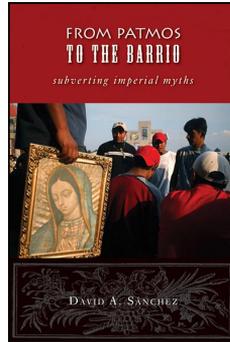


○ **REVIEW OF DAVID SÁNCHEZ, *FROM PATMOS TO THE BARRIO: SUBVERTING IMPERIAL MYTHS***
(MINNEAPOLIS, MI: FORTRESS PRESS, 2008)

Eric Repphun, Otago University



In *From Patmos to the Barrio: Subverting Imperial Myths*, American New Testament scholar David A. Sánchez intriguingly draws together three far-flung moments – first century Asia Minor, seventeenth century Mexico, and twenty-first century California – by examining three related examples of how important cultural narratives have been subverted and re-appropriated by those the stories sought to oppress or marginalise. The first, the Dragon Slayer narrative, had its beginnings in justifying Roman imperialism but was later appropriated by oppressed Jews and Christians. The second – and most important to Sánchez’s account of the rise of Chicana/o (resistant Mexican-American) culture, the focus of much of the book – is the story of the appearance of the Virgin of Guadalupe outside of Mexico City in the early colonial period. The third, which takes us into the present, is that of Manifest Destiny, one of the founding narratives of American culture, one which justifies the conviction that the United States has a divinely sanctioned right to expand its territory and a divinely mandated duty to bring light to benighted (usually non-white, non English-speaking) people both within and outside of its borders.

Sánchez suggests a novel starting point that compresses his many concerns – history, Chicana/o culture, biblical interpretation – into a single act: ‘This journey is best begun by simultaneously reading Revelation 12:1 while gazing at a photo of the Virgin of Guadalupe’ (p. 2). He follows this suggestion with what is perhaps the most immediately compelling aspect of the book, an appendix of photographs of extant murals of the Virgin of Guadalupe in the *barrios* (poor, Spanish-speaking, immigrant neighbourhoods) of Los Angeles. The murals both instantiate Sánchez’s larger argument and bring it vibrantly to life. Sánchez’s thesis is admirable in its simplicity:

people living on the margins of power – specifically in imperial, colonial, and neocolonial contexts – will challenge the centres of power in patterned ways over time and culture. The primary premise in support of this thesis is that, as one strategy of domination, dominating groups employ and perpetuate imperial

myths that configure and establish social order and cultural hierarchy in their favor ... The second, reciprocal premise is that dominated peoples respond to this ordering by adopting and subverting the very myths used to dominate them. This is especially true of the Bible and biblical interpretation (p. 4).

He begins by tracing the history of the Dragon Slayer myth until its incorporation into the final form of Rev. 12. The myth provides a connecting thread for Sánchez's journey through the centuries. The myth is rooted in the need to legitimate imperial power:

This Greek myth was used at the apex of Roman attempts to reorder the post-republic era after the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 B.C.E. and the rise of Augustus Caesar subsequent to his defeat of Marc Antony in the battle of Actium in 31 B.C.E. Rome appropriated the earlier Dragon Slayer myth to claim a genealogical relationship between the new emperor and the god Apollo (p. 13).

Consequently, the narrative also demonised the enemies and the marginalised sub-classes of the Roman empire; however, the story was given a new twist at the hands of Roman Jews, who installed their longed-for Messiah in the place of Caesar as the bringer of order and the defeater of the dragon. The Christian retelling of the Jewish myth turns it into a direct challenge to Jewish oppression of the Christian minority: 'A Christian, by adopting the Jewish redeployment of the Dragon Slayer myth, could simultaneously critique the Roman Empire – again by subverting Apollonian motifs – and also the Jewish authorities who first cast this story in Jewish terms' (p. 39).

