Thera), which hosted an advanced culture with ties to Minoan Crete, is thought by many to have been the model for Plato's Atlantis. See Friedrich, *Fire in the Sea*, *passim*.

have happened on that day, and he would have come to reign over mortals and immortals, had not the father of men and gods been quick to perceive it. But he thundered hard and mightily: and the earth around [840] resounded terribly and the wide heaven above, and the sea and Ocean's streams and the nether parts of the earth. Great Olympus reeled beneath the divine feet of the king as he arose and earth groaned thereat. And through the two of them heat took hold on the dark-blue sea, [845] through the thunder and lightning, and through the fire from the monster, and the scorching winds and blazing thunderbolt. The whole earth seethed, and sky and sea: and the long waves raged along the beaches round and about at the rush of the deathless gods: and there arose an endless shaking. [850] Hades trembled where he rules over the dead below, and the Titans under Tartarus who live with Cronos, because of the unending clamor and the fearful strife.¹²

This is Hesiod's (ca. 700 BCE) description of the battle of Zeus and Typhoeus (Typhon), derived most likely from that oldest of sources, the *Enuma Elish*, just as parts of Revelation are.¹³ Note that in this "multivalent" text there are political aspects as well. Zeus, aided by his mother Rhea, has staged a *coup d'état* and deposed his father and his father's siblings (and, incidentally, his own older brothers). In retaliation his grandmother (Earth) has brought forth another contender for the throne, Typhoeus. Before Zeus and the Olympians can settle down to a peaceful reign, Zeus must fight off an ancient Not-So-Bonnie Prince Charlie. On the political side, it's harem wars. Can Hesiod (or the *Enuma Elish*, for that matter) have been coding real political events into a mythological narrative? We'll likely never know. But Hellenistic poets like Apollonius (called the Rhodian) and Roman poets like Vergil and Horace clearly are doing just that.¹⁴

Thus, it is perhaps a commonplace in the general Mediterranean culture to commemorate change of regime with tales of earth-shaking and -shattering portents and with human events echoed in otherworldly battles and with human great men replaced by supernatural combatants. If we assume Revelation was composed toward the end of the reign of Domitian (81–96 CE), our Roman citizen would have a number of names and events to plug in as correspondences to elements of the text. The Republic has yielded to the Empire; Julius Caesar has come to power after defeating Pompey the Great (who added Judaea to the Empire); Caesar was, in turn, assassinated; Mark Antony and Cleopatra take over the eastern Empire (attempting to reproduce the empire of Egypt at its greatest historical extent—which included Judaea and Patmos); Antony

12. Hesiod, *Theogony* 820–52 (trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White, from the Perseus website <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>). Note that it is obvious an earthquake and tsunami are being described.

13. See Pagels, *Revelations*, 24–25 and "Natural Disasters" above. The *Theogony* is also influenced by such texts as the Hittite song *The Kingship in Heaven* and other songs of the Hittite-Hurrian Kumarbi Cycle.

14. See The Socio-Cultural Context below.

and Cleopatra are defeated at the Battle of Actium by Octavian/Augustus and Agrippa; Augustus established the Principate as a hereditary monarchy; the Julio-Claudian dynasty produces Tiberius, the infamous Caligula, and the Beast Nero¹⁵ Nero is forced out of power and commits suicide; four emperors arise in a single year (69 CE); Vespasian, up from the legions, establishes himself as emperor, marching on Rome from Jerusalem, which he was preparing to besiege when news of Nero's death arrived; Vespasian's son Titus is the first emperor to have succeeded his father; Titus celebrated a triumph for his conquest of Jerusalem; Vespasian's son Domitian succeeds his brother and demands to be addressed as *dominus et deus* ("lord and god"); Domitian was assassinated, with the collusion of the senatorial class, and a *damnatio memoriae* declared.¹⁶

It is generally acknowledged that John's Jewish Christian readers identified Babylon (Rev 14:17), the Whore of Babylon (Revelation 17), the Beast from the sea (Rev 13:1–10), etc., with Rome in the wake of the conquest of Jerusalem (70 CE). But in this multivalent text it's not so easy, perhaps, to plumb the readers' point of view: as Pagels quite rightly points out,¹⁷ it was the oppressed provincials who put up those cruel monuments to Roman conquest at Aphrodisias, to curry favor with their new overlords. By contrast, it's the Roman emperor Hadrian (r. 117–138 CE) who has put on the cuirass of his statue in the Athenian Agora the wolf suckling the founders of Rome, Romulus and Remus—with Athens' Athena standing on top, not prone gnawed to death by the wolf.

