

## AMAZON AND REVELATION 18\*

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*Abstract: This paper explores the extent to which a post-colonial reading of Revelation 18 might offer a critique of Amazon. To begin the paper, explores aspects of an empire and the considers the degree to which Amazon fulfils these. After concluding that Amazon can appropriately be described as an empire, the paper then considers a post-colonial reading of Revelation 18, concluding that understanding Revelation 18 as an economic critique of Rome is a faithful reading of the text. The paper concludes by considering how Revelation 18 might then be used as a critique of Amazon.*

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### **Introduction**

With the company's logo depicting a smile pointing from A to Z, Amazon makes a subtle but clear statement that it is a company that has and does everything. As the company grows, it continues to find new ways to live up to the promise in its branding. Amazon was incorporated in 1994, by founder and CEO Jeff Bezos.<sup>1</sup> It began as an online bookseller and sold its first book in 1995. It quickly expanded into selling other products and eventually became an online marketplace where other companies could sell their products as well. Through internal investment and acquisitions, it now has multiple companies and divisions in a host of industries, including books, cloud computing, delivery, entertainment, payment, smart home devices, and shopping.<sup>2</sup> As of April 2021, it had a total value of USD 1.68 trillion.<sup>3</sup> It operates in 19 different countries and regions, ranging from North and South America, Europe, Asia, the Middle East and Australia.<sup>4</sup> It has produced incredible wealth for the top shareholders, especially Jeff Bezos, whose net worth is USD 197.8 billion and who has often been the world's richest man since first becoming so in 2017.<sup>5</sup> Amazon's reach is vast and growing.

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of writing, Bezos remains the CEO of Amazon, but has announced that he will be stepping down from the post in the second half of 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Alina Selyukh, "[How Big is Amazon? Its Many Businesses in One Chart](#)," NPR, 13 November 2018. This list shows 46 different companies or divisions owned and operated by Amazon.

<sup>3</sup> "[Amazon.com Inc.](#)," MarketWatch, Accessed 22 April 2021.

<sup>4</sup> This is taken from a drop-down [menu](#) on the Amazon website, accessed 15 December 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Forbes, "[Jeff Bezos](#)," Accessed 18 April 2021.

Size and expanse such as this warrant investigation. There are many ethical questions related to wealth inequality, environmental impact, democracy, privacy, and extraction of wealth that arise when considering the size, scope, actions, and wealth of Amazon. This study aims to consider to what extent a post-colonial reading of Revelation 18 might be useful in critiquing Amazon. In the initial section of this paper, I first establish a framework of empire using literature from Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt,<sup>6</sup> Néstor Míguez, Joerg Rieger, and Jung Mo Sung,<sup>7</sup> and Shoshana Zuboff.<sup>8</sup> I will then consider the extent to which Amazon can accurately be described as an empire. In assessing Amazon, literature and research from the Institute for Local Self-Reliance will be examined as a primary source, with additional supplementary sources. I will argue that, because Amazon meets the five aspects of empire identified to a high or moderate extent, it is right to consider Amazon an empire.

Having established this, the next section will examine Revelation 18, using Rohun Park's post-colonial interpretation.<sup>9</sup> I will also draw on the work of Richard Bauckham<sup>10</sup> and, too, the work of Allen Callahan.<sup>11</sup> In this section, I will also review alternative interpretations and consider the important image of the harlot in Revelation 18. This chapter will argue that there is evidence to read Revelation 18 as an economic critique of Rome.

In the final section, I will offer my conclusions on the efficacy of a post-colonial reading of Revelation 18 being used to critique Amazon. I will argue that it can effectively be used due to the presence, nature, and effect of a synergy of destructive practices being present both within Amazon and Rome, as well as the relationships surrounding Amazon being similar to relationships of the character of the harlot in Revelation 18. I will then consider the nature of the critique that it offers, namely related to the issue of participating in destructive economic practices.

### ***Amazon and Empire***

In this section, I argue that Amazon can rightly be described as an empire. In the first major subsection, I establish an understanding of Empire in contemporary times as capitalism.

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000).

<sup>7</sup> Néstor Míguez, Joerg Rieger, and Jung Mo Sung. *Beyond the Spirit of Empire* (London: SCM Press, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (London: Profile Books, 2019).

<sup>9</sup> Rohun Park, "Revelation for Sale: An Intercultural Reading of Revelation 18 from an East Asian Perspective," *The Bible and Critical Theory* Vol. 4 No. 2 (2008).

<sup>10</sup> Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> Allen Callahan, "Apocalypse as Critique of Political Economy: Some Notes on Revelation 18," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 21:1 (1999).

After this, I will introduce Shoshana Zuboff's important work in identifying surveillance capitalism as the new chapter of capitalism today.<sup>12</sup> After exploring these, I will identify five key aspects that constitute an empire. In the second major subsection, I will then examine the extent to which Amazon fulfils these aspects. These five criteria are the convergence of multiple elite and powerful interests, the extraction of wealth, the creation and management of the world an empire takes over, a disregard for boundaries, and the presentation of itself as an inevitable eternal order. In conclusion, I propose that there is a high degree to which Amazon can rightly be described as an empire, both in its role in Empire as capitalism and in the ways in which it fulfils these aspects.

#### Understanding Empire and Aspects of an Empire

In the course of this section, there are two similar yet distinct concepts of empire. The first is *Empire*, which is, in one instance, what Negri and Hardt name "capitalist globalization."<sup>13</sup> Míguez et al. name it as "late financial capitalism."<sup>14</sup> This has since developed into a new chapter of capitalism called *surveillance capitalism* which Shoshana Zuboff introduces, even though she does not call it Empire. The second concept is *empire*, by which I mean to name imperial entities generically and broadly. As I consider the extent to which Amazon can be described as an empire in this second sense, I will do so based on the extent to which it fulfils the five aspects of *empires*, one of which includes its role within *Empire*.

#### Understanding Empire

The Accra Confession was written by the delegates of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches in 2004 and provides a good basis for understanding the broader concept of empires. Néstor Míguez, Joerg Rieger, and Jung Mo Sung use this definition to describe Empire. The confession defines an *empire* as the following: "(t)he convergence of economic, political, cultural, geographic, and military imperial interests, systems, and networks for the purpose of amassing political power and economic wealth. Empire typically forces and facilitates the flow of wealth and power from vulnerable persons, communities, and countries to the more powerful."<sup>15</sup>

Míguez et. al make the important point that these factors and interests are best realized when in tension with one another, holding each other in check so that they do not become all-

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<sup>12</sup> Zuboff, *The Age*.

<sup>13</sup> Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri. "Empire, Twenty Years On," *New Left Review* 120 (Nov/Dec 2019): 76.

<sup>14</sup> Míguez, Rieger, and Jung, *Beyond*, 10.

<sup>15</sup> "[Accra Confession: Covenanting for Justice in the Economy and the Earth](#)," page 10. Accessed on 4 March 2021.

consuming and too powerful.<sup>16</sup> Yet in Empire, they converge and are controlled by the “same project or understanding of power,” which creates something different and more powerful than when these are all in tension.<sup>17</sup> These multiple interests and powers are brought together for the shared purpose of ruling in service to Empire. The three authors write, “The public sphere is submitted to the coercion of this united force, which is ready to control everything, impose its order, and impede the access of others to decision-making spaces. In a nutshell, they convert the public sphere into a game on a restricted playing field that they already dominate.”<sup>18</sup>

The convergence of powers that Míguez et. al see is capitalism which holds primacy over everything, regardless of and transcending any specific political and governing forms, and without limitations of nation-states, culture, and other traditional boundaries. As they write, “everything must adapt its existence according to the capitalist business framework and the consumer society.”<sup>19</sup> This capitalist force leads people to view everything through the lens of market value.<sup>20</sup>

It is important to identify the driving force of capitalism. Consumerism and materialism are often said to be responsible but Joerg Rieger disagrees. He writes that identifying consumerism or materialism as the culprit of capitalism does not suffice as it focuses too much on individuals.<sup>21</sup> He writes that capitalism is fuelled by desire, but that desire is created by production. The desire is “not self-generated but has to be produced by dominant economic interests to keep production going.”<sup>22</sup> These dominant economic interests are more responsible for Empire’s totality than individuals’ consumerism.

At the time of these authors’ writings, there was a significant shift beginning to take place in the history of capitalism. A new chapter was emerging, one that was equally or perhaps even more imperial as the iterations of capitalism before it. This is identified by Shoshana Zuboff as *surveillance capitalism* and a brief discussion of it is critical in understanding Empire today and in considering the saliency of describing Amazon as an empire.

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<sup>16</sup> Míguez, Rieger, and Jung, *Beyond*, 5.

<sup>17</sup> Id, 5.

<sup>18</sup> Id

<sup>19</sup> Id, 10.

<sup>20</sup> Id.

<sup>21</sup> Joerg Rieger, “Reshaping Desire at Deeper Levels,” *Concilium: Christianity, Consumerism and the Market* (2014/4), 34.

<sup>22</sup> Id, 37.

### Shoshana Zuboff and Surveillance Capitalism

Shoshana Zuboff's book, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, names and describes this latest chapter in the evolution of capitalism. This is a new economic order that seeks to "unilaterally claim human experience as free raw material for translation into behavioral data."<sup>23</sup> These behavioral data, accumulated at scale, then become commodified and sold to the many companies willing to pay large sums of money for what become predictions of human behavior. However, it does not stop there, as surveillance capitalists then try to not just predict but modify future behavior through a new form of power she calls "instrumentarian power." This power does more than just know, commoditize, and predict human behavior; it also shapes and directs human behavior to the surveillance capitalists' benefit.<sup>24</sup>

In her article "Surveillance Capitalism and the Challenge of Collective Action," Zuboff succinctly articulates two key points. First, she writes that surveillance capitalism is now spread across a "vast and varied range of products and services" having "birthed a burgeoning surveillance-based economic order."<sup>25</sup> Any company using data from human behavior to predict or modify future behavior is a participant of surveillance capitalism. This includes supermarket loyalty schemes that track purchases and offer deals on particular products or future purchases, music streaming websites that suggest other music a user might wish to listen to, or smart watches collecting health and physical activity details in order that the user might receive a discount on health insurance premiums. Surveillance capitalism has entered many consumeristic spheres. As Joseph Bongiovi writes, "Nearly every organization is mining, storing, or controlling data, then using it to manipulate and control us."<sup>26</sup>

The second point that Zuboff makes is that "surveillance capitalism is not technology; it is a logic that imbues technology and commands it into action."<sup>27</sup> The technology does not inherently require that the data be used or collected, let alone be commodified and sold. It is not the

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<sup>23</sup> Zuboff, *The Age*, 8.

