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**Revisiting the Book of Revelation in the Context and the Makala Prison  
Experience in the Democratic Republic of Congo**

Prof. Dr Lazare Sebitereko Rukundwa

President of Eben-Ezer University of Minembwe, South-Kivu, DR Congo

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**Abstract**

Growing up, the story of John at Patmos felt like a legend to me. However, through my theological training and my visit to the island with my wife in December 2024, the socio-political meaning of the book became a reality. The historical background of John's Apocalypse remains largely hidden from many churchgoers in rural settings like my own. Yet, my fifteen months of imprisonment in Makala prison in DRC without prosecution encouraged me to revisit the political context of John's arrest and his exile to Patmos. The article discusses the political environment of John's imprisonment, the apocalyptic language and defiance mechanisms he used to challenge Roman persecution, and the apocalyptic vision of a new heaven and a new earth.

**Keywords:** Justice, prison, politics and faith

**1. Introduction**

The Book of Revelation is the last book of the Bible, with its authorship attributed to John around 95-96 AD (Koester 2020:27; Bogart 1982:8). This was a period of intense war that saw the destruction of Jerusalem and the Second Temple in 70 A.D and the persecution of the Church under the Roman Empire (Hegumen, 2025:12) forcing thousands of its inhabitants to scatter around the region for safety, as it is today in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. Under Emperor Domitian, the imperial cult became a point of conflict for the Johannine community, who believed instead in the Risen Christ. The book contains a message of both comfort and warning, encouraging members of the seven churches in Asia Minor (modern western Turkey) to persevere and remain faithful amidst trials, persecution, cultural assimilation, and temptation to compromise with Roman religious beliefs. In the socio-cultural setting of the Roman empire, the veneration of the emperor was a mandatory obligation. John opposed this and fell victim to accusations of "subversive activity," resulting in his arrest and imprisonment on Patmos Island. It is within this socio-political context that John's book of Apocalypse was written.

Apocalyptic literature emerges from marginalized voices and expresses a state of political oppression or discrimination where socio-economic and religious freedoms are not protected. Whitaker (2020:1-11) explains that Jewish apocalyptic literature came into being in "a form of resistance literature" that utilizes "vivid descriptions of violence and poetic symbols of hope" to

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encourage community members who identify themselves as “victims to maintain their resistance to political pressure or injustice.” Amidst suffering and persecution while in prison, John’s eschatological vision of the new heavens and a new earth was an expression of defiance against the existing political powers that destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple—the institutions that incarnated the identity of Jewish people. As an expression of resistance and hope, the book of Revelation offers an alternative message of a divine system designed to deal with evil. On the other hand, the experience of Makala prison in Kinshasa stands as an existing testimony of the continued injustice done of ruling powers that use oppression, intimidation and imprisonment to silence the voices of the powerless.

## **2. Political circumstance of the John’s imprisonment at Patmos**

John is considered to have been exiled to Patmos during a time of persecution under the Roman rule of the emperor Domitian in the late 1st century. Thus, Revelation is an “apocalyptic book on God and his agents who fight an apocalyptic war against evil at the end of time and finally destroys the evil power” (Labahn 2014:4). Revelation 1:9 states: “I, John, both your brother and companion in tribulation... was on the island that is called Patmos for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ.” While the book of Revelation does not offer detail on how he was taken from Ephesus to Patmos and for how long he remained there, one can imagine that within a repressive government, any person accused of “subversive activities” faced death or life imprisonment. For the Roman empire, sending John to Patmos meant a sentence of life imprisonment.

The island of Patmos is situated in the Aegean Sea (Thompson 1990:11). It belongs to Greece, lying off the southwest coast of Turkey, and has an area of about 34.05 square kilometers with a population of over 3,000 (Collins Dictionary, n.d.). It is about 350km away from the Piraeus hub of Athens. When my wife and I visited, the journey took eight hours by ferry. It is a barren island with only limited agricultural options. Today, the island is a tourist location, which serves as the backbone of its economy with the main port of Skala. Patmos is a rocky land where its inhabitants plant exotic trees, mainly eucalyptus and cedars, along with fruit trees surrounding the cave and the monasteries on the mountain. According to Dictionary of Scripture Proper Names (Jackson, n.d.), Patmos means “my killing.” Historically, it was a sterile and uninhabitable land that couldn’t produce crops. Due to these harsh conditions, the Roman Empire used Patmos as a prison—a place of relegation for criminals and those deemed dangerous to the power in place. In this way, John was among the many victims of the emperor’s iron fist.

### *The imperial Cult and the Two Kingdoms*

As the Roman Empire governed such a large region, it embraced diverse peoples, tribes and religions. As long as these cults did not interfere with the Roman political governance, people were free to worship. “The Romans typically did not initiate action against Christians in the first century, but they would take action when others denounced the followers of Jesus as a threat to the social order” (Koester 2020:30). Rome provided instructions on how to live as good citizens throughout the entire empire. In the imperial cult, the emperor “was subordinated to the gods, so

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that the imperial cult could be assimilated to the cult of the gods” (Thompson 1990:164). In the Gospels, the evangelists initially negotiated a common ground with the Roman government by advising their communities to fulfill their social responsibilities as good citizens. “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s” (Mark 12:17). However, the situation changed as war intensified in Palestine and the relationship between Jesus' followers and the Roman empire and its religious collaborators deteriorated.

