FROM TRAVEL AND MENTORS TO RESEARCHING AND TEACHING EARLY CHRISTIANITY

Adela Yarbro Collins

I grew up in Seattle, where my father was a physician and my mother was in the civil service. I thought my father's profession was wonderful and wanted to follow that path, to help people by taking care of their health. So I worked for my father one summer and in a hospital as a nurse's aide for another summer. Then I went to the University of Portland in Oregon and did a year of premedical study. The University of Portland is, like Notre Dame, led by the priests of the Holy Cross order.

I did all right and enjoyed the year of premed well enough, but then my adviser, a professor of zoology, had a sabbatical coming up in my sophomore year. He planned to go to the Alps to ski and wanted some skiing buddies, so he asked the president of the university if he could start a year abroad program for male students. The president said, "Well, if we're going to have a year abroad program, we have to include the women, the female students, as well." My adviser agreed with that, so the program was organized with the Institute for European Study.

In the first year of the program, sixteen young men and sixteen young women went to study in Salzburg, Austria. The institute organized for us a wonderful western civilization program. We had a fabulous art history instructor and a challenging teacher of philosophy, who was working on Karl Popper and the philosophy of science. Our theologian gave us a course in ecumenism, which I didn't realize at the time was so innovative. The movement was just beginning. We had an excellent history professor too.

Once I made this turn to the humanities, I decided to transfer to Pomona College in Claremont, California, where a friend of mine from high school had gone. There I found a wonderful mentor, Robert Voelkel, who was a systematic theologian, a very

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intelligent and savvy man. I took a course, "Introduction to the Bible," with S. Dean McBride, who had been a student of Frank Moore Cross, Jr., whom I later met. The assignment Dean McBride gave me was to give a presentation on the *rib* form in the Hebrew Bible, which means controversy or lawsuit. It was used for a metaphorical lawsuit brought by God against the people of Israel. I thought it was so interesting to get behind the text, to real-life people, to how the text is rooted in the oral practices of daily life. Later my adviser said, "I'm going to nominate you for a Fulbright, a Woodrow Wilson, and a Danforth," and I said, "What's a Danforth?" It was a wonderful fellowship that covered four years of my graduate study. I received but had to decline the Woodrow Wilson. Before starting a doctoral program, I used the Fulbright grant to study for a year at the University of Tübingen. My adviser was Lutheran, and I'm Catholic, so he recommended Tübingen because they had both Protestant and Catholic theological faculties. I wanted to work there with Ernst Käsemann, who was exciting in those days, but he was extremely ill that year. So I worked with his former student Peter Stuhlmacher, who at that time was very liberal. I heard his lectures in "Introduction to the New Testament" and participated in his seminar "Resurrection in First Corinthians 15 in Cultural Context." I also heard Walter Schulz on Hegel and Hans Küng, and I did a couple of proseminars. In one I learned text criticism of the New Testament, what to do with all these variants, and in the other we read a few books of Augustine's Confessions in Latin. In the following academic year, I went to Harvard and began doctoral study in New Testament.

My decision to pursue studies in New Testament had its roots in an undergraduate course with Voelkel, my adviser and mentor. The topic was contemporary theology, and we read Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, and Paul Tillich. For all of them, the starting point seemed to be the historical Jesus, but they disagreed about what we can know about him, and what the significance is of what we can know. So that's why I decided to do a doctorate in New Testament, to figure out what I thought about the historical Jesus. For my undergraduate degree, I did a thesis on Bultmann's demythologizing project, which I found fascinating. I agreed with his critics on the left who criticized his claim that the existential category of authentic existence could only be achieved through the Christian tradition. I concluded that, in principle, such a judgment should not be made *a priori*.

When I arrived at Harvard, Helmut Koester, who had been Bultmann's last doctoral student, became my adviser. He said to me, "You have studied Bultmann's demythologizing program, now you should study his form criticism." That method discerns small, oral forms in the three similar Gospels, Mark, Matthew, and Luke. It goes back through the written texts to the oral life of the early followers of Jesus. So in a semester we worked through Bultmann's book *History of the Synoptic Tradition,* which I found very interesting. Martin Dibelius also wrote a book on form criticism, in which he gives the big picture, whereas Bultmann gets down to the fine points.