<sup>24</sup>This is all a simplified summary of Zuboff, *Surveillance Capitalism*, 8.

<sup>25</sup> Shoshana Zuboff, "Surveillance Capitalism and the Challenge of Collective Action." *New Labor Forum* Vol. 28 (1) (2019): 10.

<sup>26</sup> Joseph Bongiovi, "Review of *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* by Shoshana Zuboff," *Social Forces*, 98:2 (December 2019): 2.

<sup>27</sup> Zuboff, *The Age*, 15.

technology that requires retention and commodification of the information, but the capitalist logic itself.<sup>28</sup>

Zuboff frequently uses language of empire and conquest in relation to surveillance capitalism. For instance, she refers to the actions of Christopher Columbus and the use of “declarations” as a way to create a new reality.<sup>29</sup> For the people whose land Columbus invaded, this was a new reality in the sense that they were then to be subservient to a monarch they had never heard of. She likens this to what Google did in the early 2000s when it “invented” surveillance capitalism. In examining Zuboff’s work, Keith Breckenridge argues that her “analysis presents cyberspace as a virgin legal domain in which the pioneering companies – like the former colonial powers and their mining allies – are able to define and usurp the resources because they precede the law and regulation.”<sup>30</sup> Google had in part created and in part discovered a new property that hitherto did not exist and then it declared that this new property was theirs for the taking and began monetizing it by turning it into a commodity for exchange. As a result, she writes that “we are the native peoples now whose tacit claims to self-determination have vanished from the maps of our own lives.”<sup>31</sup>

This is a bold claim and one that warrants the substantial critiques brought against it. Quinn Slobodian argues that it diminishes the suffering that traditional colonization has inflicted on many people, and Catherine Liu points out the absence of perspectives from social positions other than Zuboff’s privileged one.<sup>32</sup> However, what is important here is how Zuboff identifies surveillance capitalism as a new type of imperialism. She identifies this commoditization of human behavior through surveillance technology as a new chapter of capitalism. While she does not claim that capitalism in former iterations were imperial as Negri and Hardt and Míguez et al. do, she describes the actions of surveillance capitalism in imperial language.

Not only is this important because this is Empire today, but it is also helpful as Amazon is truly a capitalist company. It has benefited from financial capitalism, as it received strong financial

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<sup>28</sup> Zuboff, *The Age*, 15. Also Zuboff, *Collective Action*, 10.

<sup>29</sup> Zuboff, *The Age*, 175-179.

<sup>30</sup> Keith Breckenridge, “Capitalism without surveillance,” *Development and Change* 51:3 (2020): 923.

<sup>31</sup> Zuboff, “Collective Action”, 14.

<sup>32</sup> For two examples, see Quinn Slobodian, “The False Promise of Enlightenment,” *Boston Review* 44: 3 (2019): 141-155 and also Catherine Liu, “The Enemy of Democracy,” *American Book Review* 40:6 (2019): 9-10.

backing from Wall Street and was founded by someone who began his career on Wall Street.<sup>33</sup> It then has become a leader in surveillance capitalism.

### Aspects of an Empire

With this understanding of Empire as it manifests itself in contemporary times as capitalism, I now turn to consider the aspects of what constitutes an empire that I will use to assess the extent to which Amazon can rightly be described as an empire. These five aspects are a conglomerate of various descriptions of empire from the sources consulted. The first aspect comes from the Accra Confession mentioned above. Key to the constitution of an empire is that it features the convergence of multiple interests and powers. There is a synergy and cohesion that takes place, where multiple parts form something new that is greater than the sum of its parts. The multiple interests and powers are brought together for the benefit of the ruling center of the empire.

The second aspect, which is also woven into the definition from the Accra Confession, is the common action of empire in extracting wealth from its subjects. Míguez et al. describe this as “exploitation of the resources of conquered nations, which fundamentally benefits the governing elites of the imperialist power, leads to increasing internal accumulation that, in turn, ends up upsetting the configuration of power within the metropolis.”<sup>34</sup> In simpler terms, Walter Brueggemann writes that empires “exist to extract wealth in order to transfer wealth from the vulnerable to the powerful.”<sup>35</sup> Given the simplistic terms he uses, he is not being as precise as Míguez et al. in his description. Yet, while his argument could be more nuanced, Brueggemann’s simplistic language carries the same sentiment.

The third aspect is that empires operate at all levels of society, “manag(ing) a territory and a population but also creat(ing) the very world it inhabits.”<sup>36</sup> An empire takes over particular places, territories, and people, but it also goes further and creates the world in which people live. It is not enough to conquer those peoples and let them be what they once were; instead, an empire seeks to dictate how the people in the conquered territory live. The purpose and the motivation for this might vary, but the main point is that empires manage and create the world they inhabit.

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<sup>33</sup>“[Jeff Bezos Biography](#),” Accessed 4 March 2021.

<sup>34</sup> Míguez, Rieger, and Jung, *Beyond*, 7.

<sup>35</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *God Neighbour Empire: The Excess of Divine Fidelity and the Command of Common Good* (London: SCM Press, 2017), 2.

<sup>36</sup> Negri and Hardt, *Empire*, xv.

The fourth aspect is that empires disregard traditional boundaries and work to remove any that exist. When discussing Empire, Negri and Hardt assert that it is de-territorializing and de-centralized and that its rule extends everywhere.<sup>37</sup> However, this assertion is difficult to maintain. There has to be some limit, as is argued by Ian Angus.<sup>38</sup> Angus writes that Empire absolutely does have boundaries and points out that while Negri and Hardt argue that resistance from Empire needs to come from within, the existence of an “inside” requires an “outside.”<sup>39</sup> While Hardt and Negri do accurately point out the invasive nature of Empire, and thus describe an important aspect of what constitutes empires, they would do well to acknowledge that there are still boundaries. With Angus’ critique in mind, I have identified this aspect of an empire as a *lack of respect* for boundaries rather than saying an empire has no boundaries.

The final aspect is an empire’s presentation of inevitability. Again, writing about Empire, Negri and Hardt write that it “presents its order as permanent, eternal, and necessary.”<sup>40</sup> An empire suggests an inevitability about itself, the way it develops, and the power it holds. In simpler words, an empire dictates there is no other possible way things could be. It may or may not be known by the ruling elite that the empire is not eternal or inevitable. But the key here is that it *presents* itself as such.

I will now turn to assess the extent to which the five key aspects of empire described here can be attributed to Amazon and its practices. I do this while taking account of the wider context within capitalism in which Amazon has grown, with particular reference to surveillance capitalism.

#### The Efficacy of Naming Amazon an Empire

*Convergence of Multiple Interests.* The first aspect of empire suggests that an empire features a convergence of interests. Amazon’s profile reflects this, having a large number of products and services all converging into one powerful entity. Amazon produces television and films. It publishes books as well as designs and sells digital devices. The company underwrites loans, delivers restaurant orders, and sells a growing share of internet advertising. With Amazon Web Services, it has government contracts to manage the data of US intelligence agencies and hundreds of other companies. It operates Twitch, the world’s largest streaming video game

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<sup>37</sup> Id, *Empire*, xiv.

<sup>38</sup> Ian H. Angus, "[Empire, Borders, Place: A Critique of Hardt and Negri’s Concept of Empire](#)," *Theory & Event* 7:3 (2004).

<sup>39</sup> Id

<sup>40</sup> Negri and Hardt, *Empire*, 11.



platform. It manufactures a growing number of products, is in the grocery business, and is venturing into healthcare.<sup>41</sup> This list is not exhaustive. Many of these are separate industries that do not have much to do with each other. Yet, Amazon is involved in each of them and is often a leading competitor.

The convergence of interests within Amazon is demonstrated in the company's success through both horizontal and vertical integration. Horizontal integration is when companies in the same or a similar sector integrate.<sup>42</sup> This is what supermarkets have done by combining butchers, fishmongers, cheesemongers, grocers, and bakeries. One of the advantages of combining businesses like this is that companies can often lower prices on particular products or services because they have profit to gain in other areas. Vertical integration is when a company "acquires another business operating in the production process of the same industry."<sup>43</sup> An example of this would be Apple creating its own stores in which to sell Apple products rather than using other electronics retailers. Amazon has been very successful at both; each relate to the convergence of interests.

One of the ways in which Amazon has succeeded at horizontal integration is by taking profits from one portion of their business and using it to lower prices in another. But beyond simply lowering profit margins, it has engaged in predatory pricing. This is when a company sells products at cost price or at a loss in order to undercut competitors. Amazon has done this repeatedly. Because it has had substantial financial backing, it was able to operate for years while making no or minimal profit. Amazon can afford to take the money it earns and invest it in other parts of the company.<sup>44</sup> Often this investment takes the form of losing money on a particular item in order to gain market share. For example, this was done against established competitors in the e-book industry. When the Kindle e-book reader was introduced, "(Amazon sold) many titles for less than it was paying publishers... Since potential challengers were unable or unwilling to incur similar losses, Amazon was able to amass and hold 90 percent of the market for e-books."<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Stacy Mitchell, "The Empire of Everything," *Nation*, 306: 7, 23.

<sup>42</sup> "[What is Horizontal Integration?](#)" Corporate Finance Institute. Accessed 19 April 2021.

<sup>43</sup> Id.

<sup>44</sup> Rani Molla, "[Amazon's Tiny Profits, Explained](#)," VOX, 24 October 2019. As this article explains, Amazon generates much money in sales and have a large cash flow, but the profits have often been very minimal or even negative. Thanks to impressive Wall Street backing, this has been possible.

<sup>45</sup> Olivia LaVecchia and Stacy Mitchell, "[Amazon's Stranglehold: How the Company's Tightening Grip is Stifling Competition, Eroding Jobs, and Threatening Communities](#)," Institute for Local Self-Reliance, November 2016, 15.

This tactic has also been used to directly attack other businesses. Zappos, a popular online shoe company in the 2000s, refused to sell to Amazon when approached to do so. After the refusal, Amazon introduced their own shoe website and began selling those shoes at a loss and offering free, fast shipping. Amazon lost USD 150 million in this endeavor. But it succeeded. Zappos tried to match the prices and shipping but then began incurring losses on every purchase and eventually sold to Amazon.<sup>46</sup> Amazon survived the ordeal due to its immense cash flow through sales and financial backing. Zappos, on the other hand, was out of business. Predatory pricing is a business action that is only available to a small number of businesses. The size of Amazon, the diversity of products and services that it provides, and the financial backing it has secured allows for it to undercut other businesses.