As for our Roman citizen, his feelings on reading such an abstruse and evocative text are perhaps more complex than we might have thought. Let's consider, for example, the point of view of the great author and Augustan propagandist Vergil. Vergil, although an Italian, came to adulthood in a time and place that suffered from the tramp of the legions as much as any site in the Near East.

15. That Revelation refers to Nero is widely accepted. Some aspects of Nero's life and death certainly seem to be shaping the text: (1) after the great fire of Rome in 64 CE, Nero, having condemned Christians as arsonists (they talk about Romans burning, remember), sent many to the beasts (sewing them up in animal hides and loosing dogs on them, e.g.) or to other *outré* displays (using them as torches in the imperial gardens); (2) Nero, pursued by the imperial guard who intended to assassinate him, is supposed to have committed suicide with bungled and cowardly ineptitude; (3) although Nero was in fact deposed by the Roman senatorial class, he had been a favorite of the plebeians since his golden boyhood, and it was widely rumored that he was still alive or would return in glory from the dead. A mishmash of these factors may have led John's community to regard him as a Roman messianic figure to rival a Jewish messiah. Thus, Nero becomes the Beast. The use of "666" or "616" (in some manuscripts) as the name of the Beast is then explained as Jewish numerological code for the name "Nero".

16. Domitian's assassination was nearly bungled when he lived long enough to wrestle Stephanus, one of the assassins. Stephanus and his concealed dagger play a big part in Suetonius' account in *Domitian* 17. Rev 13:3 contains a reference to one who appeared to receive a deathblow but was healed. It's usually thought to be a reference to Nero's suicide or to Julius Caesar's assassination, but Domitian's death may have been thought to qualify as well.

17. Pagels, *Revelations*, 13.

From the assassination of Julius Caesar, the armies of the Second Triumvirate—the extra-constitutional alliance of Octavian, Caesar’s grand-nephew who would become the Emperor Augustus, Mark Antony, Caesar’s lieutenant, and M. Aemilius Lepidus, Caesar’s master of the horse—raged across Italy, forcing peaceful farming communities into conflict and starvation. This is the context of Vergil’s *Eclogues*, ten poems published in 37 BCE which only pretend to be about the lives of simple shepherds. Indeed, it was assumed in antiquity that in this work Vergil was lamenting the loss of his own family’s farm when the veterans of Antony and Octavian were resettled on his land after 42 BCE.

Italy in the period of the civil wars endured social and political disruption on a major scale, the product of three forces which might also have had an impact on Judaea before and after the destruction of the Temple: competing armies living off the land; “enemies” lists of the victors which brought the knock on the door in the middle of the night and armies of informers; and retired legionaries paid in farmland confiscated from the conquered. The siege of the city of Perusia (in north-central Italy, modern *Perugia*) might be taken as emblematic: while Octavian’s troops sat in siege around the town, food was allotted on a graduated scale, with slaves receiving none. They could be seen outside the walls foraging for grass. After the city capitulated it was burned, perhaps on Octavian’s command.

Vergil’s works, although ostensibly justifying the seizure of power by the Julio-Claudians, display subtle sentiments, even toward the Emperor Augustus. The *Aeneid*, especially, must not be thought to be a glorification of Imperial stormtroopers nor an uncritical encomium of Augustus’ deeds and policies. It is a complex and ambiguous work, with plenty for the victims of Empire as well as for the victors. And, you may recall, the *Aeneid* is a standard school text by the time of Nero or Domitian. So, our Roman citizen, it could be argued, has been trained to hold in mind contradictory points of view, to hunt with the hounds and run with the hares. Thus, ironically, some of the condemnations and cursings of Revelation might be thought to have an appeal to a Roman who longed for the Republic or who had chosen Pompey over Caesar or Antony over Octavian or to an upstart plebeian family like that of Vespasian.¹⁸