I was in the Ph.D. program in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, and students in that program were expected to choose two related fields and take two courses in each of them. One could be closely related to a student's main field of study, and the other was supposed to be different in terms of content or at least methodologically different. I took two courses in religions of India, one on Hinduism with John Carman and one on Buddhism with Masatoshi Nagatomi. My closely related field was Hebrew Bible. I took a course with Frank Moore Cross, Jr., on the history of the religion of Israel. One of the themes of that course was the interplay of myth and history. He argued that at certain times myth was dominant and at other times history was dominant in the thought and practice of the people. He talked about a certain time when myth went underground, when it wasn't the preferred mode of communication. He proposed that in the book of Job there is a recrudescence of myth. I didn't realize at first that the term has its roots in medicine and refers to the return of a disease. So I think he was using that term somewhat ironically and critically of myth, but he also had a good feeling for it, and I became fascinated with that topic.

At that time apocalypticism was a hot topic because of the civil rights movement, the feminist movement, the movement against the Vietnam War, and strong student protests against various social institutions. The sense was widespread that we were in a time of revolution, that everything was changing. Paul Hanson was a new faculty member at the time, who offered a seminar on apocalypticism, focusing on its origins in the Hebrew Bible and later developments. It was in that seminar that I got to know my husband well, John J. Collins. He was doing his doctorate in ancient Near Eastern languages and literature, with an emphasis on Second Temple Judaism, including the Dead Sea Scrolls.

When I decided to work on the book of Revelation, the New Testament apocalypse, two questions motivated me. One was the role of myth. It seemed clear there are mythic traditions in Revelation, and I was interested in where they came from and how they worked. I also wanted to investigate how the author made use of them, how he transformed them to serve his own rhetorical purpose. So I traced this myth of the battle between the gods or between the king of the gods and a rebellious monster in the ancient Near East, the Hebrew Bible, and in Greek and Roman texts. The monster represents political resistance or a crisis in the natural world. This combat myth usually functioned to legitimize a new king or to reinforce the authority of the ruling king. But in Daniel and Revelation that function is turned upside down. In ancient Near Eastern texts and parts of the Hebrew Bible, the human-like god battles a monster. The human-like god corresponds to the earthly king. In Daniel, the kings are the monsters, and it's the angel Michael who is victorious over them. Michael is the angelic patron of Israel, who will rule in heaven while the Messiah, King of Israel, rules on earth. Revelation transformed the myth in a similar way.

The other factor that motivated me was the knowledge that some scholars approach Revelation only from the point of view of the Hebrew Bible and Second

Temple Jewish texts, paying virtually no attention to Greek and Roman material. At the same time, there were other scholars, including my dissertation adviser, Dieter Georgi, who strongly emphasized the Greek and Roman material and paid very little attention to the Hebrew Bible and Jewish material. For about five seconds I asked myself the question, Now which group is right? Then, of course, I realized that both kinds of contextual material are important. You have to look at both cultural contexts, and which source material is dominant or more illuminating depends on the image or the particular passage being interpreted. In some passages they both may be relevant and even intertwined. Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, I discovered later, does this too. He blends biblical and Jewish traditions with Greek and Roman ideas. I think the author of Revelation did the same thing. He blends a Hebrew motif and a Greek myth that are related somehow. My dissertation was published in 1976 with the title "The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation." If I were revising it now, I would refer to Combat Myths. You can use the singular for the abstract pattern that these myths share, but in practice there are many different kinds of myths that have the same basic plot.

John and I got married in 1973. Even though I hadn't finished my dissertation, I began my first full-time teaching job that year at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, which already then was very diverse and pluralistic in intent. Most of the students and faculty were of European descent, but they had an emerging Latino Studies program, since there was a large Spanish-speaking community in Chicago. Later they started a Korean Studies program, and a recent president is Japanese American. The faculty and administration were very interested in urban ministry and social justice. It was a wonderful community of kind, good people, and the seminary was generous with salaries and benefits, especially at the beginning faculty level.

It was a huge transition for me, after doing so much historical study, to be in a place where most of the students were preparing for ministry. That situation was a challenge, but in my twelve years there, they drew me into reflecting seriously on how scripture relates to ministry. In addition, I was the first woman faculty member at McCormick in a classically academic field. Hulda Niebuhr, the sister of Reinhold and Richard Niebuhr, had been a professor of Christian education there, and women had appointments in the practical, ministerial fields; but in the more traditionally academic disciplines, I was the first. So one of the challenges of being there was the expectation that I could represent "the woman's" point of view on everything.