One of the ways in which Amazon has succeeded in vertical integration is by providing infrastructure. Amazon is often thought of as a retailer. However, Stacy Mitchell, co-director of the Institute for Local Self-Reliance, points out this is a misplaced assumption, seeing it instead as an infrastructure company. She writes, “Bezos has designed his company for a far more radical goal than merely dominating markets; he’s built Amazon to replace them. His vision is for Amazon to become the underlying infrastructure that commerce runs on.”<sup>47</sup> Rather than only competing in a particular industry, the company’s actions indicate that it seeks to create the infrastructure for the industry. Amazon has done this in online retail by creating the infrastructure on which 1.9 million sellers actively sell their products, as well as being a retailer itself.<sup>48</sup> Another industry in which it provides the infrastructure is cloud computing. Amazon Web Services (AWS) hosts approximately 40% of the world’s computing services, far more than other cloud computing companies.<sup>49</sup>

Another part of Amazon’s vertical integration success has been its creation of Fulfillment by Amazon (FBA). FBA is a service provided by Amazon for its sellers. Those who sign up have their goods stored, packaged, and shipped by Amazon.<sup>50</sup> This program began in the United States

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<sup>46</sup> Id, 16.

<sup>47</sup> Stacy Mitchell, “The Empire of Everything,” 24.

<sup>48</sup> “[Numbers of Sellers on Amazon Marketplace](#),” Accessed 11 March 2021.

<sup>49</sup> Jeff Desjardins, “[The Impressive Stats Behind Amazon’s Dominance of the Cloud](#),” Visual Capitalist, 8 July 2019. This figure was as of mid-2019 from the article listed. Other figures from a similar time suggest somewhere between 30-50% of the world’s cloud computing services are run by AWS.

<sup>50</sup> Zach Freed, Ron Knox, and Stacy Mitchell, “[Amazon’s Monopoly Tollbooth](#),” Institute for Local Self-Reliance, July 2020, 7.

in 2006 but was not used very widely until Amazon Prime membership grew significantly in popularity from 25 million members in 2013 to 112 million by 2019.<sup>51</sup> Using FBA ensured that products would be eligible for Prime and also made it more likely that a third-party seller's products would be the first default choice in a search. So, as Mitchell writes, "In effect, Amazon made a seller's ability to generate sales on its marketplace, which dominates e-commerce traffic, contingent on buying Amazon's warehousing and shipping services" which is shown by the fact that eighty-five percent of the top ten thousand sellers on Amazon rely on Prime and FBA shipping.<sup>52</sup>

This marriage of FBA and Prime has created a new revenue stream for Amazon. This has been done without competing for service on warehousing and shipping services, but simply because of the dominance Amazon enjoys from the amount of traffic in e-commerce and the power to make or break a business based on product placement on search results. By compelling sellers to use FBA through threat of not attracting Prime members or being placed low down on search results, rather than being better on price and service, Amazon has become a top logistics provider, already overtaking the United States Postal Service in parcel volume.<sup>53</sup> This is where the convergence of interests is a crucial factor. It takes its power in multiple sectors and brings that together to create another lucrative stream, taking business in a new sector or different point in the production process away from other companies, even those who outperform Amazon on service and price. As Amazon succeeds at providing the infrastructure for these and other industries, the interests and wealth from them all converge toward Amazon, even those that the company is unable to dominate or does not decide to infiltrate.<sup>54</sup>

Being large and having a vast array of products and services *per se* does not constitute imperial qualities. But through Amazon's success in both horizontal and vertical integration, the vast array has converged and synergized to create power and wealth for the company. This is what sets it apart from other monopolies or large companies and is what has led to its dominance. Because of this, Amazon meets this aspect of empire to a high degree.

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<sup>51</sup> Id. Again, these particular numbers are from the United States. FBA is a service offered in a growing number of other countries as well.

<sup>52</sup> Id.

<sup>53</sup> Id., 8.

<sup>54</sup> For example, the company gains value and money from charities who use Amazon Web Services.

*Extraction of Wealth: Exploiting Sellers and Workers.* The extraction of wealth and exploitation of resources is another key aspect of empires. Amazon has found multiple ways to do this, which sets it apart from other companies. Broadly, this is done through siphoning money from a wide variety of economic streams. In an interview on the podcast “Why is This Happening?” Stacy Mitchell says that Jeff Bezos sees the world from a “Wall Street point of view.”<sup>55</sup> According to Mitchell, Bezos views the world as streams of wealth and his goal is to siphon off profit from as many of those streams as possible. Anywhere that there is money being made, Bezos wants to have the ability to take a share of it.<sup>56</sup> One of the ways Amazon does this is by providing the infrastructure on which so much business and commerce takes place, as described above. Of course, barring Bezos actually saying that explicitly, Mitchell’s words here are somewhat speculative. However, her perspective is very illuminating. Where money is being made, Bezos has designed Amazon to be able to redirect some of that money to himself and Amazon’s stakeholders. More specifically, there are two significant ways in which Amazon extracts wealth that I will now discuss.

Amazon’s first exploitive practice is aimed at its marketplace vendors. Amazon, both literally and metaphorically, extracts wealth and resources from its third-party sellers. The money that Amazon takes from each sale from a third-party seller averages up to approximately 30% of Amazon’s revenue. In 2019, this amounted to nearly USD 60 billion.<sup>57</sup> These fees come in three main ways. First, there is what are referred to as “referral fees,” which is what any seller must pay to sell on Amazon. Most of these are set at a rate of 15% of the sale. A fee like this is not unusual, but what is surprising is that this rate has stayed the same for 20 years. This suggests there is little competitive need to lower their referral fees, likely due both to no other online marketplace coming close to Amazon’s size and the inability of third-party sellers to demand or affect change to this fee. The other two ways Amazon takes fees from their sellers are through two optional services, FBA and sponsored product advertising.<sup>58</sup> Freed et. al describe this as coercion, stating that “sellers

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<sup>55</sup>Chris Hayes, “[Amazon’s Wish List with Stacy Mitchell](#),” *Why is This Happening?* Podcast Audio, 22 January 2019. This is at the 42:15-minute mark.

<sup>56</sup> Id, 42:15-43:00

<sup>57</sup> Freed, Knox, and Mitchell, *Monopoly Tollbooth*, 3.

<sup>58</sup> Id, 7, 9.

who buy them are given much more favourable position on the site and thus are significantly more likely to make sales,” meaning practically, they are necessary for success.<sup>59</sup>

Amazon takes more than just money from their third-party sellers. It also takes and uses knowledge and expertise. Amazon capitalizes on this by gaining third party sellers’ “product knowledge, market insights and entrepreneurial drive.”<sup>60</sup> Amazon does not have to incur all the costs of researching products or creating and storing inventory, nor does it carry the liability of goods not selling.<sup>61</sup> So in many cases, a third-party seller does the work of starting a business by creating and selling products. If a seller chooses to sell on Amazon, the platform can siphon money off the top of these sellers’ profits and collect the data on their sales. With the data collected, Amazon can see which products are most lucrative and manufacture its own rival products and sell those at a lower price or with higher exposure than the original third-party product. It can then leave the less lucrative products for the third-party sellers to continue selling, while still collecting a fee on the transaction.

Amazon can also extract money that could otherwise be in the hands of customers. Amazon penalizes companies that sell their products on another platform for less than the price on Amazon. “(I)f Amazon detects a lower price for a product elsewhere, it will suppress visibility and sales of the item on its site by demoting it in search results, deleting its Prime badge, or removing the ‘buy now/add to cart’ buttons from the product page.”<sup>62</sup>

An example of all of the above is Viahart, a toy company with a tiger toy priced on Amazon at \$150. Given the fees that Amazon requires from Viahart in order to sell with them and have good placement in search results, Viahart has to pay nearly \$40 to Amazon for each tiger sold, even though Viahart is the one doing most of the work behind the scenes. It is possible that Viahart would have to pay \$40 in advertising and marketing to sell their toy on another platform or in another manner. However, if Amazon’s pricing scheme were not so restrictive, Viahart might be able to sell this toy for a lower price on its own website and either make more profit or pass on the savings to customers who use more than just Amazon. Amazon, just one of multiple platforms that Viahart might choose for selling its products, uses its size and customer base to demand that it is

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<sup>59</sup> Id, 3.

<sup>60</sup> Id, 4.

<sup>61</sup> Id, 4.

<sup>62</sup> Id, 7.

the platform that sells the Viahart toy at the lowest price. If Viahart violates this demand, it will be punished with barriers put up between customers and its products. Thus, Amazon has restricted how Viahart conducts part of its business on every platform, not just Amazon's. Amazon uses its dominance in one arena, in this case the dominance that comes with 60% of online shopping in the United States beginning on its website rather than a search engine, to impose order on how business is conducted even outside Amazon's platform.<sup>63</sup> However, Viahart chooses to sell on Amazon, and this comes with terms that Amazon create, like any contract with a selling platform. But because of Amazon's size and power, it can impose rules and an order beyond its own platform that benefits only itself, which suggests it is similar to the actions of an empire.

This is highly exploitative. In effect, Amazon builds its business and wealth on the backs of others. Rather than the existence and presence of Amazon producing more for another industry or business in a symbiotic relationship, it reduces and detracts from other businesses. Because of its size and dominance, it can extract wealth from the work of others, without risk to Amazon itself. If the third-party sellers' businesses are weakened, there are other businesses and workers to pick up what is lost. "Thanks to these third-party sellers," writes Sandeep Vaheesan, "Amazon offers a dazzling array of products while not bearing the risk of poor sales and mostly avoiding the legal liabilities from defective and dangerous products. Amazon enjoys control without responsibility."<sup>64</sup> This is the practice of empire, being able to extract wealth from those under its control without having to worry about any negative consequences to their production. If they fail to produce, others will be provided to take up the slack. This is another characteristic of Amazon that significantly sets it apart from other monopolies.

This aspect is also present in the wealth inequality within Amazon, whose treatment of its employees is no less abusive than its relations with its third-party sellers. Despite the CEO being the richest man in the world, 4,000 warehouse employees in nine states of the United States rely on governmental food assistance programs.<sup>65</sup> This is because, according to Richard D Wolff, "the value added by those workers is greater than the value paid to them as wages, and that's the surplus value that is accruing... to the employer."<sup>66</sup> There is great wealth generated by the employees of

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<sup>63</sup> Id, 3.

<sup>64</sup> Sandeep Vaheesan, "[Imagining a Democratic Amazon](#)," *Democracy Journal*, 16 July 2020.

<sup>65</sup> Matt Day and Spencer Soper, "[Amazon Has Turn a Middle-Class Warehouse Career into a McJob](#)," *Bloomberg*, 17 December 2020. This has come even with a \$15 minimum wage for Amazon employees.

<sup>66</sup> Arvind Dilawar, "[Amazon is the Best Argument Against Capitalism](#)," *Pacific Standard* 7 February 2019.