Contrary to Roman religious politics, faith in Jesus began to take a distinct direction, separating itself from other religions of the time, which put its members into direct confrontation with the Roman empire. Christian faith, therefore, became a politico-religious opposition and consequently suffered persecution (Meta 2023:233). In this context, it may be understood why the Apostle Paul employed a “soft” religious diplomacy (Rom 13). Politically, Paul recognized that both government and church have different functions while fulfilling social and divine responsibilities. And it is also seen that Paul’s confrontation with the Roman judicial systems was influenced by the Jewish religious conspiracies (Acts 13). But John, the evangelist, apostle, theologian and prophet, held an opposite view of the role of the Roman government. To him, it is an agent of the devil, whose *Pax Romana* was unjust, characterized by violence, oppression, corruption and idolatry (John 10; Rev: 21:8). He believed it must be overthrown by the divine government led by Jesus, the descendent of King David (Rev 5).

#### *Johannine Theology and the Fluidity of Time*

All Johannine writings maintain a constant political position, from the Gospel to the Epistles and Revelation. Moving from the perspective of a boat expert to a theologian, the Apostle John portrays Jesus as the King over Roman emperors; the only hope for his community, not a mere historical figure in time and space, but a personified divinity who embraces eternity. The introduction of John’s Gospel begins at the start of time: “The Word Is” (John 1:1). In the Epistles, John repeats “that which was in the beginning,” referring to the Word of life (1 John 1:1) and the truth which will be with us forever (2 John 1:2). The book of Revelation 1:8 is arguably the summary of Johannine biblical theology. The notion of time in John’s revelation is “fluid” rather than chronological, appearing as a dream that mixes different eras “rather than showing one long chronological story” (Leah 2018).

Alpha and the Omega—referring to Him who is, who was, and who is to come—take on new meaning here, echoing Deuteronomy 32:39: “I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and make alive, I wound and I heal.”. John is constructing a “Christocentric” history (Mihoc 2023:1; Guthrie 1994) that portrays “what the victory won on the Cross means for the whole subsequent history.” John was forging a new identity within the Roman empire in the aftermath of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Second Temple. He was concerned with the survival and socio-political well-being of his community under persecution, a position that placed him in direct conflict with the established imperial power structures.

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*Conflict, Identity, and Resistance*

Meta (2023:228) engages in “alternatives to persecution.” While several theologians (Tenney 1957 :23, Resseguie 2009 :90, Tonstad 2006 :3, Loren 2003:123-127) viewed Revelation as a narrative of “spiritual conflict between God and Satan” and their respective agents, the Lamb and the Beast, Loren (2003:127) develops an apocalyptic theory of “non-violent resistance” symbolized by these figures(Rev 5; 13). However, Meta argues that spiritualization of this conflict can accentuate the theodicy of Revelation while it relativizing actual oppression, reinforcing the “otherworldly ethos of fundamentalist interpretations.”

Most of John’s Jewish community was scattered throughout the region seeking refuge, and John himself settled in Ephesus during this period. He reflects the sentiment: “The world hates you, because it hated me first (John 15:18-25). It has destroyed our city (Jerusalem), our Temple, killed our King (Jesus) and his people, looted our properties, and evicted us from our land and made us errant with no home nor identity in the region; therefore, “abide in Me” (John 14:20; 15:4). This statement, as simple as it is, carries the weight of an anchor not only as Johns’ personal conviction but as the doctrine of the Church until the end of time. To John, “the world” represents all influences from the Roman empire, Hellenic culture and Judaism that opposed the Christ-believing community. According to Thompson (1990:195-196), John and his community are situated in Roman society “as a group of people who understand themselves as a minority that continuously encounters and attacks the larger Christian community and the even larger Roman social order.” Although John’s revelation is “grounded in first-century Asian life... in all power structures in all dimensions of human society..., “it entangles itself as opposition”. The message “opposes the public order and enters the fray as other ‘deviant’ groups in the empire.” For John and his community, the message of revelation is an alternative “to the knowledge derived from the public order” which makes them sectarian and subversive.

Consequently, John's message is not abstract, it addresses existing local churches defined by their specific context() of persecution and suffering experienced by their members (Lee 1999:213; Boesak 1987: 25). There is no doubt that John's imprisonment was related to his faith in Jesus Christ. John was arrested while in Ephesus, where he had relocated due to war in his homeland. It was a prominent city, a hub for trade and the home of the temple of Artemis(Key 2016:12). John and other believers considered the Roman empire to be the “as agent of the devil” because of the imperial cult. According to Thompson (1990:104-107) this cult was present across “many reigns andwas a tradition of the people around the Mediterranean region, “where worship and deification of rulers had a long history.” In Asia Minor, where John preached, the practice of deifying emperors had been a significant force since the time of Augustus. Thus, any allegiance to the Roman government was seen as contrary to the standards of John’s community across the seven church-cities. (Rev 2-3).

On the other hand, John’s message dealt with internal conflicts (Sanchez 2008) within his community regarding liberal stance on social and spiritual behaviors found in the seven churches (Rev 2-3). These issues included the false identities of church leaders, the practices of Nicolaitans, those who belong to the synagogue of Satan, the eating of idol food, and economic

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and prophetic competitions (Duff 2001: 14-15). According to Meta (2023 :229, see Glabach 2007; Thompson 1990:191), the conflict was not only with the Roman empire and its collaborators; John also addressed prophetic rivalry within the community. The violent rhetoric in Revelation reflects an internal power struggle between prophets—specifically John, Jezebel, and those following the teachings of Balaam. John’s revelation seeks to correct these issues and establish Christian principles to follow for his endangered community. The spread of these liberal movements “provided a significant challenge to John’s authority within the churches, leading him to heighten his rhetoric to strengthen his position and protect the community from opponents.” (Britannica, 2024).