Moreover, just as we saw in that passage of Hesiod with which we began, if dynastic squabbles are being represented in literature and art as battles of the gods and giants—or angels or other beings with super powers—an ordinary citizen might be justified as seeing these conflicts as the doings of his social superiors, as the unmitigatedly insane operations of those patrician idiots. If

18. Vespasian was supposed to have been descended from an ordinary Roman legionary who rose to centurion. The writers of the HBO *Rome* series may have had this in mind when they gave Ray Stevenson’s character the name Titus Pullo (Vespasian’s mother’s name was Vespasia Pullo)—it’s possible in later years they intended to make his and Cleopatra’s son the ancestor of Vespasian.

so, he may not be reading Rome (i.e., himself and his pals) as Babylon, but the upper-class precincts of Rome as Babylon, not himself and his pals as Beasts, but the dynasts who bleed Rome white with their extravagances. Thus our ordinary Roman might very well feel himself allied with a Jewish population who've been declassed in the Empire: the ordinary Roman has been demoted, too. Let's keep in mind that, although we're clearly an "evil empire"—in the words of Ronald Reagan's speech to the National Association of Evangelicals—we persistently see ourselves as those courageous, armed farmer/revolutionaries . . . those Tea-Partiers.

The Socio-Cultural Context

Some aspects of Roman civilization seem to align nicely with ideas expressed in Revelation. For example, as Donald Kyle (*Spectacles of Death*) reminds us:

Both Romans and Christians understood punishment and vengeance beyond death. The punishments that Christian writers record or predict for their persecutors reflect traditional Roman patterns of abuse and damnation, but with their final scene being the fire of hell. (p. 254)

Thus, it might be argued that our ordinary Roman has been prepared all his life to anticipate that after death he might have the delight of witnessing the torment of his enemies.¹⁹ In fact, some Roman social institutions reflect this thinking, the most prominent being the Roman practice of the *devotio*, as described in the early Empire text of Titus Livius' *History of Rome* (8.9.3–12)

[3] in the beginning the strength of the combatants and their ardour were equal on both sides; but after a time the Roman *hastati* on the left, unable to withstand the pressure of the Latins, fell back upon the *principes*. [4] in the confusion of this movement Decius the consul called out to Marcus Valerius in a loud voice: "we have need of Heaven's help, Marcus Valerius. come therefore, state pontiff of the Roman People, dictate the words, that I may devote myself to save the legions." [5] The pontiff bade him don the purple-bordered toga, and with veiled head and one hand thrust out from the toga and touching his chin, stand upon a spear that was laid under his feet, and say as follows: [6] "Janus, Jupiter, Father Mars, Quirinus, Bellona, Lares, divine Novensiles, divine Indigites, ye gods in whose power are both we and our enemies, and you, divine Manes, —I [7] invoke and worship you, I beseech and crave your favour, that you prosper the might and the victory of the Roman People of the Quirites, and visit the foes of the Roman People of the Quirites with fear, shuddering, and death. [8] as I have pronounced the words, even so in behalf of the republic of the Roman People of the Quirites, and of the army, the legions, the auxiliaries of the Roman People of the Quirites, do I devote the legions and auxiliaries of the enemy, together with myself, to the

19. This would be in contrast to, e.g., the Homeric view of life after death, where only those criminals who have offended the gods in face-to-face encounters suffer punishment.

divine Manes and to Earth.”[9] having uttered this prayer he bade the lictors go to Titus Manlius and lose no time in announcing to his colleague that he had devoted himself for the good of the army. [10] he then girded himself with the Gabinian cincture, and vaulting, armed, upon his horse, plunged into the thick of the enemy, a conspicuous object from either army and of an aspect more august than a man’s, as though sent from heaven to expiate all anger of the gods, and to turn aside destruction from his people and bring it on their adversaries. [11] thus every terror and dread attended him, and throwing the Latin front into disarray, spread afterwards throughout their entire host.