Amazon, but they do not receive it. This is a form of wealth extraction, with company leaders and investors taking what they themselves did not produce. Of course, not all employees will be paid the same given the skills required and the responsibility of each position, but for there to be such a discrepancy between the CEO and the lowest paid workers – that is, that in the same company are the world’s richest person and employees on government food assistance programs – suggests that there is wealth being extracted or inequitably distributed. Additionally, when Amazon employees use government funds to subsidize their non-liveable wages, Amazon indirectly takes wealth from taxpayers as well.

Given how Amazon extracts wealth from as many revenue streams as possible, exploits the work of the third-party sellers, and withholds value from those who earn it within the company, all without negative consequence to themselves, I believe that Amazon also meets this component of empire to a high degree.

#### Manages and Creates

The third aspect is that empires manage territories and seek to create and shape the world they inhabit. Financial capitalism established this by creating insatiable desire in many people through its continual production. Surveillance capitalism now does this by using data to predict and modify human behavior. Capitalism has made anything liable to becoming monetized, commodified, and consumed. It has created a world in which humans are seen primarily as consumers of goods, products, services, and entertainment. The human subject is only as valuable as she is able to participate in the market.<sup>67</sup> As Míguez et al. write, “human relationships are now measurable in terms of commodities and become structured like the relation of commodities.”<sup>68</sup> Having money is what is required to be human in this system.<sup>69</sup> This is a way in which Empire creates the world it inhabits. It is so pervasive that it changes and forms people.<sup>70</sup>

In thinking about Amazon as a particular empire, I do not think Amazon has done this too significantly. Undoubtedly, given its size and dominance in so many sectors, it has changed and influenced the way others operate parts of their business, such as pricing restrictions in the example of Viahart mentioned above, or inducing many other companies to offer fast, free-to-the-customer

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<sup>67</sup> Míguez, Rieger, and Jung, *Beyond*, 10.

<sup>68</sup> Id, 36-37.

<sup>69</sup> Id, *Beyond*, 12.

<sup>70</sup> Chapter 2 of *Beyond the Spirit of Empire* focuses on how consumerism shapes subjectivity.

shipping. However, it does not seem that changing the way business is done *per se* is part of Amazon's goals or strategy. Rather, its focus seems to be capitalizing on how business is done in any possible way it can. For instance, Amazon did not create the internet or the idea of online commerce but took incredible advantage of this relatively new territory for its own benefit.

Where Amazon *is* a key player in managing and creating the world in which "its subjects" live is through surveillance capitalism. Amazon has joined Google, Facebook, and Microsoft in collecting vast amounts of behavioral data with the introduction of Alexa, their artificial intelligence and personal assistant interface, as well as other data collected on search and sales histories of users. Their introduction of Alexa has been aggressive, having opened its development "to third-party developers in order to expand the assistant's range of skill."<sup>71</sup> Alexa is sold as a service to any company who wants to integrate it into their products, all for the purpose of data gathering.<sup>72</sup> For instance, Amazon has formed an alliance with BMW and Ford to integrate Alexa into their cars.<sup>73</sup> It also has integrated Alexa into appliances, new building contracts, and hotels, and it is seeking ways to travel beyond just the home speaker or through a car's dashboard, with the introduction of earbuds, glasses, and rings.<sup>74</sup> In this way, Amazon is again creating an infrastructure through which other companies can participate in surveillance capitalism, while of course being a top surveillance capitalist itself.

While Amazon may have not adopted this aspect of empire in the business sphere, it is playing a significant part in the wider Empire of surveillance capitalism that is shaping and managing human behavior. Amazon is, as Míguez et. al put it, "a particular 'incarnation' of the wandering spirit of Empire."<sup>75</sup> Whether this is for the goal of creating and shaping the world, or to simply make as much money as possible, Amazon has fully embraced surveillance capitalism and is one of the leading proponents. Therefore, regardless of the extent to which Amazon meets this criterion of "empire," its role in and adoption of the spirit of Empire satisfies this criteria.

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<sup>71</sup> Zuboff, *The Age*, 267.

<sup>72</sup> Id., 267.

<sup>73</sup> Ted Karczewski, "[Ford Announces In-Car Alexa Integration, New Alexa Skill](#)," Amazon Developer, 5 January 2017,. Also, "[BMW Connected with Alexa](#)" Group 1 Automotive website, accessed 4 March 2021.

<sup>74</sup> Brian Barret, "[Amazon Won't Stop Until Alexa's Always with You](#)," *Wired*. 25 September 2019.

<sup>75</sup> Míguez, Rieger, and Jung, *Beyond*, x.



### Disregard for Boundaries

The fourth aspect to consider in regard to Amazon is its disregard for boundaries. There are two main ways in which this is articulated in how Amazon configures itself today. First, as has already been discussed, Amazon is a company with a vast range of services and products, involved in a large array of industries. It does not operate within the traditional boundaries of a single company staying in a single industry. Additionally, it extracts wealth from multiple economic streams stepping beyond typical business structures found in other enterprises.

Secondly, its international presence and operations in nineteen countries indicate a disregard for boundaries too. It may be useful to use an example of another well-known company and imagine it doing the multitude of things that Amazon does in all of the places to see how unusual Amazon is. Taking the United Kingdom's supermarket chain Tesco as the company acting like Amazon, it would, for example, have a warehousing service in the United Arab Emirates, start a clothing line sold in Brazil, open bookshops in Canada, develop an electronics company in Australia, and manage the data and computing servers for the MI5 Security Service.

It seems as though there is no sector or economic stream or even country that Amazon does not or eventually cannot reach. However, while Amazon is pervasive and has a lot of control over the business of its sellers, it does not control everything and, as Angus cautions, there is a limit to an empire. Not everyone shops on Amazon. Not every business sells on Amazon. It is not in most countries. Its limitations noted, I contend that Amazon fulfils this aspect of empire to a moderate degree due to its lack of regard for boundaries.

### Presentation of Inevitability

The fifth aspect of empire is the sense of inevitability implicit in the declaration that its order is enduring, true, and how everything was always meant to be – that it is “permanent, eternal, and necessary.”<sup>76</sup> I suggest that Amazon does tell a story like this, but also knows that it might not be permanently powerful, given the reality of the harsh capitalist world in which it operates.

In response to those that are critical of Amazon's negative effect on the book business, Bezos said, “Amazon isn't happening to the book business. The future is happening to the book business.”<sup>77</sup> This suggests that Amazon is presenting itself as necessary, to use Míguez's word.

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<sup>76</sup> Negri and Hardt, *Empire*, 11.

<sup>77</sup> Brad Stone, *The Everything Store: Jeff Bezos and the Age of Amazon* (London: Corgi Books, 2014), 28.

Bezos is revealing an interesting narrative here – a narrative that Amazon is telling the world and itself as to why it is acceptable to be what it is. It suggests that Amazon is simply embracing the future. There is a sense of inevitability in what Bezos says here about what Amazon has done and become – it had to happen because of where the future was always destined to go. This allows Amazon to shirk responsibility for the destructive and forceful actions that it takes. It does not account for the fact that its practices have historic precedent and seem rather antiquated. Instead, it makes the Amazon model appear to be the way business was always heading.

Despite this narrative to describe Amazon’s journey as inevitable, Bezos is also aware of its fragility, recognizing that the business world can change. He says, “When you are small, someone else that is bigger can always come along and take away what you have.”<sup>78</sup> This statement appears to make it sound as if Amazon’s actions and large size are a defensive tactic. Surely, Bezos knows his company is the one coming along and taking what others have. Nonetheless, it suggests that he knows that Amazon may not always have the power it does now.

This appears to be limited evidence on which to judge the extent to which Amazon fulfils this criterion. However, these statements seem to be paradigmatic and informative of how Bezos understands and presents Amazon. Thus, coupled with Amazon’s practices, I think they are valuable to this discussion. Given that Bezos presents Amazon as having an inevitable future but acknowledging the limitations of basing this on two quotes, I believe that Amazon meets this aspect of empire to a moderate degree.

### Conclusion

Because Amazon meets three of these aspects to a high degree and two to a moderate degree, I contend that we can appropriately describe Amazon as an empire. The three aspects which most convincingly argue for naming Amazon an empire are the convergence of interests, the exploitation of others through extraction of wealth, and its role in capitalism, particularly surveillance capitalism. Amazon is set apart from other companies largely due to the convergence of multiple interests and its ability to exploit others and extract wealth from so many streams. Also, Amazon plays such a significant role in surveillance capitalism, which is a strong imperial force at work in the world today. Along with meeting the other two aspects of empire to a moderate extent, these suggest that Amazon can appropriately be described as an empire. Having established

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<sup>78</sup> Stacy Mitchell, “Empire of Everything,” 24.

this framework for understanding Amazon, and the broader context of capitalism in which it has arisen, I now turn to discuss Revelation 18.

### ***Revelation 18 as an Economic Critique of Rome***

In this section, I will examine Revelation 18 and consider the validity of reading it as an economic critique of Rome. After introducing the book of Revelation, I will take the themes and reading of Revelation presented by the post-colonial scholar Rohun Park to discuss the text.<sup>79</sup> I will also incorporate the work of other authors to substantiate my argument. I will then consider two alternate ways of interpreting Revelation 18. Before concluding, I will discuss the image of the harlot from Revelation 17-18 as further evidence that reading Revelation 18 as an economic critique is appropriate. This discussion of the harlot will also assist in determining the nature of the critique itself.

The book of Revelation was written towards the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE to both Jewish and Gentile audiences. It is addressed to seven churches across Asia Minor. Its literary genre is mixed. As Michael Gorman and Judy Diehl both agree, “Revelation is simultaneously an apocalypse, a prophecy, and a letter.”<sup>80</sup> As an apocalypse, Revelation is a document that is “political in nature, with highly symbolic images and coded messages that pointed to hope and liberation for those who understood the author’s meanings.”<sup>81</sup> As a prophetic text, Revelation is a book that speaks challenge and comfort to God’s people, particularly the seven churches to which it is written.<sup>82</sup> Gorman writes, “The target of Revelation’s prophetic critique is imperial idolatry (civil religion) and injustice (military, economic, political, and religious oppression), and specifically Rome’s imperial idolatry and injustice.”<sup>83</sup> As a letter, this is an epistle to seven churches throughout Asia Minor, in which the author shares specific concerns for these churches. Beyond these three genres, Gorman writes that Revelation is also a liturgical text and a political text.<sup>84</sup> Given the two cultural audiences and the multiple genres, it is clear that Revelation is a very complex and intentional document. Thus, all of these factors must be considered when interpreting

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<sup>79</sup> Park, “Revelation.”