### **3. The Apocalyptic language in Revelation**

The book of Revelation is often difficult for the contemporary church to read for several reasons: (i) the social setting; (ii) the language codification such as symbols, imagery, numbers and prophetic rivalry; (iii) methodologies of biblical interpretations influenced by time and space. These and many other factors raise concerns for laypeople, preachers and theologians alike as they attempt to understand the message behind symbols used in different contexts including crisis, war, persecution, and natural calamities. As Thompson (1990: 25-26) notes “apocalypses do not arise in just one ‘setting in life’”; rather, they emerge from the heart of crisis or harsh times.

Thompson cites Hanson (1979:432), who identifies two major apocalyptic periods: Jews in the exilic period in Babylon (587 BCE) and the Maccabean period (170 BCE). During these times, the Jewish people lost their national, political and religious identities to their enemies. Consequently, “world-weary visionaries began to recognize in a mythologized version of eschatology a more promising way of keeping alive a hope for final vindication.” Furthermore, the social changes brought about by cross-cultural contact such as in the postexilic period of Israel or the rise of early Christianity, “exacerbate disorder, disorganization, conflict, and a sense of deprivation” that are conducive for creating a context of apocalypse. Thompson (1990:28) argues:

An apocalypse thus functions in a social situation not only to bring comfort, hope, perseverance, and the like but also to cause people to see their situation as one in which such functions are needed and appropriate. An apocalypse can create the perception that a situation is one of crisis and then offer hope, assurance, and support for faithful behavior in dealing with that crisis.

According to Labahn (2014:6), the book of Revelation “incorporates various texts, pictures and ideas built upon ancient culture as well as its philosophical or religious ideas. Through such a strategy, Revelation shows a profound knowledge and understanding of various ancient political, religious and cultural systems.” These are borrowed from his socio-political context influenced by “biblical-Jewish traditions and Hellenistic-Roman background.” Like any apocalyptic community, John uses a language that is familiar to his audience and addresses the immediate concerns of community members. Even the seven churches, to which the revelation is first addressed, do not share their locales; the messages delivered by angels are tailored to the context

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of each church and its city setting (Key 2016:12-15). So, the message of an apocalypse taken to a specific audience carries with it a “true knowledge about the cosmos, religion, the political order, local economic transactions, and the nature of social life” (Thompson 1990:28) of that particular context. John links the seven city-churches to his visions so that they become part of its message and “do not read or hear them as ‘external’” to that very intended message (Thompson 1990:180).

### *Coded Language and the “Colis”*

This reminds me of the coded language code within the Banyamulenge community during times of conflicts, where political leaders and key terms are often codified. During AFDL war of 1996-97, Laurent Desire Kabila was nicknamed *Gashigo*. In Kinyamulenge, *a-kabira* refers to a small forest and *a-gashigo* refers to a small bush. Members of the community would refer to Kabila as *Gashigo* in their conversation so that outsiders would not understand who was being discussed. Similarly, former MP Moise Nyarugabo was nicknamed *Gongwa*, one of the mountains in the Bijombo location in South Kivu Province, where his family lived.

Symbols or images are used to carry significant messages through figurative language. Every sectarian community has its own codified way of communicating especially in difficult times. During my time of arrest in June 2023, military intelligence officers in Kinshasa communicated in a coded language; I was referred to as a *colis*, or “parcel.”

In every culture, symbols play a very vital role in all spheres of life, including religion. It is no surprise to see the use of symbols, metaphors, numbers or imagery in the Bible and other religious sacred books. As a means of communication, they carry deep cultural and spiritual meanings. "Over the centuries, they have been passed down from generation to generation and are an integral part of religious heritage" (Tatala & Wojtasiński 2024: 237). They serve to protect and codify meaning within a specific context.

In every culture, symbols play a very important role in all spheres of life including religion. It is not a surprise to see the use of symbols, metaphors, numbers or imageries in the Bible and other religious sacred books. As a means of communication, they carry a deep cultural and spiritual meanings to real life. “Over the centuries, they have been passed down from generation to generation and are an integral part of religious heritage” (Tatala & Wojtasiński 2024:237). They can be used to codify meaning in a particular context.

### *Imagery and Sound in a Traumatic Context*

The symbolic language found in the book of Revelation (Hegumen 2025:16, Butt 2024, Jordaan 2013) is generated from a traumatic context of a prisoner. John’s circumstances were a complication in themselves; psychologically, his dreams could easily be dismissed as hallucinations. However, his audience, the members of the seven-city churches, was well-accustomed to apocalyptic literature. In their daily conversations, the use of jargons/symbols, parables and parallelism was not new to them, particularly within a repressive political context.

They also had access to ancient world literature and historical realities. For example, Ezekiel (38-39) contains the story of Gog and Magog, and Daniel 7 describes four beasts from the sea. In the New Testament, the Gospels record Jesus using parables of sheep and goats (Mat 25:31-46), and Luke records Jesus calling Herod a fox “Go and tell that fox for me” (Luke 13:31-35).