Livy here is recording an event that may have taken place at the battle of Sentinum in 295 BCE, as the Romans fought a coalition of Samnites and Gauls. What’s happened here is this: the consul P. Decius Mus, seeing his army falter, has formally and with appropriate ritual language and dress dedicated himself to the gods of the underworld. He then rides into the enemy’s ranks. When he is killed, the enemy will suffer the wrath of the underworld—he will effectively be leading the enemy to hell.

A wild-eyed figure on horseback, dressed in the shining white of the toga, carrying the enemy off to hell, in a kind of reverse rapture—how very apocalyptic. It might be argued Rev 19:11 with its rider ritually prepared and dressed is ringing a change on the Roman model. What may also be significant are the circumstances of the reportage of this incident. Livy is for the most part reasonably indifferent to historical fact we usually argue; he’s engaged in a work of propaganda to shore up the Julio-Claudian dynasty.

As for political suicide among the Romans (we call it martyrdom when the Christians do it), there is a conspicuous example during the period of the composition of Revelation. In 69 CE, the year of the Four Emperors, the year that may be commemorated in this text by the Four Horsemen, Otho, one of the four, is supposed to have committed suicide after losing a battle, although his adherents were resolved to fight on. He is thought to have said, “It is far more just to perish one for all, than many for one” and the next day to have plunged a dagger directly into his heart.²⁰

Moreover, it might be argued that Revelation conveys a delight in its visions of violence, the delight of a spectator at the gladiatorial combats, beast shows,

20. This would make him another possible candidate for the victim of the sword mentioned in Rev 13:3. See above, n. 16. Further on Otho and political suicide, see Plass, *The Game of Death*, 81–84 *et passim*.

Otho has a place in the literature of the Empire as well. Martial, during the reign of Domitian, produced this epigram (6.32):

Although the goddess of civil warfare was still in doubt,
And soft Otho had perhaps still a chance of winning,
He renounced fighting that would have cost much blood,
And with sure hand pierced right through his breast.
By all means let Cato in his life be greater than Julius Caesar himself;
In his death was he greater than Otho? (tr. Wikipedia, s. Otho)

or, it might be argued, land and sea battles staged in the imperial arenas.²¹ In fact, although it is often argued that Revelation is told from God's point of view, we might also note that, as entertainment, the pageant of the end times is viewed from the best seats in the house, that is, the emperor's point of view.²²

It happens to be in vogue just now to discuss how Judeo-Christian propagandists (although commentators generally don't call them that) co-opted the cultural structures of the Empire and reinterpreted them for ecclesial use.²³ Some scholars have also equated the visions of Revelation with arena entertainments.²⁴ What I would like to contribute to the discussion is some speculation on why the early Judeo-Christian communities might have chosen to condemn the arena performances while aping their emotional effects in performance texts such as Revelation.²⁵

As for why the Judeo-Christian communities despised the games, it is important to remember that the games are a significant part of the Roman religious apparatus. Gladiatorial combats, for example, first performed in Rome in 264 BCE, are connected with Etruscan funerary ritual, dispatching prisoners of war, slaves, or criminals as attendants in the afterlife for an honored chief.²⁶ Moreover, by the early Empire, beast shows and gladiatorial combats often depicted episodes from Greco-Roman myth, such as the death of Hercules and the castration of Attis, which were witnessed by Tertullian.²⁷ Obviously, practitioners of monotheistic religions must be kept from these enticing spectacles.

But the author of Revelation is not just deploring the brutality of Roman entertainments; he is on some level creating his own version of the very entertainments he condemns. Now it has often been argued that this is yet another example of the Judeo-Christian communities' coopting the structures of the Roman imperial apparatus to construct an Empire of God to rival the Empire of the Caesars. But Revelation is not a simple text with straightforward intentions;

21. There were by 1994 five Roman amphitheaters dating to the second and third centuries CE excavated in the area of Roman Palestine.

22. See Pagels, *Revelations*, 39 and refs.

23. For excellent general discussions, see Crossan, *God and Empire*. For a lucid (if conservative) summary on Paul and the emperor cult, see Oakes, "Re-Mapping the Universe."

