Speaker 1 (00:01):

Yale Podcast Network. Welcome to the podcast, a Yale Divinity School podcast series focusing on issues related to religion, culture, and politics. In this episode, YDS alum, Emily Judd, interviews YDS Associate Professor of New Testament Yi, Jan Lin, about the Biblical Book of Revelation. Professor Lin compares the final judgment described in Revelation to modern immigration policies.

Yii Jan Lin (00:28):

There's a huge multitude and they're awaiting judgment. And then books are opened. So that is the bureaucratic moment at which the records are checked, right, which also should seem pretty familiar to us, to anybody who has crossed a border into a different country,

Speaker 1 (00:41):

She argues against using the Bible in American national discourse.

Yii Jan Lin (00:45):

We don't need to use the Bible in the public sphere in that way because it's not applicable to everyone. In the moment you insist that it is, then that's exclusionary for those who don't have that heritage and don't have that belief system. And

Speaker 1 (00:58):

Professor Lynn explains the historical link between infectious diseases in the United States and xenophobia.

Yii Jan Lin (01:04):

Our experiences with covid and xenophobia really are just repeating patterns that we've already seen in dealing with disease in throughout American history.

Emily Judd (01:16):

Professor Lynn, your latest book is intended to show how American immigration ideology has been influenced by the Book of Revelation, the final book of the New Testament. In your book, you argue that the idea of the new Jerusalem in the Bible has actually been used to fuel xenophobia and exclusion in the United States. You refer to immigration processes at Angel Island in San Francisco, at Ellis Island in New York City. What does the entry into the new Jerusalem in Revelation have to do with the immigration experience in America?

Yii Jan Lin (01:54):

Yeah, so I think it's, at first seems a bit bizarre to juxtapose the book of Revelation with immigration and entry and that sort of thing. But if we can set aside preconceived notions of theology and end times and just think about it as a book of migration, then it becomes much clearer how those things overlap with processes we have in place with immigration and American history of that process. So for example, when you get to, first of all, there's all the escape from climate change, disaster, so you can think of and war and conflict, which is taking up the bulk of the book of Revelation. But up until you get to the judgment of the dead there you have segregation, which is happening at both ports of entry, men and women on the side of Angel Island. You do have also people who are considered white and constructed

that way, and then those coming from Asia constructed Asian or Oriental as they're called at the time. So immediately a separation of different populations, which is also happening at the last judgment.

Emily Judd (03:00):

So in the Book of Revelation, what actually is the criteria for the separation between those who are going to make it into the new Jerusalem and those who aren't, and how does that compare to the modern immigration inspection? So

Yii Jan Lin (03:15):

We have all the dead living and past dead of all history. Everyone who's ever died showing up, and there's a huge multitude and they're awaiting judgment. And then books are opened. So that is the bureaucratic moment at which the records are checked, which also should seem pretty familiar to us, to anybody who has crossed a border into a different country. So we have to see if your name is registered in the Book of life, and then on top of that, what your deeds are, right? Books are open and consulted to see what people have done in their lives. So there are two different types of records being checked, and that's also mirrored in the ways we do immigration today. If you have a visa, if your name is listed, if you are on a blacklist is also a possibility. So that is also part of inspection and also health inspection.

(04:06):

So that takes place now no longer at US borders, but more in the embassies with which you would get visas. But at the time for Angel Island and Ellis Island, when they were still in operation, many of those inspections would take place there. So you would be marked with chalk at Ellis Island if you walked with a limp for example, or if you seemed unhealthy in a particular way, you sent to a different place to be inspected. Same with Angel Island. You would definitely go through inspection no matter what if you were coming from Asia, and then you would also be detained for a period of days up to weeks and even longer on the island. And that's also something that comes up you wouldn't expect in Revelation, but it does. So in the new Jerusalem, in chapter 22 of Revelation, it says, blessed are those who wash their robes so that they can enter through the gates, and there's a sense of cleanliness and health. And wearing white robes is emphasized throughout the book. So also we have those who are evil doers or the filthy will always be filthy in chapter 22. So there's a separation also and a sense of cleanliness or hygiene that's also echoed in our processes, both in the past and now in the present.