In Revelation 5-6, there are scrolls and lamb, the seals, and the lion; alongside living creatures, elders, stars, the moon, caves and the rocks of the mountains. Numerical symbols are also prevalent (Kuykendall 2022: 472–489) such as number seven, which appears in the seven churches, seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls. Chapters 12-13 refer to the dragon, the pregnant woman, the child, followed by the fall of Babylon in chapter 17. In chapter 21, John refers to new heavens and a new earth, the new Jerusalem, a bride and a groom. Beyond these metaphors and symbols used in John’s communication, there is also a profound use of songs and sounds in Revelation (Rev 5:8-14; 7:9-12; 11:17-18; 15:3-4; 16:5-6). Within a cultural setting, songs have long played a role in the fight against oppression (Rukundwa 2006:39, 63-64,194). They sang the song of Moses and the Lamb “...All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed” (Rev 5:3-4).

#### **4. Death and Resurrection Story: A Defiance to the Roman Oppression**

I have been a victim and I have witnessed innocent people discriminated against, harassed, imprisoned. I have seen people become refugees or internally displaced; I have seen hundreds of people killed, their villages and livelihood reduced to ashes simply because of ethnic/ tribal differences. Minority groups and poor people have no space to call their own. The world has watched the deaths of thousands of immigrants at sea, while threatened individuals are barred from access to safety. According to statistics, between 2016 and 2024, over 31,400 people have died in the Mediterranean sea (Statista, 2024). They are continually victimized to the extent of becoming guilty of their innocence, because the powerful own space and justice. The powerful intimidate the weak and death becomes the ultimate negotiated end whether the victim deserves it or not. Can death intimidate justice? What we live through today reminds us of the context of the death and resurrection of Jesus during the Roman Empire in the first century of our era.

##### *The Political aspect of Jesus Ministry*

Jesus’s ministry drew crowds whenever he passed through or sojourned, whether in villages or cities. His presence among the ordinary citizens affected by the war, displacement, poverty and exploitative bourgeoisie, meant hope and protection. They saw in him a Messiah, a King, a Revolutionary leader who will take away the Roman yoke and the religious exploitive methods (Rukundwa 2006: 236-274). He stood in the gap and wanted to transform the society by reintroducing the essence of justice and human dignity for all. He ensured that children, the poor and foreigners had access to the Temple ( Matt 21:1-11), while providing healing to the sick and food to hungry multitudes (Matt 14: 13-21; John 6:1-14). He also taught agriculture and environment protection to farmers (Matthew 13:1-23, Mark 4:1-20, Luke 8:4-15), economics and savings to communities (Matt 20; 25:14-30); and He set an example of paying taxes (Matt 22:15-22) among many examples as a good citizen.

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However, these good works provoked animosity from political and religious rulers who saw in him a potential opponent. They plotted against Him in an effort to silence “the rebel”. Consequently, Jesus was accused, arrested, persecuted and unjustly condemned to death for blasphemy (Mat 26:63-66; Mk 14:61-64; Lk 22:61-71). His groans like those of any punished criminal in the hands of Romans and rulers of the Temple pierced the realms of the universe and reached the heavens “My God... why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:45-47). In agony, Jesus turns to God whose power and rule transcend that of the Romans and the Religious! He is not alone.

The death penalty was a common punishment for criminals and anyone found guilty of subversive activities endangering security of the empire. “Executions were public, and the means of execution were deliberately agonizing for the condemned and frequently entertaining for the bystanders” (Ashby, n.d.). Methods of death punishment included crucifixion, being burned in a furnace, cast as prey for wild animals to name a few. Jesus was arrested, convicted and condemned to death after being accused of “participating in an insurrectional movement” against the Temple and the empire. His trial was inherently political and was crucified as a criminal, although the Roman justice had established no offense against him (Luke 23:4; John 19:6). Nevertheless, on his cross it was written, “Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews” (John 19:19). For the sake of Roman justice, Pilate had to find a cause to justify the judgment against Jesus. To the Chief priests, the inscriptions were scandalous. Jesus’ death not only was a shame to himself (Gal 3:13; Heb 12:2-3), but also a national humiliation to all who hoped in him for a Messiah.

On the other hand, Thompson (1990: 182-185) argues lengthily about public discourses in the Roman empire and in the Book of Revelation that expressed forms of freedom and free speech that came with Stoic and other philosophical ideals. These were used “to make various claims for freedom: free speech, liberty, free access to political power, a senate free from imperial constraint, and freedom from subjection to a higher ruler.” Philosophers made “histories filled with exemplary figures who upheld their ideals against past tyrants.” The writings and sayings of an opponent figure would be collected and shared by his relatives and disciples after his death “especially the last words of those who killed themselves —sometimes at the command of a tyrant —in perfect control at a gathering of friends and disciples.” At special occasions of the martyr tributes, eulogies, poems, and songs were shared not only in remembrance of the deceased but also as a means of “censoring the loss of liberty in the days of the principate.” In such a social setting death was “admired widely throughout the latter half of the first century CE as forms of protest against tyranny.”

“When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: ‘Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive forever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades’” (Revelation 1:17-18). Singata (2020: 319-345) explores the concept of “justice for the dead” in the light of John D. Caputo’s approach to resurrection, which seeks to ‘rewrite the history of the suffering with prayers and tears’ in a South African context. In his attempt, he wants to see this as an act of “remembering the victims of the past which is different from historiography.” According to

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Caputo cited by Singata, “the notion of a risen body, ‘is the refusal to separate oneself from the body’. In the notion of the risen body there is a negation of the body’s negation, namely death.” Therefore, “the risen body is protest” (2020:327).