24. For Revelation as a reinterpretation of arena entertainments, see, e.g., Frilingos, "Spectacles of Empire"; Murray, "Urban Earthquake Imagery"; and, in particular, Stratton, "The Eschataological Arena."

25. Here I use the phrase "performance text" because, as you may recall, one way or another the ancients eschew silent reading: either they've heard a text read aloud at a dinner party, e.g., or they themselves are reading the text aloud as an aid to working through documents riddled with holes or blotched with impurities. Both of these cases contribute to the interpretation of the text.

26. The single combat between Spartacus (Kirk Douglas) and Antoninus (Tony Curtis) before Crassus (Laurence Olivier), Caesar (John Gavin), and assorted legionaries in the 1960 *Spartacus* (directed by Stanley Kubrick) is Hollywood's take on the oldest form of the ritual.

27. Tertullian, *Apologeticus pro Christianis* 15.4 (repeated at *Ad nationes* 1.10.47). See also Coleman, "Fatal Charades," *passim*.

as Origen exclaimed (*De principiis* 4.2.4), “Who can read the revelations granted to John without being amazed at the hidden depths of the ineffable mysteries?”

Our Roman citizen, for example, might be delighted by Revelation for the same of the same reasons he’d be delighted by the great games: (1) it’s real, but not real at the same time. For the most part, performances have more in common with WWF wrestling than with witch-burnings or even with Dempsey vs. Tunney. When it costs so much to train a gladiator, for example, why waste him?²⁸ (2) enemy combatants are social no-accounts: slaves, prisoners of war, condemned criminals, bankrupts, members of a group not your own, in an us-and-them culture;²⁹ Revelation’s readers are unlikely to find themselves in the same room with the likes of Nero, for example—the bad guys can be demonized, like the inhuman armies of Ahriman or of *Lord of the Rings*, for that matter; (3) performances of myths with sexy overtones are titillating—Dirce and the Bull, for example, an actual Roman scenario which is ably portrayed by Deborah Kerr and Buddy Baer (Max’s heavyweight boxer brother) in the 1951 *Quo Vadis?* The Roman performance was no more real than the film or than the description of heavenly battles in Revelation. The linking of sex and violence is a commonplace in Greco-Roman art and popular culture—and in the Bible as well. As for Revelation, picture the Whore of Babylon (played by some Roman Lady Gaga perhaps) onstage in the Circus Maximus; (4) it’s an opportunity for social bonding: scenarios often portray the triumphs of the Empire, the triumphs of the people. Our Roman citizen, dressed in his group-identifying toga at the games, is invited to exult in the successes of his people. Revelation clearly also acts as a mechanism for group-formation; (5) the Romans believed the games had psychological benefits for the spectators, such as inspiring bravery and self-sacrifice.³⁰ Our Roman may well feel himself stronger, tougher, and more deserving after a performance; Revelation aims for the same effect.

28. It was the lanista Lentulus Batiatus’ staging a fight to the death at the gladiatorial school that sparked Spartacus’ rebellion—the gladiators don’t expect necessarily to die. If they can stay alive for three years, they become trainers for a time, and then are awarded their freedom. Remember, for the most part, they’re condemned criminals. Spartacus’ rebel gladiators are Gauls and Germans (likely prisoners of war) new to the Roman system, or they might have seen gladiatorial success as the road to wealth, freedom, and feminine attention. See Friedländer, *Roman Life and Manners*, 2.240–90.

29. In a society where most men have been trained for the army, gladiator can seem a reasonable career choice. Gladiators can retire from the arena (after only three years) with significant amounts of money; it is not uncommon for Romans, even Roman patricians, to resign their class status to recoup their financial losses. See once again Friedländer, *Roman Life and Manners*, vol. 2.

30. We tend to focus on the scenarios reported by the Christian fathers (such as Tertullian, above), all of which apparently involve some innocent, passive Christian devoured by some monstrous beast. But, even if the Christian fathers are correct (and there’s no particular reason to assume they are), we have to suppose the Christians pushed into the arena had the same deal offered everyone else: they were provided the wherewithal to fight the beast or the opponent—otherwise there’s no show at all. Punishment is clearly an aim of the shows

The question for commentators to tackle, in my view, is this: did Revelation imitate the Roman spectacles to condemn them or to provide a substitute that would pull the same strings, play to the same urges—on a budget? In other words, is it only the lack of the resources of a state that prevented John's community from staging Revelation as an arena show, with heretics as fallen angels and bladders filled with pigs' blood for special effects?