Emily Judd (05:15):

The Book of Revelation is a book that's within this genre of apocalyptic literature, which is known to be mysterious. It's difficult to understand because it's language is highly symbolic and dense, and it focuses on topics like crisis judgment, the end of the world. What amount of blame do you actually put on the genre for the interpretations that have come out of it that have spurred xenophobia?

Yii Jan Lin (05:44):

I would say I don't think a text or genre itself can cause harm, or I think human beings bear the responsibility of enacting harm. That being said, I do think if someone creates something that's meant to inspire xenophobia, that's meant to inflame, I think of racist manifestos or films like Triumph of the Will or Birth of a Nation, the creators are responsible for putting that into the world and hoping to be incendiary in those particular ways. After the creation of that though, I think in terms of the author of Revelation, we don't know what intentions were, and it's not quite as explicit, I think, as those particular works of history. And it's also coming from a different context altogether thousands of years ago. So I don't know if it's useful to talk about blaming the author or text or genre in that sense, but we are of

course responsible for our interpretation today. So whatever ethics or interpretations we create are on us. And so I could watch Birth of a Nation today and have lots of different reactions to it. I could embrace it, I could be disgusted by it. And I think that's the same with something like apocalyptic and with Revelation is what are the ways that you're going to interpret this for a faith community, for scholarship, for a wider audience politically as well. That's really the blame of that and the harm that that can cause is on the way we carry it forward.

Emily Judd (07:12):

In the book, you make an argument that some might find controversial because you argue that America needs to forget the Book of Revelation and erase it from the national imagination and discourse. But how realistic actually is this? And given the fact that there are many other biblical books that have been appropriated throughout American history to serve certain political agendas, what other solutions are there other than just doing away with Revelation completely?

Yii Jan Lin (07:43):

I think there are two different conversations. So in terms of American identity and nationalism, I think for sure Revelation should not be a part of the conversation because as long as Christian nationalism or a swath of the population insists that America is a Christian nation, the xenophobia revelation is just going to be right for the picking, right for that kind of message. So I don't think it should be used in any way in a national sense. Yeah, I'll just leave it at that. But for faith communities, I think of whether or how to use that. I think it should be extricated from a national identity because it's been used so long in terms of thinking about American exceptionalism and justification for whatever it's doing in the world. And I think it is possible for a national level, I would say we don't need to use the Bible in the public sphere in that way because it's not applicable to everyone in the moment you insist that it is, then that's exclusionary for those who don't have that heritage and don't have that belief system. So I would say that I would recommend leaving it out if possible.

Emily Judd (08:52):

So in your analysis of the modern American immigration experience, you also discuss and focus on the plagues in purity that are detailed in the Book of Revelation, and you compare it with the historic blame on immigrants in the United States for spreading infectious diseases. We just went through the COVID-19 pandemic a couple years ago where we witnessed parallel rises in both discrimination against Asians and apocalyptic this idea that we're living in the end of times. What historical precedence did you see echoed in the COVID-19 pandemic?

Yii Jan Lin (09:34):

I mean, I think our experiences with covid and xenophobia really are just repeating patterns that we've already seen in dealing with disease throughout American history. So for example, when we America was dealing with yellow fever outbreak in the Philadelphia area, there was a sense of blame for those who are coming from the West Indies in Haiti and arriving on those shores. In other examples later we have the association of unwanted immigrant groups like Irish with cholera, Jews and Italians with tuberculosis and others. And then definitely I think one of the most virulent examples is virulent pun intended of Chinese and association with leprosy and smallpox and other diseases. And it was linked with punishment from God. We need to repent from this. We need to cleanse ourselves not only from immorality, but also from these people who are presented as corrupting as going to invade the United States in a particular pestilent way.