The resurrection of the dead was not part of the earlier traditions (Nürnberg 2007 :232). Instead it first “appeared in the Judeo-Christian tradition” in the post-exilic era “as a result of the theodicy question: how can God be a God of justice if his faithful servants are unjustly killed while their murderers live long and prosperous lives without being judged? God can only be just, if God’s justice is greater than death.” Singata argues that “even in its earliest biblical appearances, resurrection means that God remembers every single body that is broken by imperial power. God protests the unjust imperial order by raising the dead” (2020:329). “Where is God in this history” in the making through a Christology of a risen man? Belief in resurrection is traced in the post-exilic prophetic texts such as the book of Ezekiel (Evans 2015:81-82), which means a “reward of the righteous individuals.” Bosman (2014:391) argues that “indications exist of the creativeness of prophetic innovation that played a role in the hermeneutical process” used in “Jewish literature of the Second Temple period.” Isaiah and Daniel can be quoted as well “But your dead will live; their bodies will rise... the earth will give birth to her dead” (Isa 26:19) and “Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake” (Dan 12:1-2).

Even during the exilic period, Ezekiel 37, shared a message of hope and resurrection of the dead in the vision of a valley of dry bones. “Son of man, can these bones live? ... Lord, you alone know... dry bones hear the word of the Lord (Ezek37:1-4) or the tender shoot from the top of a cedar (Ezek17:22-27); finally, this is intertwined with the hope for the future that Jeremiah brings about in the same exilic context “For I know the plans I have for you ... plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”(Jer 29:11)

John was among those who witnessed the horrific scene of crucifixion and courageously remained behind with Vaillant women (John 19:25-27) who still hoped that death could not consume their hero. Mary and her companions may have persistently waited for a miracle to happen defying the death imposed upon him by Roman and religious oppression. In that chaotic and mourning context Mary asks “Who will roll the stone for us?” Customary, they had come to terms with the reality of his death and went to embalm the body of Jesus (Mark 16:3). But the extraordinary happened overnight. He is risen (Matt 28:6, Mark 16: 5-7, Luke 24:6-7, John 20:1-9). The account of Jesus’ resurrection is first and foremost political. The message of the resurrection of Jesus means that “the one who was crushed was remembered by God. God defied Rome” and religious rulers by raising Him (Singata 2020:329). It involved the whole system of Roman military and security services to twist the report (Matt 28:1-15). The hasty trial, *urubanza rw’ikibiriraho*, remains legally questionable, as it failed to wait for more witnesses to appear and influence the decision of the judges (John 18-19). Likewise, the news of His resurrection had to be dismissed “You are to say, ‘His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep’” (Mat 28:13).

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This political “tag-war” over the resurrection story evidenced the disintegration of the Jewish community regarding the messiahship of Jesus and the Roman empire’s fear of a “self-proclaimed king,” who might disrupt the peace of Rome. With the help of the Roman empire, religious leaders wanted Jesus dead and forgotten, contrary to his followers who venerated His life and victory as the one “holding the keys of death and hades,” and subduing all powers. “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matt 28:18). While John’s Gospel skipped this account not until in the book of Revelation as Alpha and Omega, Victorious (John 1; 20:21-22). Jesus is back to work in full swing of powers, after walking over death, which was the last punishment of the Roman empire. Thus, “the triumphant resurrection” of Jesus serves as the ultimate proof of “the relevance of God’s promises for humankind in this world of injustice” (Vorster 2023:2).

John’s relegation to Patmos appeared to be his last chance to be closer to nature before he could have his final prayer in agony and despair. However, he writes: “I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. On the Lord’s Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet...” (Rev 1: 9-10). The connotation of this short phrase “the Lord’s Day” carries profound and critical meaning. Under the Roman imperial cult, the emperor was considered divine and had a special day of veneration as the Lord. During the reign of Domitian “the Lord’s Day” was interchangeably used with “the emperor’s day. The sharp contrast is drawn between “Who is Lord? Caesar or Christ?” (International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, n.d.)

In a political understanding of John’s context, this is a declaration of defiance against the emperor’s worship. Instead of bowing to the emperor, he is filled with zeal for his King of Kings; he is filled with the spirit of God to proclaim the day of hope for the persecuted, the oppressed because of their faith. This is in the fashion of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who refused to worship the king’s golden image (Daniel 3:1-30); and mirrors the footsteps of Jesus during his temptation in the desert (Matt 4:8-10). For John, therefore, the Lord’s Day means a resilient day. It is a day of hope not only for himself but for the whole creation that could breathe again. It is a day of salvation, where death is shamed and could not be a threat anymore to the Johannine community and the whole world. The Roman tools of oppression and death used to silence opponents, including Jesus’ followers, were challenged and nullified in the vision. Paul is right when he says “For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil 1:21). John found courage to speak for himself and all who suffered unjust deaths, confident in the promise that “the sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them” (Rev. 20:13).

The same promise of victory over death is found in Hosea (13:14) “I will redeem them from the power of Sheol; I will redeem them from death. O death, where is your pestilence? Sheol, where is your destruction?” Death and grave as oppressive and intimidating measures of the Roman empire are no more things to fear. Through the proclaimed victory of Jesus by his testimony (Rev 1:5; 5:1), he becomes incontestably “the Lord of history” (Mihoc 2023:2) and all that it

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containst. Therefore, graves and their dead are part of the living testimonies of community's resilience within this created history. They represent both political and spiritual resistance to the hostile regime that the Johannine community faced. John encouraged the seven city-churches (Rev 2-3) to stand firm, to persevere till death and to not compromise with political and religious oppression no matter the cost. In an interesting manner, John introduces the notion of rewards for victory, including the profound symbol of "meal sharing" that Singata (2020:329) highlights.