<sup>80</sup> Michael Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly: Uncivil Worship and Witness Following the Lamb into the New Creation* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2011), 13. He calls it a “hybrid document.” Judy Diehl lists these in, “‘Babylon’: Then, Now, and ‘Not Yet’: Anti-Roman Rhetoric in the Book of Revelation.” *Currents in Biblical Research*, 11(2) (2013): 175, calling it “a composite” document.

<sup>81</sup> Judy Diehl, “Babylon,” 176.

<sup>82</sup> Gorman, *Reading*, 23-24.

<sup>83</sup> Id, 33.

<sup>84</sup> Id, 13.

it. One of them may be more in focus than others in Revelation 18 particularly, but all are part of what makes Revelation what it is.

A key theme of the entire book, in part taken from Revelation 18, relates to critiquing Christian participation in empire. Gorman writes, “Revelation is a powerful wake-up call to those who have taken for granted beliefs, commitments, and practices that should be unthinkable.”<sup>85</sup> It was written to Christians who were living in the empire of Rome and called them to non-participation in the injustice and civil religion. Gorman writes, “The target of Revelation’s critique is not limited to Rome. ‘Babylon’ means Rome, but it also means something more than Rome... Revelation is also a critique of all idolatries and injustices similar to those of Rome, throughout history and into the present.”<sup>86</sup>

### The Content of Revelation 18

The main substance of chapter 18 focuses on the fall of Babylon. There is a strong economic focus in the passage. There is a call to the people of God to leave Babylon, followed by judgment on Babylon, and then there are various groups of mourners, all lamenting the loss of their profit from participation in Babylon’s economy. It is widely understood that ‘Babylon’ is referring to Rome, a stance I hold due to the details and plot of Revelation.<sup>87</sup>

Rohun Park offers a post-colonial reading of Revelation 18, applying both the historical critical method and other theoretical methods as well.<sup>88</sup> This combined approach provides a “re-contextualized” understanding of the passage. This is, as Judy Diehl writes, “the implied multiple ways different readers understand a document as a result of reading it in varied social contexts.”<sup>89</sup> She adds, “the message of Revelation must be ‘translated’ into our literal contemporary situations properly where it can be used to move humanity to a more appropriate rhetorical response.”<sup>90</sup>

As a post-colonial interpreter, Park grounds himself in a specific historical position, which provides the reasons for interpreting Revelation 18 as he does. His historical position prompts him to a preferential disposition to listen to the perspectives of those who are on the margins

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<sup>85</sup> Id, 33.

<sup>86</sup> Id, 33-34.

<sup>87</sup> For further discussion on support for Babylon being understood as Rome, see Giancarlo Biguzzi. “Is the Babylon of Revelation Rome or Jerusalem?” *Biblica* 87: 3 (2006) 371-386.

<sup>88</sup> See Diehl, “Babylon,” 187, for a discussion on post-colonial theology taking from both methods.

<sup>89</sup> Id, 189.

<sup>90</sup> Id.

economically and colonially.<sup>91</sup> Rather than trying to deny or be unmoved by the particulars of his social position, he embraces them. The uniqueness of his social position is what allows him to then offer a model and strategy for a wider audience and space. As Park writes, “From an East Asian global space and time in particular, I advance such a model and strategy in regard to the people living in the empire at large.”<sup>92</sup> The more accurately he identifies his particularities, and those of the writer, the more he can transcend them. This leads to a more honest and effective interpretation as well.

To discuss the text more in depth, I will take the four key themes he identifies and expand on them, using the work of other scholars as well. These themes are the “1) Dwelling of Demons (vv.2-3); 2) Exodus of the People of God (v.4); 3) Fall of Babylon the Great (vv. 8-17); 4) Redemption of the Faithful (v. 20).”<sup>93</sup>

*Dwelling of Demons.* According to Park’s reading, the demons mentioned in 18:2-3 indwell the people in contrast to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, as described by John in his Gospel.<sup>94</sup> Park points out that “the place of ‘dwelling’ emerges out of the demons’ rendering of power and prosperity.”<sup>95</sup> The power and prosperity that is seen in Babylon (Rome) is indeed evidence of the demons indwelling. As he writes, “They claim their absolute power and control over their possessions.”<sup>96</sup> Verse 2 says that:

(Babylon) has become a dwelling place for demons  
 a haunt for every unclean spirit  
 a haunt for every unclean bird  
 a haunt for every unclean and detestable beast.

As for what this haunting manifests, I think it is important to, as Park does, consider John’s other work in his Gospel where he often speaks of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. He writes, “While in the Gospel of John the affirmation of the flesh and the ‘dwelling’ of the Word offer a

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<sup>91</sup> Park, “Revelation,” 25.2.

<sup>92</sup> Id, 25.2.

<sup>93</sup> Id, 25.6.

<sup>94</sup> Park assumes that the author of Revelation and the Gospel of John are the same. For further discussion on the authorship of John, see Hugo A. Cotro, “Could the author of Revelation step forward, please?” *DavarLogos* 14: 1 (2015): 71-89.

<sup>95</sup> Park, “Revelation,” 25.6.

<sup>96</sup> Id, 25.7.

life-giving, ‘truthful’ encounter with the divine (John 1:9), in Revelation the dwelling of the demons and haunt of foul spirits only serves as a site of denial to the divine.”<sup>97</sup>

These sites of denial to the divine are antithetical to God and the opposite of life-giving, truthful encounters with God. It is any aspect of Rome that is destructive to life. Peter Perry, in a comparison of John with Dio of Prusa, an aristocratic rhetorician and philosopher, indicates that violence, exploitation, and luxury are three such examples of destructive forces in the Roman Empire.<sup>98</sup> Violence is demonstrated in the killing of Christians and Dacians in Rome.<sup>99</sup> Exploitation of resources at others’ expense is present in the form of “neglect(ing) the material needs of the provinces by draining wealth and resources from the periphery to the center.”<sup>100</sup> Luxury in Rome came at the expense of virtue and righteousness.

These three things – violence, exploitation, and luxury – are at the heart of John and Dio’s critique of the Roman empire. Each on its own would be destructive, but they work together too, and it is their synergy that makes them so significant. Allen Callahan writes, “The momentary triumph of the powerful at the expense of the powerless, prosperity at the expense of the poor, and economic life at the expense of mass death... are evils, but more: they are related evils, the triumvirate of contemporary empire.”<sup>101</sup> There is a destructive and terrible synergy that takes place that John critiques. Later, Callahan writes, using different but similar terms in speaking of Rome, “Luxury, slavery, violence, and desire are overdetermining elements of imperial hegemony in John’s apocalyptic vision. The text of the Apocalypse refuses to isolate any one of these evils or to see any one of them as chief or key. They are so evil precisely because they work together, synergistically for evil in the world.”<sup>102</sup> Thus, there is no possibility of movement towards justice within the system. All of it must be “completely repudiated and completely annihilated.”<sup>103</sup> It is this synergy that makes Rome the evil entity that it is.

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<sup>97</sup> Id, 25.7.

<sup>98</sup>P.S. Perry, “Critiquing the Excess of Empire: A Synkrisis of John of Patmos and Dio of Prusa,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 29:4 (2007): 493.

<sup>99</sup> See Rev 18:24 regarding the violence. The killing of the Dacians is addressed by Dio and not mentioned in Revelation.

<sup>100</sup> Perry, “Critiquing,” 493.

<sup>101</sup> Callahan, “Apocalypse,” 51.

<sup>102</sup> Id, 64.

<sup>103</sup> Id.

*Exodus of the People of God.* Park's second theme of Revelation 18 is the exodus of the people of God. As indicated above, Revelation 18 is a critique not only of empire, but of Christian participation in it. Verse 4 reads,

Come out of her, my people  
lest you take part in her sins  
lest you share in her plagues.

This is a charge to Christians to exercise their agency, to remove themselves from the reach of empire, and to not participate in the destructive ungodly economy. Park explains, "This is a call not only to separate oneself from, but also to stand over and against the economies that have long supported the empire. Being part of it is just to fall into sin and to make oneself subject to the judgment of God."<sup>104</sup>

It a charge to the readers of Revelation to "dissociate themselves from Rome's evil, lest they share her guilt and her judgment. It is a command not to be in the company of those who are then depicted mourning for Babylon."<sup>105</sup> John wanted his Christian readers to refuse to participate in the luxuries of empire that exploited and endangered people and caused human suffering. He was of the view that the churches should not enjoy the luxuries produced on the back of economic injustice.

Callahan, too, points out this critical element of John's message which is to say that, for those who are Christian, participation in such an economic system is wrong and should be avoided. He cites the third century Carthaginian bishop, Cyprian, who, in a time of difficult relationship between the church and the Roman Empire, wrote,

He who goes out and departs does not become a partaker of the guilt; but he will be wounded with the plagues who is found a companion in the crime... A blind love of one's own property has deceived many; nor could they be prepared for, or at ease in, departing when their wealth fettered them like a chain. Those were the chains to them that remained — those were the bonds by which both virtue was retarded, and faith burdened, and the spirit bound, and the soul hindered.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Rohun Park, "Revelation," 25.8.

<sup>105</sup> Bauckham, *The Climax*, 377.

<sup>106</sup> Cyprian, [\*De lapsis\*](#), 10-11. Last Accessed 18 February 2021.

These words were addressed to those in the church at the time who wanted to hold onto the material benefits of belonging to the empire more than they wanted to stay faithful to God. Cyprian “insisted that compromise for the sake of the material benefits afforded by peace with the State was fatal for Christian faith. He refused to isolate politics from piety and money from morality. To trade in the luxury that only the injustice of empire makes possible is to be a partaker of the guilt.”<sup>107</sup> Again, it is participation in this kind of empire and luxury that John appears to think is inimical to Christian faith. To participate in it is to become complicit in it. Callahan continues, summing up John’s critique of Rome well, “John’s visionary critique insists that we cannot separate political and moral economies, that political economy and moral economy are intimately bond (*sic*)[bound] together, that justice is the tie that binds the public square to our private lives.”<sup>108</sup>

*Fall of Babylon.* Continuing to follow Park’s reading, I now move on to the theme of the quick and intense fall of Babylon (18:8, 10, 17, 19). Babylon is destroyed, which is understood as judgment (18:8, 20), and there are many who mourn its destruction. In considering the whole of Revelation, this judgment on Rome is most often portrayed as vengeance for the death of Christians. However, Bauckham points out that the judgment is also economic, being “attributed to (Rome’s) slaughter of the innocent in general (18:24; cf. 18:6), her idolatrous arrogance (18:8), and her self-indulgent luxury at the expense of her empire (18:7).”<sup>109</sup> Park, too, believes this judgment is economic, arguing, “As a grand narrative of power and control falls apart, the economy of Rome is no longer able to benefit the privileged at its discretion.”<sup>110</sup>

In 18:12-13, there is a long list of cargoes and imports that Rome buys and sells. Bauckham makes the important point that the inclusion of such a list demonstrates that John is writing against a very concrete and specific reality. There is a lot of symbolism in Revelation, but as Bauckham writes, it “is not a way of abstracting from these realities but a means of prophetic comment on their significance.”<sup>111</sup> Bauckham argues that many of these items “are specifically mentioned as prime examples of luxury and extravagance by Roman writers critical of the decadence, as they saw it, of the wealthy families of Rome in the early imperial period.”<sup>112</sup> Not all of these items are

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<sup>107</sup> Callahan, “Apocalypse,” 65.