During my time at McCormick, I began teaching a seminar on the historical Jesus that I taught for many years, there and elsewhere, including here at Yale. We'd meet once a week, and in each session we'd discuss a monograph on Jesus and analyze a text from one of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). We would begin with Reimarus from the eighteenth century, whose intention was to debunk the accounts about Jesus. He thought that the Gospels were history, but bad history. He had a very strong hermeneutic of suspicion, as such an approach came to be called later. The next book that we read was by the nineteenth-century German scholar David Friedrich

Strauss, *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined.* He was very fortunate in his translator, Mary Ann Evans, whose pen name was George Eliot. Then we read other classic studies and more recent ones, ending up with the Aryan Jesus and the feminist Jesus. It was a delightful course to teach. I finally concluded that it is possible to make a list of facts or characteristics relating to Jesus that are highly probable, almost certain to be true. I would have a different list from the one E.P. Sanders drew up, and I would phrase some of the same ones differently, but I did come up with a list. I realized, however, that the moment you move from that list either to a narrative or to an explanation, you step into the realm of fiction. That was the case with ancient Greek historians as well. As Charles Fornara has shown, Herodotus got his ethnographical information from eyewitnesses, but when he began to write his narrative, he used Homer as his guide. Like Homer, he used the narrative technique of imitating life: *mimesis.*

Our children were born while I was at McCormick. I gave birth to identical twin boys in 1977 and to another boy in 1979. There are twenty months between them. We were rather busy there for a while, but we did have help. In 1979 I published a popular commentary on Revelation, a short commentary for a general audience, in the New Testament Message Series. It distilled what I had discovered in my dissertation and presented it, I hope in an understandable way, to a general audience.

I also participated during that time in a Society of Biblical Literature project. The society had a Genres Project dealing with all the types of literature in the New Testament. John was chairing the group studying the genre "apocalypse," and I was a member of that group. We started with the question of how to define the genre apocalypse. We proceeded inductively, and then each of us analyzed a particular part of that body of literature. The results were published in the experimental journal *Semeia,* vol. 14, which came out in 1979. Harry Attridge, who is a colleague here at Yale, did the Greco-Roman material, and someone else did Gnostic material. John dealt with Jewish apocalypses, and I with early Christian apocalyptic literature: the New Testament book of Revelation and the noncanonical Christian apocalypses.

In 1981 I gave the Winslow Lectures at Seabury-Western, which at that time was an Episcopal seminary in Evanston, Illinois. In the meantime they have closed the seminary in Evanston and formed a federation with Bexley Hall seminary in Chicago. After expanding and revising those lectures, I published them as a book, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse.* In that book I used a social psychological approach to understand Revelation in its social and political context. In this way, I tried to explain the violent language. The author used violent language to respond to important events that were disastrous from the point of view of the author. These included first of all the crucifixion of Jesus by a Roman magistrate. Early Christians did not give up on the idea that he was the Messiah in spite of his suffering the most shameful kind of official death at the time. All early Christian writers had to cope with that fact somehow. The second major event was Nero's brutal police action against Christians in Rome. Then came the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. I think

the author of Revelation was of Jewish origin, believed that Jesus was the Messiah, fled the war in Palestine, and went to the Greco-Roman cities on the western coast of Anatolia, modern Turkey.

The author understood Jesus to be the ruler of all the rulers on earth. The idea that the risen Jesus is the King of Kings was strongly discordant with the social and political reality in which the author lived. He used the images of destruction and battle in order to resolve that tension, so that the kingship of Jesus could be imagined as in effect in heaven and as an eventual outcome on earth.

The author also made use of the myth of the birth of the god Apollo in chapter 12. As the story goes, Apollo was born after a conflict between his mother and a monster, a dragon that pursued Apollo's mother, trying to prevent the birth of her child or to kill him immediately after birth. The author of Revelation used that story because the emperor Nero had used Apollo traditions in his imperial propaganda. He promoted his reign as the Golden Age of Apollo and presented himself as a kind of avatar of Apollo on earth. So John used those traditions to present a rival point of view, a Christian point of view.