On one side, the Eucharist (Luke 22:18-20; 1Cor 11:23-25) "which commemorates crucifixion – is not a romanticization of suffering; rather, it is a refusal to be intimidated" by death threats. It is a deliberate act of remembering the broken body, and the dead victims of injustice. On the other hand, the Supper mentioned in Revelation represents a celebrated life regained through the risen body- a banquet in fullness of restored time (Rev 3:20; Rev 19:9). The absence of the empire's imprisonment, death penalty and other forms of persecution to the whole creation, ushers us in "to experience a deep cosmic connection" in the world made new and divine justice is finally consumed (Nogueira 2024: 27-28).

### **5. The New Heaven and Earth: a Theory of Hope and Inclusiveness, Revelation 21-22**

The analogy of cities here is important to note in their social context. The urban development of cities Asia Minor where John and his community lived "featured stone gates, paved streets, and aqueducts inscribed with the names of Roman emperors, administrators, and wealthy patrons". These urban structures showed the development and majesty of the Roman empire (Koester 2020:36). "Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God... "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people... They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life.... On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations (Rev 21: 1-4; 22:1). The city's "gates were written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel" and its wall "were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb" (21: 12-14) not of the Roman emperors or other wealthy and important earthly people. "The great street of the city was of gold, as pure as transparent glass" (Rev 21:21) not compared to paved streets of Roman cities. John is sure in his vision that "no earthly city can be equated with God's city; no social or political order can claim to be the final one" (Koester 2020: 36).

What is the essence of God's recreation process, or is John trying to find comfort in his own fate? New heavens and new earth! Genesis 3 refers to the Fall of man and the Eden broken relationship of all creation. There is a reason to believe that corruption tainted the heavens as well, as referenced with the fallen angels found in Ezekiel 28. Does God still concern Himself with fixing broken pieces of His dear creation in a continuing process? From a political understanding, John's vision is overshadowed by Rome, whose emperors were worshipped as gods representing both heaven and earth (Thompson 1990:16). In this sense, the heavens and

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earth were considered corrupt under the oppressive rule represented by Babylon in the vision (Rev 17-18).

John's vision draws on the prophecies of Isaiah regarding the Babylonian exodus: "See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy (Is 65:17-18). Isaiah also declares, "As the new heavens and the new earth that I make will endure before me," declares the Lord, "so will your name and descendants endure" (Is. 66:22). Isaiah uses the creation of new heaven and earth figuratively to express the joy and happiness of the Jewish people as they returned from Babylon to rebuild Jerusalem Jerusalem (Ezra 1: 2-3).

Peter, also as a victim of the same political and religious persecution, introduces the notion of recreation not as a partial fix, but as a complete renewal of the cosmos: "That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise, we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells" (2Pet 3:12-13). Paul, a fellow prisoner and errant apostle, because of his faith, dreams of a city beyond, identifying as a "citizen of heaven" (Phil 3:20). Anthropologically, it is fair to say that the search for God and His meaning is deeply rooted in human experience and history.

#### *Reconciliation and the Reconstitution of Justice*

In John's apocalyptic circumstances, "heaven" and "earth" are explained in ambivalent and dynamic ways influenced by his context. They are not eternal nor static; they are instead subjected to some forms of mutation. His imagery is built from a hope for an ideal, just and righteous heavens and earth far away from the haunted world of persecution, imprisonment and brutal death. Paul joins this sentiment, stating that in the dispensation of time, the wholeness of justice (for all creation) we long for is in resurrected Christ "... all things will be united in Christ, whether things in heaven or things upon the earth" (Eph 1:10). The notion of reconciliation of all things in John's Revelation is a pertinent piece of discussion.

Within the disrupted form of Roman governance, all things had fallen apart. Paul exposes a corrupt system that infiltrated the whole of creation, which he describes as "groaning" for justice: "For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Rom 8:18-25).

Now it is time to reconstitute these broken pieces into a deserved heaven and earth under the leadership of the Eternal King and Judge who administers justice to all creation. The concepts of transitional justice and reconciliation are central here. John sees souls of those killed unjustly because of their faith; he sees the seas and graves cooperating to bring back their dead for justice (Rev 20:1-13). God's creation undergoes a renewal process filled with grace and peace, becoming God's dwelling place, where a physical Temple is no longer needed. God's presence

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not only restores the creation but replaces Roman power and the religious rituals that once persecuted the followers of Christ. He is *Emmanuel* (Mat1:23), the Word that dwells among us full of grace and glory (John: 1:14).

*The Prisoner's Nostalgia and Cosmic Renewal*

John at Patmos is a political prisoner with little hope of returning to his family or the churches where he preached the good news. He writes, "I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things" (Rev 22:8; 1John 1:1-3). Like any nostalgic prisoner, John cannot help but think and dream of home—of Jerusalem and the Temple, the pride of Israel. He proclaims that "God is creating a future that looks fundamentally different from today" (Whitaker 2020:10). According to Thompson (1990:68-69), John's revelation of new Jerusalem is interpreted into "eschatological homologues" away from tears and suffering (Rev 7:17, 21:4). John longed to live in a city, in a home surrounded by gardens, rather than the barren land of Patmos, where harmony of all creation is reestablished, a home with no violence, brutality and persecution from ruling powers.