<sup>108</sup> Id.

<sup>109</sup> Bauckham, *The Climax*, 350.

<sup>110</sup> Rohun Park, “Revelation,” 25.8.

<sup>111</sup> Bauckham, *The Climax*, 351.

<sup>112</sup> Id, 367.



necessarily wrong in and of themselves. However, there are two points which stand out. First, it is the sheer scale of extravagance, with such a volume of luxury items coming into Rome. Secondly, it is that these items have come into Rome at the expense of people from within the empire.<sup>113</sup>

There are many who weep over the destruction of Babylon: kings (18:9), merchants (18:11), and shipmasters and seafarers (18:17-18). These are, as Park calls them, “colonial agents” that lament over the loss of the breaking down of the economy and thus their livelihoods and power.<sup>114</sup> They have participated in this destructive economy and they are now lamenting the loss of it – presumably because their wealth and livelihood have been bound up in it. The loss of the empire’s power and the economic devastation when Rome falls brings them to tears and mourning (18:9, 11, 15, 19).

*Redemption of the Faithful.* Park’s final theme is the redemption and consolation of the faithful. There is justice and hope for those who have not participated in the imperial economy.<sup>115</sup> Firstly, they are not devastated when the economy no longer succeeds, as they were not invested in its success. Secondly, they have remained faithful to God by not participating in a destructive economy. This consolation “affirms that the colonial construction of the economy is not eternally fixed or immovable.”<sup>116</sup> This destructive economic structure will fall at some point.

As shown, the readings of Park, Bauckham, and Callahan are that Revelation is an economic critique. There are, however, different conclusions resulting from different methodologies. As a point of comparison, I will now outline two of these and indicate where I see their limitations.

### Two Alternative Views

*A Religious Critique.* Iain Provan offers a differing interpretation of Revelation 18, suggesting that it is more a religious critique of certain Christians rather than an economic critique of Rome.<sup>117</sup> He reaches this conclusion by using a theoretical method instead of the historical-critical method. He argues that the text does not lend itself to the historical-critical method and suggests that Bauckham deduces too much that is simply not in the text, such as the exploitative

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<sup>113</sup> Verse 24 indicates that Rome is also judged for the killing of innocents.

<sup>114</sup> Rohun Park, “Revelation,” 25.6.

<sup>115</sup> Id, 25.9.

<sup>116</sup> Park, “Revelation,” 25.9.

<sup>117</sup> Iain Provan, “Four Spirits, Fornication, and Finance. Revelation 18 from an Old Testament Perspective,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 64 (1996): 88.

nature of Rome. In his article, he emphasizes that it was general themes of evil being destroyed that were more important in Revelation 18, rather than the particulars of Rome and its economy. This is especially true, he suggests, when one considers the literary context and the influence that it has from the Old Testament.<sup>118</sup>

A significant implication of this method for Provan is that he does not think that Babylon represents Rome.<sup>119</sup> Indeed, he thinks there could be a compelling case for it to be Jerusalem.<sup>120</sup> He argues that understanding Babylon as Rome is, again, focusing too much on the particularities, rather than the generalities of the way this fits into the wide narrative of the Bible which is about “the ongoing, long-fought battle... between God and those political and religious powers which oppose even while sometimes appearing to serve God, and the resolution of that conflict in the coming of the kingdom of God and the new Jerusalem.”<sup>121</sup> It is true that, when applying a passage to a different time and place, there might be a need to consider the general theme of a passage. However, the particularities, such as the historical setting, do matter significantly. Just as Park’s particularities influence his reading of a passage, so too do those of a biblical writer influence what they are writing and how that passage might then be used in the future. Provan is also interpreting through the lens of the Old Testament perspective. This is understandable and very important, as the Old Testament would have influenced John’s writing significantly. However, this is not the only way in which to read Revelation as it was not John’s only influence.

On this basis, I do not believe Provan’s interpretation is the most appropriate. A more thorough approach would be to combine a theoretical approach such as the one presented by Provan with a historical-critical method from Bauckham. This would include the essential particularities that shape a passage and thus an understanding of a passage. It also appreciates that cultures are different, and a more generalized interpretation of a passage is sometimes better. Indeed, as Diehl writes, “a methodology like post-colonialism depends on both the historical and the theoretical approaches.”<sup>122</sup> This combines the best of the two methods.

*Dispensationalism.* Another popular way of interpreting Revelation is through a dispensational lens. Michael Gorman states that dispensationalism “holds that history is divided

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<sup>118</sup> Id, 81.

<sup>119</sup> Id, 99.

<sup>120</sup> Id, 92-94.

<sup>121</sup> Id, 99.

<sup>122</sup> Diehl, “Babylon,” 187.

into various ages, or dispensations, each characterized by different ways in which God deals with humanity.”<sup>123</sup> Viewed through this lens, Revelation is thus about the “end times” in which God ultimately destroys Satan and evil in a literal war. Revelation is seen as a coded text predicting exactly what will happen in a specific timeline. Dispensationalists read the text very literally using a “grammatical-historical” method.<sup>124</sup> When read this way, Revelation 18 apparently predicts the future fall of Babylon. For this to happen, of course, Babylon would need to be rebuilt and indeed Kenneth Allen argues that this rebuilding will happen.<sup>125</sup> He does so because his reading of Scripture understands prophecy in the Bible to be about predicting the future and because it is understood literally. It also is a result of believing the texts to be “verbally inspired, infallible, and inerrant in its original manuscripts”<sup>126</sup> and translated over the centuries with little inaccuracy.

There are two significant problems listed by Gorman with the dispensational approach that I will mention here.<sup>127</sup> First, a dispensational reading claims to read the text literally, but it only does so selectively.<sup>128</sup> Even if the literal reading were consistent, that would not be an appropriate way to read the whole of the Bible, as there are different literary forms within Scripture. This is like someone reading an anthology about World War Two that includes maps, timelines of the history, letters from soldiers, journals of those whose towns were invaded, military records on movements, historical fiction pieces, and war poems and treating all these writings as literal. The same is true of Scripture. Using a blanket approach of reading the whole of Scripture literally opens a reader up to inconsistencies and misunderstanding.

Similarly, a second problem with dispensationalism that Gorman addresses is that it misunderstands the nature of prophetic and apocalyptic literature.<sup>129</sup> Prophetic literature in Scripture is not about predicting future events but instead “speaking words of comfort and/or challenge, on behalf of God, to the people of God in their concrete historical situation.”<sup>130</sup> Likewise, apocalyptic literature is not simply about the end times, but is heavily symbolic

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<sup>123</sup> Gorman, *Reading*, 22-23.

<sup>124</sup> Kenneth Allen, “The Rebuilding and the Destruction of Babylon,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 133: 529 (January 1976): 19.

<sup>125</sup> *Id.*, 25-27.

<sup>126</sup> *Id.*, 25.

<sup>127</sup> Gorman, *Reading*, 71. For the total list of problems with the dispensational approach Gorman offers, see pages 71-73 where he includes eight interpretative problems, eight theological and spiritual problems, and five political problems.

<sup>128</sup> *Id.*

<sup>129</sup> *Id.*

<sup>130</sup> *Id.*, 23.

literature, with the basic function of sustaining the people of God in times of crisis.<sup>131</sup> As Gorman writes, “Apocalyptic literature both expresses and creates hope by offering scathing critique of the oppressors, passionate exhortations to defiance... and unfailing confidence in God’s ultimate defeat of the present evil.”<sup>132</sup> With this understanding of apocalyptic literature, it seems more appropriate to consider what Revelation 18 means in this regard, which lends itself to reading it as an economic critique rather than a literal destruction of a city that would need to be rebuilt first in order for this to come true.

### The Image of the Harlot

Another contribution to the discussion in interpreting Revelation 18 as an economic critique is the character of the harlot. She is introduced in Revelation 17 and is depicted in the next chapter as an image of Babylon. It is the harlot who is pictured as being destroyed and it is therefore important to carefully examine the imagery used, as this will assist in the interpretation of the entire chapter. The harlot is dressed in many jewels and expensive clothes which Bauckham understands as a metaphor for the great wealth present in Rome. He writes,

Rome is a harlot because her associations with the people of her empire are for her own economic benefit... But in John’s view these benefits are not what they seem: they are the favours of a prostitute, purchased at a high price. The *Pax Romana* is really a system of economic exploitation of the empire. Rome’s subjects give far more to her than she gives to them.<sup>133</sup>

Of course, there is considerable reason to question that a prostitute’s associations are for her own economic benefit, particularly if they have a handler or have been trafficked. However, if Rome is described as a harlot because Rome’s benefits such as peace and prosperity are purchased at a high price and actually for Rome’s benefit rather than the people of the empire, we can see that reading Revelation 18 as an economic critique is effective and appropriate, as Park and Bauckham argue.

Surekha Nelavala, a post-colonial Indian feminist reader of the Bible, offers an interpretation of the harlot of Revelation 17-18 from the perspective of the harlot herself.<sup>134</sup> She

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<sup>131</sup> Id, 15.

<sup>132</sup> Id.

<sup>133</sup> Bauckham, *The Climax*, 347.

<sup>134</sup> Surekha Nelavala, “‘Babylon the Great Mother of Whores’ (Rev 17:5): A Postcolonial Feminist Perspective,” *The Expository Times* 121:2. (2009): 60.

finds this image problematic particularly because of “how women are treated in Hindu religious texts, which have enormous influence on the way that Indian society has perceived women.”<sup>135</sup> Because women actually suffer because of these religious texts, it is entirely understandable that she wants to reinterpret the harlot differently. When there is a text or an interpretation of a particular text that causes suffering in an acute and specific real-life situation, it can and should be challenged or reinterpreted.

At the same time, it is not a responsible use of the text to entirely disregard the passage’s intent either. Focusing on the nature of what happens to the harlot is important, especially if women sex workers are treated badly in a real-life situation because of the text. However, it should not come at the expense of focusing on the nature of the harlot herself and what she represents within the text, nor should it be ignored in other contexts where women are not being mistreated because of the text. By choosing to interpret from the harlot’s perspective, Nelavala brings some insightful conclusions. She argues that John is both writing about a woman negatively, but also with the anguish of a colonized person himself.<sup>136</sup> She also asks questions suggesting that the violence perpetrated by the harlot is justified.<sup>137</sup> Despite these insights, there is still a need to consider what the metaphor was originally representing, i.e., Rome’s imperialist and destructive economy.