Propaganda for a New Empire

The arena shows were always a venue for political propaganda, of course, even from that long-ago day in 264 BCE when they were first introduced to Rome. That gladiators fought in honor of the anniversary of the death of a notable ancestor of one of the great families was an amplification of the reputation of someone who sooner or later would be a candidate for public office. It is probably no coincidence, then, that the shows increased in number and extravagance during the political dueling of Julius Caesar or that sometime in the second century CE such shows would come to be presented 175 days a year. After all, as the direct political involvement of the Roman citizenry faded, the games became an assembly of all the citizens, became the one place for emperors to test the mood of the mob.

But the establishment of the Empire and of the Julio-Claudian dynasty also required high-culture propaganda, as the emperor Augustus well knew. Some of the mythologizing emphasized in this period of Roman history may also have proved useful for those who were busy instituting the Empire of God.

One of the most prominent Julio-Claudian myths dealt with the clan's descent from the goddess Venus through her son Aeneas, the son of Prince Anchises of Troy. Aeneas was thought to have led a desperate band of the last survivors of Troy out of the burning city with his crippled father on his back and holding the hand of his son Ascanius (also called Iulus or Julius; the name of the clan is derived from his).³¹ Aeneas is also depicted as carrying the Lares and Penates or the Palladium, all sacred objects of Troy, out of the city.

It was this sketchy tale that Augustus commissioned the great poet Vergil to weave into a foundation myth for a new dynasty, a new Rome. Vergil cast Aeneas as a new kind of hero, a hero with a mission, a messianic hero, we might say, who would take the conquered and scattered "leavings of the Greeks and of savage Achilles" (*reliquias Danaum atque immitis Achilli* 1.30) on a diaspora

involving condemned criminals, but the Romans, as a fighting people, admire courage—and skill—as well. The shows are teaching moments, too.

Other scenarios have very little to do with punishment as reenactments of how our brave cavalry defeated lions or the Parthians or how our brave sailors triumphed in a sea battle, etc. Again, teaching moments or training films.

31. A denarius coin of Julius Caesar dated to 47–46 BCE has Venus on the obverse, Aeneas carrying Anchises out of Troy on the reverse (vroma.org, s. "Palladium").

across the Mediterranean to found a new Troy, a new Jerusalem, we might say, in Italy.

In the course of spinning his tale, Vergil describes the destruction of Troy (Venus is speaking to Aeneas):

You do not hate the face of the Spartan daughter of Tyndareus, nor is Paris to blame: the ruthlessness of the gods, of the gods, brought down this power, and toppled Troy from its heights. See (for I'll tear away all the mist that now, shrouding your sight, dims your mortal vision, and darkens everything with moisture: don't be afraid of what your mother commands, or refuse to obey her wisdom): here, where you see shattered heaps of stone torn from stone, and smoke billowing mixed with dust, Neptune is shaking the walls, and the foundations, stirred by his mighty trident, and tearing the whole city up by its roots. There, Juno, the fiercest, is first to take the Scaean Gate, and, sword at her side, calls on her troops from the ships, in rage. Now, see, Tritonian Pallas, standing on the highest towers, sending lightning from the storm-cloud, and her grim Gorgon breastplate. Father Jupiter himself supplies the Greeks with courage, and fortunate strength, himself excites the gods against the Trojan army. Hurry your departure, son, and put an end to your efforts. I will not leave you, and I will place you safe at your father's door." She spoke, and hid herself in the dense shadows of night. Dreadful shapes appeared, and the vast powers of gods opposed to Troy. (2.601–20)³²

Here, a century earlier, Vergil has created his own mini-Revelation, dispelling with Venus the cloud (*omnem . . . nubem*), which hides the battles of the gods from us. Here, too, a mighty city falls to cruel conquerors from the western sea, but the magical mother will save her son for greater deeds.