Furthermore, Revelation suggests that this vision is not a single, distant event but a continuous process of cosmic renewal. Both Collins (1979) and Thompson (1990:31-32) argue that revelation is both temporal and spatial. That is, an "apocalypse does not reveal another world, it reveals "hidden dimensions of the world in which humans live and die." In other words, it is not "worldnegating but, rather, world-expanding: it extends or expands the universe to include transcendent realities, and it does this both spatially and temporally." Therefore, in John's apocalypse, "there is no radical discontinuity between God and the world" or between "this age and the age to come". Heaven and earth are united under the future transformation whereby the earthly age is consumed by "the presentness of the age to come in heaven".

*Environmental Healing and Political Restoration*

There is also a significant political dimension here: God is reconciling the whole creation to Himself. In a world defined by the destruction of Jerusalem by fire, environmental pollution, floods, drought, famine, earthquakes, and the displacement of thousands of refugees across the region due to war, the creation is in disarray (Rukundwa 2006:186-188, Stark 1991:198; Klausner1977:197-198). God is now coming to rescue and fix the mess, reclaiming what has been His from the beginning.

The healing process of the earth is found in the water of life and the tree of life (Rev 22:1-5). God rehabilitates the garden and nature, the leaves of trees, the breeze through them become the natural medicine for nations (Rev 22:2), and the thirst for justice is finally quenched (Mat 5:6). All people, tribes, cultures and nations, in all their diversity without discrimination, find a place to belong under God's righteousness (Rev 7:9-17).

Referring back to Isaiah, the complete harmony of creation hears the call of God, goodness and forgiveness flow from His throne reaching out to mend the broken relationships. Even wild

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beasts will restore their friendship (Isa 11:6-9). This restorative process of creation can be interpreted through both material and spiritual lenses, relating everything from political powers (Roman empire and the city of Jerusalem), environment, trees, water, precious stones and gold to the Temple, place of worship and communion (Rev 21-22-27).

To conclude this discussion from a political point of view, the apocalyptic message of John as a political prisoner, the coming of new heavens and new earth can also be interpreted through a figurative term. The core message of Apocalypse of John to shape the hearer's worldview, to reinforce the "practice of hopefulness" (Whitaker 2020:8) that help his community to resist the evil until their salvation comes. More importantly, sharing the account of revelation: of things that were, are and yet to come, is a therapeutic process from this traumatic experience of jail and persecution that John and his community faced. In this revelation storytelling, John rebuilds his faith and remains positive even in harsh imperial times, trusting that God of time will finally end the injustice against his church community.

### **From Minembwe to Makala Central Prison: My experience in Prison**

#### *7.1 Context of arrest*

Since April 2017, a tribal conflict broke out in Katanga village, Bijombo location, Uvira Territory, opposing two people of different tribes, a Banyamulenge and a Bafuliru on a market day (Kuno,2024). This became *inzirondo*, the spark, of what is now a regional conflict eight years later. Destruction of a village after another, looting of properties and loss of lives became rampant like wildfire, consuming over 80% of the Minembwe region and its environs. Statistics show that from 2017 to 2025 (Ntanyoma 2025:1294-1318), more than 400 villages have been destroyed, over half a million cows which is the economic backbone of Banyamulenge community was looted or killed; more that 2000 people have been killed while over 150,000 people became internally displaced and refugees in neighboring countries.

In October 2019, I served as a delegate alongside local chief Bikino Mitabu to meet President Felix Tshisekedi in Bukavu to plead for protection of Minembwe, its people and property. The President, surrounded by his four ministers and the governor of South Kivu, promised immediate military intervention and humanitarian assistance. However, these promises remained mere words, and the FARDC (the national military) became increasingly complicit in the destruction of the Minembwe livelihood. In the same context, Banyamulenge delegations visited neighboring countries to explain the alarming humanitarian and political crisis that the community is facing.

I was part of the civil society delegation to the Nairobi Peace Processes (Amani Africa, 2023) in Nairobi, held under the hospices of the President Uhuru Kenyatta and East Africa Community Heads of State. In both meetings, one could sense a total lack of political will from DRC representatives, who always used intimidation and issued orders to armed group representatives to bend to government will. The suspension of the *Mouvement du 23 Mars* (M23) during the Nairobi II, widened the gap of doubt in the process. Moreover, the Banyamulenge self-defense

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groups (*Twirwaneho*, *Gumino* and *Android*) present in the meeting were treated with mistrust by DRC government representatives who wrongly considered them complicit with Rwanda. At the end of the meeting, we returned home in early December 2022 to find that attacks on Minembwe villages by various armed groups and elements of the government army had intensified. It was only when a Burundian army battalion intervened that the attacks finally ceased in January 2023.

My position as a member of civil society, a leader of the university in the community, allowed me to establish a good working relationship with different actors in the region particularly for peacebuilding. From December 2022 to May 2023, we organized a series of conferences, youth concerts and reflections about peace and social cohesion among different tribes. Local leaders and government representatives in Minembwe all attended. Instead of receiving credit for these efforts to avoid conflict escalation, I became an unwanted person for many who were working for the destruction of Minembwe.

During the Nairobi III Peace Consultations in late November 2022, the participation of the *Twirwaneho* self-defense group was severely obstructed. First, their invitation for participation was intercepted and hidden in Bukavu, and false messages were sent to organizers claiming they refused to join the consultation. By the time this was discovered, the MONUSCO logistics meant to transport them and all participants from Minembwe had departed. Eventually, through arrangements with the Burundian government, the provincial government in Bukavu and MONUSCO, they traveled via Bujumbura to Nairobi while all other participants went through Goma. As this route was not sponsored by the organizers, community members had to find means to fund the trip themselves. I found myself acting as a liaison between MONUSCO, the Burundian Government (whose President was the chairperson of the EAC Summit) and the EAC consultation organizers.