Marion Carson does not think it is appropriate to read this passage directly from the perspective of the harlot. Carson argues that this is being too focused on one perspective when a broader view of the passages and the characters within the passages are needed, namely the harlot’s relationship with the beast.<sup>138</sup> She also notes that in Revelation 18, the harlot should be viewed not only as a victim of the beast (though she is), but also a perpetrator of unjust actions that have led to God’s judgment. This is more in keeping with Bauckham’s understanding. Indeed, the woman has “valued luxury, wealth and power to such an extent that she has lost sight of human kindness. Caring for nothing but her own self-glorification (18:7), she has used people to build up her fortune and empire.”<sup>139</sup> She has also engaged in slavery, treating humans as commodities. This being the case, the character in the text is not simply a passive victim. Understandably, in real life situations

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<sup>135</sup> Id.

<sup>136</sup> Id, 64.

<sup>137</sup> Id, 64-65.

<sup>138</sup> Marion Carson, “The Harlot, the Beast, and the Sex Trafficker: Reflections on some Recent Feminist Interpretations of Revelation 17-18,” *The Expository Times* 122:5 (2011): 224.

<sup>139</sup> Id, 224-225.

where women sex workers are victims, this image is deeply disturbing. But in the text, this character has done evil, which needs to be judged.

There are other times in the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament, when the image of the harlot is used. In the book of Hosea, we read that the prophet is asked by God to marry a woman who is unfaithful to him, as a symbol of Israel's unfaithfulness to God. While there are a few references to economic-related symbols in Hosea, the image is mostly used to describe Israel's worship of other gods than YHWH, similar to how the image and language are used in the Old Testament.<sup>140</sup> However, when the Old Testament features actual women who were prostitutes, such as Rahab in Jericho found in Joshua 2, it is favorable toward them. This suggests that the harlot *metaphor* is used to describe unfaithfulness to God, whereas *actual women* are portrayed much more positively.

Additionally, Justin Jeffcoat Schedtler contends that the image of the harlot could have also evoked Cybele the "Great Mother" Goddess, a Greco-Roman goddess.<sup>141</sup> He writes that the harlot's title is similar to Cybele's and that the descriptions of the harlot match well-known depictions of Cybele herself. The fornication metaphor used of the harlot also reflects the cult of Cybele. She represented an integral part of Roman imperial power, and so if the association between the harlot and Cybele is correct, or at least partially correct, that would mean that it is one more image in Revelation that is portraying "representatives of the Roman Imperial apparatus as loathsome enemies of God and the Lamb."<sup>142</sup> Schedtler argues that the destruction of her and those who participate in her commerce suggest the destruction of Rome.<sup>143</sup>

It is also possible that John did not use the image of the harlot with *one* specific representation in mind. It may indeed reflect a combination of entities and identities.<sup>144</sup> Schedtler's evocation of Cybele would therefore be in keeping with the symbolic nature of Revelation and indicates a strong association between Revelation 18 and the economics of Rome.

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<sup>140</sup> The economic symbols are found in Hs 2:8, 4:2, 7:14,8:4, the most significant of which is 4:2 which mentions stealing a list of sins Israel has committed. For use of the words related to prostitution and adultery in the Old Testament, see D.J. Slager, "[The Figurative Use of Terms for 'Adultery' and 'Prostitution' in the Old Testament](#)," *The Bible Translator* 51:4 (October 2000): 431–38. See especially page 435.

<sup>141</sup> Justin Jeffcoat Schedtler, "Mother of Gods, Mother of Harlots: The Image of the Mother Goddess Behind the Depiction of the "Whore of Babylon" in Revelation 17" *Novum Testamentum* 59 (2017): 52-70.

<sup>142</sup> Id, 70.

<sup>143</sup> Id.

<sup>144</sup> Id, 67.

The metaphor is problematic, without doubt. It appears to justify violence against women and as such its usage may be challenged. However, I see the actions of the harlot as signifying Rome and its economics. In fact, Nelavala's interpretation does not contradict this. It adds a new perspective claiming that perhaps the harlot's violence is more justified or excusable, but it does not actually contradict that her violence is her economic exploitation of others. It is also important to bear in mind that this *is* a metaphor, one in which gender is not necessarily the primary focus. Given the exploitative action of the harlot, Carson writes that "the image of the whore therefore should be seen as a political metaphor, and her destruction, rather than depicting the humiliation of an individual woman, should be seen in terms of the just defeat of a corrupt power."<sup>145</sup> While the image of the harlot is problematic, it seems that John is more concerned with an economic critique of the Roman Empire with a message that there is judgment against exploitation, violence, and slavery.

### Conclusion

I conclude in agreement with the many scholars proposing that Revelation 18 is primarily an economic critique. Alternative ways of interpreting Revelation are not convincing enough, nor consider all of the contributing factors closely enough. They do not adequately consider the combination of the literary context, literary genre, historical setting, and the lens of both the reader and writer as well as does the post-colonial view put forth by Park. In addition, given the ways in which the harlot has also participated in economic injustice and the evidence for understanding the image of the harlot as part of the Roman imperial apparatus, Park's understanding of the passage itself, coming from a specific social location with specific influences, seems to be a strong and appropriate approach for interpreting Revelation 18 as an economic critique of the Roman Empire. In light of this understanding of Revelation 18 and understanding the ways in which Amazon is like an exploiting empire, I now turn to the task of determining the usefulness of using Revelation 18 to critique Amazon.

### ***The Efficacy of Using a Post-Colonial Reading of Revelation 18 to Critique Amazon***

In this section, I will bring together the discussion from sections one and two to establish how using Revelation 18 may or may not be effective in critiquing Amazon. I will start by outlining limitations to doing so. I will then present two substantive reasons to support the use of Revelation

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<sup>145</sup> Carson, "The Harlot," 225.

18 in critiquing Amazon, particularly in the matters of convergence and synergy and the relationships surrounding Amazon. I will then finish this chapter by expounding on the nature of that critique which will help in showing its effectiveness.

#### Limitations of Revelation 18 as a Tool to Critique Amazon

*Amazon and Rome are Not Entirely Equivalent.* To begin by stating the obvious: while there are significant similarities, Amazon and Rome are not entirely equivalent. Amazon is not a political and national entity, as was the Roman Empire. Amazon is not actively and openly killing people, nor is there any Amazon military. These are significant differences. However, like Rome, Amazon engages in destructive behaviors. These are not necessarily life-destroying in the same sense of Rome killing people, but they are life-suppressing in how they affect the lives of those involved who lose businesses and/or livelihoods, or suffer hard working conditions, or whose expertise and knowledge is exploited.

*Amazon is Only Part of the Wider Empire of Today.* The second limitation to using Revelation 18 for examining Amazon is that Revelation 18 was concerned with the largest empire of the day: Rome. Empire in contemporary times is not one company, but rather the global enterprise of capitalism, in both its financial and surveillance aspects. In this sense, using Revelation 18 to critique capitalism in general may provide a more direct parallel reading of the text. In this case, Amazon would be seen perhaps as one of the cargo merchants listed in the chapter.<sup>146</sup> However, the particular focus on Amazon here reveals a company wholly adopting a capitalist mindset, and then forging ahead from financial capitalism into surveillance capitalism. So, though it is not the Empire of today's world in the way that Rome was in its world, Amazon is very much a symptom and manifestation of Empire today and is still an empire in its own right.

*The Characteristics of Empire Not Mentioned in Revelation 18.* In the first section, I listed five aspects of an empire and examined how those did or did not apply to Amazon. I proposed that Amazon does substantially fulfil the criterion of presentation of inevitability, given how Bezos presents Amazon as the future. I also argued that Amazon does not respect boundaries, another aspect of empire. These two characteristics are true of Rome as well. However, in the passage of Revelation 18, these are not addressed in the same way the other characteristics are. Therefore,

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<sup>146</sup> Of course, Amazon is not a merchant of a single cargo; it sells a nearly incomprehensible vast array of products and services. It is instructive to reflect on whether Amazon is the collective of merchants that live off an empire or the empire itself. (Hence the title of Brad Stone's book; see footnote 77 above).



while these aspects may be further evidence that Amazon can be accurately described as an empire and may be valid reasons to critique Amazon, they are not as pertinent to using Revelation 18 to critique Amazon.

### Strengths of Revelation 18 as a Tool to Critique Amazon

*Convergence and Synergy.* One of the strengths of using Revelation 18 to critique Amazon lies in the effect of convergence and synergy. These work in three ways. Firstly, convergence and synergy are present within both the Roman Empire and Amazon. Revelation 18 addresses the separate evils of Rome's empire: violence, exploitation, and luxury. These join together to create a destructive and evil synergy. It is because they work together that they are so evil. It is this synergy that makes Rome the destructive force that it is. Similarly, as shown above, Amazon uses many tactics that work together to give itself enormous success. One or two of these tactics on their own would not create Amazon as it exists today. But when joined together, Amazon becomes something much larger than a simple monopoly. In particular, I showed how Amazon uses success in one industry as leverage in another unrelated field, creating an unfair advantage. But then, beyond that, this *pattern* of leveraging becomes one element of the company that converges with other patterns and evil practices such as the exploitation of workers and third-party sellers.

Secondly, the synergy taking place is similar in nature. In Rome, it was violence, exploitation, and luxury. In Amazon, part of what is converging is the tactics that have taken away livelihoods and jobs, the exploitation of third-party sellers and warehouse workers, and the resulting massive wealth inequality. At the heart of all of these, both within Rome and Amazon, are dehumanizing actions that allow the wealthy and powerful to accrue more wealth and power.

Thirdly, what results from the convergence and synergy is similar in both the Roman Empire and Amazon. All of the separate evils of each are destructive and worthy of critique, but what sets Amazon and Rome apart from other companies or empires is their scale. Amazon utilizes and performs these evils at a scale unlike what other companies are able to do. What results is a company, much like the Roman Empire in its day, that can control and dictate how things operate. This convergence allows Amazon, as it did Rome, to use its position to further consolidate its power and wealth. To use colloquial language, Amazon often gets to set the rules for others and play by its own, all for its own benefit and without risk to itself. Rome had this freedom too.

Given this strong similarity between Rome and Amazon – that convergence and synergy are present within both, that the nature of what is synergising is destructive and exploitative, and

that the synergy produces an entity that can manipulate for its own power – Revelation 18 offers a highly effective critique of Amazon. If Revelation 18 were only concerned with critiquing one aspect of Rome rather than the various elements that converge, it would be less effective. Likewise, if Amazon was not similar to Rome in this manner and were simply a large company or even a monopoly, the analogy would be less effective. But because Rome and Amazon share such a significant characteristic that is addressed in the chapter, it is very relevant to use in a critique of Amazon.