In Book 8, Vergil casts the battle of the gods as an omen of the future (we know the event took place before the omen, but does our Roman citizen?):

In the centre bronze ships could be seen, the Battle of Actium, and you could make out all Leucate in feverish preparation for war, the waves gleaming with gold. On one side Augustus Caesar stands on the high stern, leading the Italians to the conflict, with him the Senate, the People, the household gods, the great gods, his happy brow shoots out twin flames, and his father's star is shown on his head. Elsewhere Agrippa, favoured by the winds and the gods leads his towering column of ships, his brow shines with the beaks of the naval crown, his proud battle distinction. On the other side Antony, with barbarous wealth and strange weapons,

32. Translation by A. S. Kline (poetryintranslation.com).

conqueror of eastern peoples and the Indian shores, bringing Egypt,
 and the might of the Orient, with him, and furthest Bactria:
 and his Egyptian consort follows him (the shame).
 All press forward together, and the whole sea foams,
 churned by the sweeping oars and the trident rams.
 They seek deep water: you'd think the Cycladic islands were uprooted
 and afloat on the flood, or high mountains clashed with mountains,
 so huge the mass with which the men attack the towering sterns.
 Blazing tow and missiles of winged steel shower from their hands,
 Neptune's fields grow red with fresh slaughter.
 The queen in the centre signals to her columns with the native
 sistrum, not yet turning to look at the twin snakes at her back.
 Barking Anubis, and monstrous gods of every kind
 brandish weapons against Neptune, Venus,
 and Minerva. Mars rages in the centre of the contest,
 engraved in steel, and the grim Furies in the sky,
 and Discord in a torn robe strides joyously, while
 Bellona follows with her blood-drenched whip.
 Apollo of Actium sees from above and bends his bow: at this
 all Egypt, and India, all the Arabs and Sabaeans turn and flee.
 The queen herself is seen to call upon the winds,
 set sail, and now, even now, spread the slackened canvas.
 The lord with the power of fire has fashioned her pallid
 with the coming of death, amidst the slaughter,
 carried onwards by the waves and wind of Iapyx,
 while before her is Nile, mourning with his vast extent,
 opening wide his bays, and, with his whole tapestry, calling
 the vanquished to his dark green breast, and sheltering streams. (8.675–713)³³

Ah, yes, Cleopatra, the Whore of the Nile, who lured poor Mark Antony into
 another Roman civil war.³⁴

Here she is again, in an ode by another of Augustus' propagandists, Horace:

It would have been wrong, before today, to broach
 the Caecuban wines from out the ancient bins,
 while a maddened queen was still plotting
 the Capitol's and the empire's ruin,

with her crowd of deeply-corrupted creatures
 sick with turpitude, she, violent with hope
 of all kinds, and intoxicated
 by Fortune's favour. But it calmed her frenzy

33. Translation by A. S. Kline (poetryintranslation.com).

34. It would have been impolitic to villainize Mark Antony, since he was the father by Octavia, Augustus' sister, of Antonia, the mother of the emperor Claudius, grandmother of the emperor Caligula, and great-grandmother of Nero.

that scarcely a single ship escaped the flames,
 and Caesar reduced the distracted thoughts, bred
 by Mareotic wine, to true fear,
 pursuing her close as she fled from Rome,
 out to capture that deadly monster, bind her,
 as the sparrow-hawk follows the gentle dove
 or the swift hunter chases the hare,
 over the snowy plains of Thessaly. (*Od.* 1.37)³⁵

From these examples, I think it's clear our Roman citizen was primed for the imagery and action of Revelation. That he may have understood John's work in a different way than the members of John's community may not have concerned John or his imitators. The question that remains is, was Revelation shaped by John or later writers deliberately to play to Roman associations and sensibilities?

Conclusion

I've tried here to suggest some ways we might link the message of Revelation more directly to Roman cultural values and to speculate on how an ordinary Roman might understand John's text. This is an exercise that I think might prove instructive for the future of the Early Christianity Seminar.

35. Translation by A. S. Kline (poetryintranslation.com).

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