Not long before I moved to Notre Dame, I was a member of the Centennial Publications Committee of the Society of Biblical Literature. In connection with the celebration of that anniversary, I edited a volume of essays entitled *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship.* Later I wrote an article, "Feminine Symbolism in the Book of Revelation," which was published in the first issue of a new journal called *Biblical Interpretation.* It was later reprinted in Amy-Jill Levine's *A Feminist Companion to the Apocalypse of John.*

We moved together to the University of Notre Dame in 1985, and that was another major transition. I had been teaching master's-level ministry students, and one of the reasons for going to Notre Dame was to have the opportunity to teach undergraduates, master of divinity students who wanted to go into ministry, students doing an academic master of arts in theology degree, and doctoral students. So that was an exciting time. We had a program and a seminar called "Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity." Participants in the seminar included faculty in Hebrew Bible; ancient Judaism, including Rabbinic Judaism; New Testament; and Early Christianity. One faculty person would lead the seminar for an academic year, choosing a topic that people in all those fields could address from the point of view of their disciplines. I led it once on the topic of the historical Jesus. In the fall, a faculty member would give a paper each week. In the spring, the doctoral students would give papers. While I was at Notre Dame, I directed three dissertations, two men and one woman.

The first project on the genre apocalypse looked only at the form and content of the various apocalypses. So in the 1980s, I started a project at the Society of Biblical Literature on Early Christian Apocalypticism. In this project we looked at the form, content, and function of the works. Those studies were published in *Semeia,* vol. 36, in 1986.

From the time I was a graduate student and for quite awhile afterward, I was interested in the "Son of Man" sayings, which are spoken by Jesus in the Gospels. In the second century already, Ignatius of Antioch misunderstood these sayings, remarking that Jesus was both the Son of God and Son of Man. The Son of Man epithet did not originally mean that Jesus was human as well as divine. The term comes from a Hebrew and Aramaic idiom in which, for example, being the son of a prophet means being a prophet. So being a son of man means being human. That is how it is used in the book of Ezekiel in the Hebrew Bible. In early Christian tradition, the Son of Man epithet was an allusion to Daniel 7, where four monsters rise from the sea, and then a figure *like a son of man* comes to the deity, the ancient of days, who gives him eternal and universal kingship. In contrast to the beasts, this figure is human-like; that is, it looks like a human being. For the author of Daniel, that figure was probably the angel Michael, the patron angel of Israel. But by the first century of the Common Era, the figure was interpreted as the Messiah of Israel. That is also how early Christians understood it, understanding the Messiah of Israel to be Jesus. The first article I published on that topic had the title "The Origin of the Designation of Jesus as 'Son of Man.'" It appeared in the *Harvard Theological Review* in 1987. The culmination of my work on that topic was my half of a book that John and I coauthored, *King and Messiah as Son of God*. He wrote the first four chapters on the ancient Near East and the Hebrew Bible, and I wrote the second four on New Testament texts in their Jewish context. One of my chapters is "Jesus as Son of Man," and another is "Messiah, Son of God, and Son of Man in the Gospel and Revelation of John."

In the late 1980s, while I was still at Note Dame, I was commissioned to write a scholarly commentary on the Gospel of Mark in the Hermeneia series. My goal was to interpret Mark in its historical, social, and cultural contexts. I began by publishing articles as a way of delving into different aspects of the gospel. These included "Remove This Cup: Suffering and Healing in Mark," "The Empty Tomb in the Gospel according to Mark," "Rulers, Divine Men, and Walking on the Water," "From Noble Death to Crucified Messiah," and "The Flight of the Naked Young Man Revisited."

Another question that I wanted to answer was what the epithet "Son of God" means in Mark. I think it means something very different in Mark from what it means in the Gospel of John. I discovered that you can't pin down its meaning in Mark by trying to understand it in its literary context and how it is used. Rather, it's possible to read that title in Mark in different ways. So I published two articles on the topic. In one I showed that you can make a case for Son of God in Mark being a royal title and that it is about Jesus being the Messiah. This article is called "Mark and His Readers: The Son of God among Jews." The other article is entitled, "Mark and His Readers: The Son of God among Greeks and Romans." Among members of that audience, it has a stronger divine connotation because for an ancient Greek, for example, Son of God means a being who has a divine father and a human mother.

We moved to the University of Chicago Divinity School in 1991, where I taught master's-level students and doctoral students. I directed seven doctoral dissertations there by six men and one woman.