*The Image of the Harlot and Her Relationships.* Secondly, I see the image of the harlot and her relationships in the passage having parallels with Amazon and entities involved with it. The harlot has significant relationships with other characters. Initially, she is said to be the dwelling place of demons and all the unclean spirits, birds, and beasts (18:2). Verse three continues,

For all nations have drunk  
the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality  
and the kings of the earth have committed immorality with her  
and the merchants of the earth have grown rich from the power of her luxurious living.

There are three significant sets of relationships that the harlot has in this verse. First, the nations – the people – have drunk her wine. Secondly, the kings of the earth – the political establishment – have “committed adultery” with her. And lastly, the merchants – the business leaders – have grown rich because of her, at the expense of others. It is worth considering parallel relationships within and around Amazon. Broadly, the relationship between the harlot and the other characters is that they seem influenced by her to do something immoral and unjust, even when it comes at their own expense. It is worth considering more closely each of these sets of relationships.

More specifically, in light of the people drinking the wine of the harlot, I believe that Amazon finds many takers for the wine of an insatiable desire, instigated by seemingly endless production that drives capitalism and by extension, Amazon.<sup>147</sup> Those who drink it are intoxicated and proceed to perform injustices against others. There are many characters who are caught up in this insatiable desire for more. Bezos himself wants to colonize space due to the limits of Earth;<sup>148</sup> the strategists within Amazon want to extract money from every revenue stream possible; and the

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<sup>147</sup> See again Joerg Rieger, “Reshaping Desire,” referenced above.

<sup>148</sup> Mike Brown, “[Blue Origin’s Jeff Bezos Details His Radical Vision for Colonies in Space](#),” *Inverse*, 10 May 2019.

customers buy more and more items. Production and the desire subsequently created, like a harlot, promise pleasure, but ultimately exploit and dehumanize those who engage.

There is then the political establishment that has “committed adultery” with the harlot. Amazon evaded taxes in the United States for many years and now receives generous subsidies when building local warehouses.<sup>149</sup> It has benefited from little governmental opposition to its business acquisitions.<sup>150</sup> Amazon also hosts United States government data such as from the US Department of Defense.<sup>151</sup> Even if this political establishment is ultimately exploited by Amazon, it has allowed the company to become what it is through action or acquiescence.

Akin to the merchants of the earth who have “grown rich from the power of her luxurious living” are investors in Amazon gaining great wealth from their shares in the company. In the case of Amazon, investor funding is a significant aspect of what has allowed it to perform its destructive practices, such as predatory pricing, which have been key to its business strategy. This means that investors have not just *benefited* from the company’s profits but have also *enabled* its destructive actions. Revelation 18 would depict these investors as those who have profited from Rome’s economic injustice and who mourn the loss of their wealth when the empire falls.

There is another reason, beyond the similarities in these sets of relationships, that the image of the harlot makes this a useful passage to critique Amazon. The harlot is a prostitute, as opposed to an adulteress. Rather than simply the unfaithfulness of an adulteress, a prostitute commodifies sex and uses it for financial gain. In 18:13, she is said to have traded in human lives. There are parallels here with the nature of capitalism which commodifies that which has not previously been or should ever be, a process which then leads to destructive and dehumanizing action. In the case of the harlot in Revelation 18, she commodifies herself at her own expense and those who have slept with her. Capitalism commodifies and dehumanizes too. Amazon’s story reflects the destruction and dehumanization that capitalism brings.

There are limitations to interpreting the image of the harlot in this way. Firstly, in the passage the harlot is destroyed. This should not be seen as a prediction of the demise of capitalism or that the desire for more will end. Nor should the weeping of the characters be held up as a sign

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<sup>149</sup>H. Claire Brown. “[Amazon Gets Tax Breaks While Its Employees Rely on Food Stamps, New Data Shows](https://theintercept.com/2018/04/19/amazon-snap-subsidies-warehousing-wages/),” *The Intercept*, 19 April 2018, <https://theintercept.com/2018/04/19/amazon-snap-subsidies-warehousing-wages/>.

<sup>150</sup>Tim Wu, “How Google and Amazon Got Away with Not Being Regulated,” *Wired*, 13 November 2018.

<sup>151</sup> Amazon Web Services. “[Department of Defense Cloud Computing Security Requirements Guide](#)” Accessed 23 April 2021.

that Amazon will one day fall or fail. Secondly, all analogies have their limits; it should not be attempted to match up every character within Revelation 18 with some character within Amazon as some sort of code or in order to declare the passage is about Amazon. However, there is power in applying insights from the relationship between the harlot and the other characters to understanding the relationships surrounding Amazon. Revelation 18's critique of empire in this regard make it useful in a critique against Amazon and ultimately may be used as a judgment against it.

*The Nature of the Critique: Christian Participation Surrounding Amazon.* Having shown two reasons for why using Revelation 18 to critique Amazon is effective, I will now consider the nature of that critique, as this demonstrates the effectiveness of using this passage. The core of the critique involves Christian participation surrounding Amazon. The churches in Revelation 18 were called to remove themselves from the direct benefit of Rome's destructive economy.<sup>152</sup> The passage is a critique of participation in and support for empire. As such, it holds a message for Christians today to dis-engage in aspects of the economy that are destructive and antithetical to life, such as Amazon's proven record of unjust and life-hindering practices, similar to those of the Roman Empire. I contend that this suggests that the passage invites Christians to disentangle themselves from engagement with Amazon.

It is valuable to note that I have labelled this section as discussing matters of *Christian* participation. The reason for this is that Revelation 18 is addressed to Christians and to those who claim to be a part of the new humanity made possible in Christ. However, even though the passage was originally directed towards Christians, it can absolutely inspire persons of any or no faith to consider their values and what that means for their participation in Amazon. While I would object to any use of the passage as a directive to those outside the Christian faith, the passage does invite self-reflection and self-examination into how one participates economically in the world.

Inspiration for how one might untangle themselves from Amazon may be found considering the sets of relationships found in Revelation 18:3 quoted in the above section. Thinking personally, one may consider if they have "drunk the wine" of capitalism and desire as it manifests itself in Amazon. This may lead them to ponder whether to be a Prime member or occasional shopper or to stop shopping on Amazon all together. Individuals will certainly make

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<sup>152</sup> Revelation 18:4, "Come out of her my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues."

different choices based on their values, needs, and desires, but the critique from Revelation 18 suggests that we seek to disentangle and disengage from destructive economic practices. Revelation 18 invites readers to consider, for example, that the benefits and the ease of Prime shopping are not more important than the human cost in jobs lost, poor jobs, and poor working conditions.

Consideration might also be taken of Amazon's relationship with the political establishment. It is well worth contemplating how to vote for particular candidates and resolutions, based on whether they help promote or oppose Amazon's destructive practices. Revelation 18's critique also challenges those who have political power to make choices and pass laws that do not allow Amazon's destructive convergence and synergy to continue.

Finally, one might consider how they are benefiting from Amazon's luxury and wealth. Perhaps one owns shares in the company. They might consider that Revelation 18 urges them to remove their financial investment in the company. To get wealthy from the exploitation Amazon practices is not in keeping with the call from the chapter.

If someone is a business owner and uses Amazon in some way, either by selling through Amazon Marketplace or using Amazon Web Services for their company's website, or in another way, they may consider the implications of doing so. As someone who is not a business owner, I cannot speak with great authority on the complexities that go into making business decisions, but a Christian retailer or business owner inspired by Revelation 18 ought to consider the way in which their participation in Amazon relates to the injustice and destructive practices of Amazon. While it is not a perfect measure, I suspect that proximity to the wealth and luxury that Amazon offers to a limited few is key. As the invitation from the passage is to detangle oneself from Amazon, I believe any movement a business owner or retailer takes away from the destructive practices and the luxury those practices offer is in keeping with the challenge and invitation from the passage.

In sum, I believe the key invitation from Revelation 18 in relation to Amazon is to remove oneself from the benefits that come from the company's unjust practices. Any step further away from those benefits caused by unjust practices is a step toward justice and in keeping with the call from Revelation 18. Certainly, there is a high probability that someone who disengages with Amazon will not be entirely and fully participating in a purely life-giving economic structure. There will be inconsistencies. However, where there is knowledge about an injustice, the call from

Revelation 18 indicates that an appropriate Christian response is to challenge it and begin the disentangling process.

### In Summary

In this section, I have shown the points at which a post-colonial reading of Revelation 18 can effectively be used as a critique of Amazon, given its imperial characteristics. Albeit with the limitations noted at the beginning of this chapter, in regard to the issues of convergence and synergy and the relationships surrounding Amazon, Revelation 18 offers a relevant and effective critique, as these issues are very much present both in Amazon and Rome. The nature of this critique, which shows how the passage can effectively be used, is that Christians – or anyone inspired by the passage – ought to disentangle themselves from Amazon given the practices of the company that are antithetical and destructive to life.

### **Conclusion**

Of all the inspirations one might have for critiquing Amazon, a passage from the Bible may seem an unlikely one. Yet in Revelation 18, we find an effective tool for criticism. Amazon is a formidable force in the world today. As such, it is no stranger to scrutiny and criticism. Its scope, size, and influence across the globe represent a company which I have suggested may legitimately be seen as an empire. As examined, there is a destructive synergy present in Amazon that is common within empire. Multiple forces and interests converge together to make Amazon something different than a normal monopoly or large company. The company extracts wealth through the exploitation of workers and third-party sellers. Furthermore, Amazon participates in surveillance capitalism, which commoditizes human behavior and leads to dehumanization. All of these suggest that Amazon operates like an empire to a significant degree.

Thus, a post-colonial reading of Revelation 18 is a relevant tool to critique Amazon. The biblical passage unleashes a condemnation of the economic system on which Rome stands, an economy built on a destructive synergy of violence, luxury, and exploitation. It features a harlot who has commoditized sex and made drunk those who have joined her. These aspects of empire resonate with what is at work in Amazon today. Like Rome, a select few within Amazon have enjoyed great wealth at the expense of others. This has come as a result of the relationships Amazon has with those in its influence, those who have become inebriated on the wine it offers.

As Amazon continues to wield incredible influence and power and seeks more as time goes on, there are likely to continue to be many ethical issues and questions that arise which will require

further examination and critique. When those issues are related to issues such as synergy and convergence of destructive and powerful interest, wealth exploitation and extraction, and the relationships surrounding Amazon with capitalism, consumerism, and desire, Revelation 18 can be an effective and useful tool to offer a critique.

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