(10:41):

We see a similar move with Covid. So in the beginning we have blame on because of geographic location of Wuhan and China, an apocalyptic prophetic fear of end of the end times kind of discussion and also blame on Chinese as just being disgusting of eating disgusting foods. And that there's a conflation, which also happens throughout history of China, the nation with Chinese ethnicities living in the US as American citizens, it doesn't matter that they've been here for their whole lives. They can represent China forever. And because China geopolitically is a rival of the us, there's going to be an easy political blame of a particular nation and then of course associated peoples. And when that comes towards election time, fall of 2020 and then ramping up to the Biden Trump election, we have that blame.

Emily Judd (11:35):

So speaking of politics, a recent Pew Research Center poll actually found that immigration was a top issue among all voters in the 2024 election, and that reflected in the campaign rhetoric as well. In the book, you highlight the Trump wall, the Biden emphasis on strong borders. How much did the modern political discourse revolving around immigration motivate your writing of this book?

Yii Jan Lin (12:03):

So I began thinking about the themes of the book starting in 2015. So that was before, I mean, ramping up to the first election between Trump and Clinton in 2016. So it wasn't directly related, although immigration has been a contentious topic for many, many years. And I think the extreme discourse around that was beginning to ramp up. At the time I was actually asked, I was teaching in Berkeley at the time. I was asked in California, I was asked to reflect on some readings for Advent for an Asian community, and they were apocalyptic in nature. And it was really weird to think about how do we think about apocalyptic and advent and Asian, Asian American immigration experience. And I also had grown up in the Bay Area in California, and there's a lot of really heavenly names and themes in that area that got me thinking this is also a port of immigrant entry.

(13:01):

And what is that like to have this vision of arriving in paradise and not have it turn out to be that way, which is also apocalyptic in its own right. So for example, the names of the Bay Area, you have Golden Gate, obviously an Angel island is the place where you would be detained, you would arrive at the Golden State. Chinese immigrants had called San Francisco Gold Mountain. And even now in my family, we call San Francisco Old Gold Mountain Joji scent. So those names stick around. So there's a sense of a heavenly aura, and you're arriving at paradise. It's the American dream, which can also go horribly wrong for many people who are rejected at the border or turned away. So it's this sense of arrival or destruction or devastation. So I began to think of those terms in 2015 as I started thinking maybe I should dig a little bit more on the surface. And then it was as if prophetically, I don't want to claim anything, but things started to ramp up in terms of this discourse. And at some point I was like, I have to stop writing this book because I could just keep going.

Emily Judd (14:10):

So in the acknowledgements at the beginning of your book, you thank quite a few YDS professors, including Laura Nara, Don McCrae, Clifton Granby, and more for helping you bring the book to completion. Can you speak to the faculty collaboration at Yale Divinity School?

Yii Jan Lin (14:27):

Yeah, so what's great about being on faculty here is just the number of conversation partners and resources that I had writing this book. So I'm not an American religious historian by training, and I'm really coming to this from a New Testament scholar point of view. So actually, Tisa Weger was a huge resource for me, and she was really just generous with her time and discussing and suggesting You should check out this book, or this really touches on the topic. So more than a few times, she was able to give me input on that and work on the manuscript with me in improving it. And also, I mean others like Laura nra also reading certain chapters and giving me feedback on that. And colleagues also, were also open to being part of writing groups together, which also always leads to conversation. We'll say over the summer, let's meet on Thursdays and write in the morning, something like that, and will give us time to chit-chat in between and share ideas and point each other to bibliography. That would be really helpful. So there's just a really sense of we're free to help each other think and think through different arguments that we're making, and also offer resources from what our expertise allows us to do. So it's just been really great to have definite sharing of those resources and ideas together.

Emily Judd (15:42):

Well, we've come to the end of our time, unfortunately. Thank you so much, professor Lynn for joining us on the podcast. Great. Thanks so much, Emily.

Speaker 1 (15:51):

Thanks for listening today. We hope you'll tune in again for the next episode of the YDS Quad Cast.