During that time, I continued to work on the Book of Revelation. In the message to Pergamon, Christ says, "I know where you live, where the throne of Satan is." There has been a lot of debate about what "the throne of Satan" means. The question is whether the image alludes to anything concrete or is simply language about Roman imperial power, which is connected with Satan in Revelation. I argued that it refers to the Zeus altar, which is the famous Pergamon altar now in Berlin. It looks like a giant throne, and early Christians identified Greek gods with demons. So for them the chief demon, Satan, is equivalent to the king of the gods, Zeus. I published a scholarly article on that topic and then a popular version in the *Biblical Archaeology Review* ("Satan's Throne: Revelations from Revelation" in May/June 2006). Hershel Shanks was the editor at that time, and he pushed me to make the essay fully understandable to a general audience. So I kept revising at his instigation, and it eventually got a prize. So of course I gave him credit in my acceptance.

We moved to Yale in 2000 as professors in the Divinity School with secondary appointments in Religious Studies. When we arrived, Yale's tercentennial was about to be celebrated. A wonderful conference was held in connection with the celebration, organized by Margot Fassler and Harry Attridge and sponsored by the Institute of Sacred Music, which is affiliated with the Divinity School. She was the director of the institute at the time. The conference was on the psalms in community from the beginning until the present. A new musical composition was commissioned, and people from various fields gave presentations on the psalms from the point of view of their specialties. I presented a paper on the psalm or hymn to Christ in chapter 2 of Paul's letter to the Philippians. In it I argued that Christ is presented there in contrast to human rulers who were violent and seized power. There's an analogy in the work of the Jewish exegete and philosopher Philo of Alexandria, who praises Moses for not seizing political power even though God had shared divine powers with him. Both Moses and Christ are presented as humble. That paper was published in the conference volume and also in the journal *Biblical Interpretation*.

While I was at Yale, I completed the commentary on Mark, which was published in 2007. It was a great relief to finish it because the commitment to write a commentary like that is a heavy weight to carry. I gave the presidential address at the Society for New Testament Studies in 2010 on the topic "The Female Body as Social Space in 1 Timothy." It was published in the journal *New Testament Studies* the following year. At Yale, I directed two dissertations, both by women. They have already established international scholarly reputations.

My post-commentary project is on the reception of Paul. My working title is "Paul Transformed: From Romans to Augustine," and I'm doing it topically and selectively. I have a contract with Yale University Press for that book. I retired from full-time

teaching in 2015, but in the very next month I chaired a colloquium in Leuven, Belgium. The universities there have a biblical colloquium every year; one year the theme relates to the Hebrew Bible, the next year to the New Testament. They had asked me earlier to lead one on Revelation. I was involved in deciding who would give main papers and vetting proposals for short papers. My presidential address at the colloquium was on "The Use of Scripture in the Book of Revelation." I also edited the conference volume, which is called *New Perspectives on the Book of Revelation*. It was published in 2017.

In May of 2019 I gave a paper, "Polemic against the Pharisees in Matthew 23," for a conference on Jesus and the Pharisees in Rome. It will be published in the conference volume. In the same month, I gave a paper, "Time and History: The Use of the Past and the Present in the Book of Revelation," at a symposium entitled Dreams, Visions, Imaginations: Jewish, Christian, and Gnostic Views of the World to Come, held in Barcelona. This paper will also be published in the conference volume.

In September of 2019 I gave three lectures on the book of Revelation at the Higher School of Economics to the students of the faculty of biblical studies. In the same month I gave a paper at a conference on current study of the Gospel of Mark, sponsored by the Theological Institute of postgraduate and doctoral studies of the Russian Orthodox Church. The title of my paper was "The Social Embodiment of Apocalyptic Ideas in the Milieu of the Gospel of Mark."

In October 2019 I co-taught a course with John in the School of History of Nanjing University in China. The title of the course was "Methods in Biblical Scholarship."

Another project is a multiyear seminar at the General Meetings of the Society for New Testament Studies, which I am cochairing with a German professor, Christine Gerber. She is at Humboldt University in Berlin. The seminar met for three consecutive days at the General Meeting in the summer of 2019 in Marburg, Germany. Our topic is the Phenomenon of Pseudepigraphy, asking why ancient people often wrote in someone else's name. I would like to argue that each culture—namely, the Second Temple Jewish, the Greek, and the Roman—had different reasons and practices, and that there is also diversity in the reasons and practices within each one. At the first meeting I presented a paper on Roman practices of pseudepigraphy.

We were unable to meet in the summer of 2020 due to the pandemic. I look forward to the second round of papers in the summer of 2021, whether in person or virtually.