Back in the present, Sánchez's readers encounter a disorienting jump of more than a thousand years between pages 46 and 47, landing in colonial Mexico during the seventeenth century. Before moving on to the second of his three disputed mythologies, Sánchez succinctly traces the genealogy of the dominant political/theological notions that lay behind the Spanish drive for empire. This subtle and compelling history, which teases out the connections between the Spanish *reconquista* of the Iberian Peninsula and its conquest of the New World, is one of the book's great strengths. However, Sánchez is more concerned with the struggle over the story of the first appearance of the Virgin of Guadalupe to a man named Juan Diego outside Mexico City in the late 1640s. The Virgin, originally a well-loved icon in Spain, was transported over the Atlantic and used to justify the legitimacy of Spanish colonial power. Reports of her appearance in Mexico became a locus for a power struggle between the Spanish, the indigenous Mexica people, and the Creoles (people of Spanish descent born in the New World, thought to be inferior). The battle over the Virgin was, like the one over the Dragon Slayer, waged at least partially through successive re-appropriations of the story of the Virgin's appearance. Both of the subordinate groups used the manifestation as a way to subvert the Spanish power by appropriating the icon of the *conquistadores* in their own interests.

Building from this historical struggle, Sánchez tackles Manifest Destiny, long a major building block in the American narrative economy. Sánchez brings out the effects that the story has had, and continues to have, on the Chicana/o population. Sánchez argues that this myth retains much of its power:

With the influx of Mexican migrants into the United States in this post-9/11 era, the ugly head of U. S. notions of exceptionalism has reared itself once again ... Xenophobia is in fashion once again, leading to the dehumanization and stereotyping of the most vulnerable of peoples (p. 93).

Against this, Sánchez places the resistant, endlessly mutable image of the Virgin, to whom the self-identity of Chicana/o culture has long been tied. The Virgin thus remains inextricably intertwined with a conflict of narratives, this time that of Manifest Destiny. This is especially true, Sánchez tells us, of *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán*, a treatise inspired by the writings of Alberto Ulrista and drafted at the First National Chicano Youth Liberation Conference in 1969 (Sánchez helpfully includes a translation of the *Plan* as an Appendix). The *Plan*, which alludes to the United States Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, again takes an imperial narrative and turns it on its head. These are, he argues, ‘powerful allusions that appropriate and subvert the very language used by the founders of the United States’ (p. 102).

This leads into Sánchez’s concluding argument: biblical scholars have an obligation to engage with the voices of the colonised and thus with postcolonial theory:

Colonized peoples are in a distinctive position to shed light on the collective body of academic knowledge concerning Bible and biblical interpretation, domination and resistance, that has been traditionally been written from the perspective of the colonizer (p. 121).

His engagement with postcolonial ideas adds some subtle and necessary nuances to his central structure, nuances that show that Sánchez has a firm grasp on the concrete difficulties of social liberation: ‘To create an antimythology is as futile as armed resistance, so instead, they choose to create a countermythology that devalues the original myth while simultaneously recontextualising and restructuring it in their favour’ (p. 122). Sánchez also sees postcolonial theory quite rightly as a direct challenge to the academy: ‘we must redirect our historical gaze to the shadows of empire, to those interstitial and hybrid spaces where marginalised peoples are actively and continually producing offstage countermythologies’ (p. 3).

There is something undeniably hopeful about Sánchez’s book, in spite of the long history of oppression that it recounts. He pins this hope onto the further deployment of narrative, and biblical narrative in particular, as an ideological tool. This hope points to a fundamental tension in the book between biblical interpretation and the *use* of biblical narratives, a tension that Sánchez never manages to resolve, at times confusing one for the other, at times simply ignoring the necessary distinctions between them.

There is much to admire in Sánchez’s book; however, these strengths are too often overshadowed by formal and stylistic missteps. His prose is in places highly inconsistent, to the point where passages of lucid and fluid writing are interrupted by a sentence or a phrase so awkward that it drops into the book with an almost audible thud. More importantly, Sánchez is over-reliant on the work of other scholars and uncritical of those he relies on the most heavily. In places, the first chapter amounts to little more than a summary of the work of Adela Yarbro Collins. His final chapter is perhaps equally problematic, in that it presents the sweep of postcolonial criticism in a simplistic, almost naïve fashion. Here Sánchez is reliant almost wholly on the work of Homi

Bhabha and his concepts of 'hybridity' and 'mimickry'. Where are Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, Gayatri Spivak, and Talal Asad? Too much of value has been simply ignored, in particular Said's *Culture and Imperialism*, a classic reading of narrative as a colonial battleground. Because of these formal problems, the book comes across in places as both tentative and derivative. This is a particular shame because, in the final analysis, it is neither of these things.