Deliberately and politically motivated, the government of Kinshasa through its representative to the Consultation, sought to exclude *Twirwaneho* and assimilate them into the M23 due to ethnic politics. However, Banyamulenge civil society representatives in the consultation pushed hard to ensure their voices were heard. While all armed and self-defense groups present signed a ceasefire commitment in December 2022, there were others whose mission remained determined to silence us.

Minembwe desperately needed regional attention and protection; since 2017 it had been under fire from tribal armed groups while the government watched passively with no action. During in the consultation, Minembwe was attacked by *Bilozebishambuke* armed group, which was present at the meeting. The Banyamulenge delegation at the Consultation protested and suspended their participation for two days. However, the organizers took no disciplinary action was taken against that armed group, despite the rules of conduct. This demonstrated the consultation leadership's partisanship. We sought a meeting with the facilitator, but the DRC chief of delegation again blocked us. It is through this contentious political environment that the consultation of Nairobi III ended.

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*UN Report and the Price of Peace*

In June 2023, a UN group of experts report (United Nations Security Council, 2023) was released, and my name among many was included. In its paragraph 144, it states: *After his participation in the Nairobi talks, in November 2022, Saint Cadet as well as a prominent member of the Mahoro Peace Association, Lazare Sebitereko campaigned to encourage the Banyamulenge community of Nairobi to financially support the M23 and young Banyamulenge to join the ranks of the Twirwaneho.*

This deliberate accusation was a shock to me, and I immediately made issued a refutation:

*I want to inform the public and whoever is concerned by the report, that I am neither a founding member, ordinary member nor an honorary member of Mahoro Peace Association. Mahoro Peace is an association of the Banyamulenge Diaspora in the USA, which I am not. The association has its bylaws, list of its members and executive committee that can be verified. I participated in the Nairobi Peace Process on Eastern DRC in November 2022 among hundreds of Congolese in search of peace. We were hosted by the facilitation for a week and returned home. I have not met Banyamulenge youths in Nairobi to sensitize them to join Twirwaneho, a Banyamulenge self-defense group, which I encouraged to sign the final declaration of the consultation; nor have I met any member of Banyamulenge community in Nairobi mostly refugees and encourage them to finance M23, the movement that I am not part of and I have not any contact with. It is obvious that the UN group of experts have been misled by their informants with bad intentions geared to tarnish my name and put my life in danger. At the same time, it is aberrant that none of the group of experts dared to verify these false allegations with no material proof against my person. However, this UN group of experts deliberately used these allegations with intention to harm. **To give false information is a weapon that destroys innocent lives.***

A week after the release of this report, I was arrested in Uvira on 27 June 2024 by the National Security Agency (ANR) while returning from Minembwe. I spent several hours in custody and was interrogated about the UN report's allegations. I explained to them that the allegations were baseless. After they checked my laptop, and I was released. However, two days after, on 29 June 2023, I was arrested again, this time by the Military Intelligent Services, and was sent to Kinshasa via Bukavu and Goma (SOS Médias Burundi, 2023). I experienced hell for fifteen months without trial until my release on 23 September, 2023. During detention, I went through five different cells and Makala Central Prison, with different experiences of pain and frustration.

During the boat journey from Bukavu to Goma, I was masked so that I could not see where I was going and who was around me. My hands were chained to a large pillar inside the boat, and later around mid-night, my legs were tied up as well so that I could not escape, I suppose. I asked myself what wrong I had committed to the government of DRC, my communities, to myself, or to neighboring countries to deserve such treatment before I was even officially accused of any offense. I understood quite well, my identity alone (being whom I am) was the problem. For three days, I went without food; after two days I received a drink and a piece of sausage, but this was just a taste of what I was to face ahead. My phones, identity card, and Burundian driving license

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were confiscated and brought along with me to Kinshasa but I never saw them again. Three little prayers I made as I started this journey: for God be with me in this journey, to make me fearless and to let me remain positive so I could turn this circumstance into opportunity.

During the interrogation in early July 2023 at the secret cell of the military intelligence service known as *Détection militaire des activités anti-patrie* (DEMIAP), I was surrounded by a team of six officers who questioned me for four days. Their first statement was “there are no charges against you at this point and we have no proof. You are here as a *reseignant* (informant).” I replied, “if there is no charge against me, why then am I arrested and brought to Kinshasa?”

The next line of questioning concerned my identity. Who am I? Besides my names and where I live, they asked about my tribe. I said I was Banyamulenge. Half of them ironically laughed and claimed no such tribe existed in DRC. One pulled a document from a drawer and said, “Here are all the tribes of DRC, Banyamulenge is nonexistent!” I insisted, “I am!” When they asked if I was Tutsi or a Hutu, I insisted: “I am a Banyamulenge, and if you don’t recognize who I am, I will not continue answering your question”’s. After a lengthy argument, they finally agreed to write down Banyamulenge as my tribe.

They accused me of obstructing the DRC and Burundian armies from fighting the (self-defense group) *Twirwaneho*, in one of the meetings held at the university in Minembwe referring to peace concerts I had organized. I asked how a concert for social cohesion, attended by those very same army officials, could be an obstruction. Who am I even, to refuse collaborating armies to launch an attack against whoever they wish to attack? The concert for peace was organized together with all local churches, local government, Congolese and Burundian army officials were present. They all took turns to address the congregation about peaceful cohabitation. At the same meeting I shared the Nairobi process decisions, including the ceasefire signed by all armed and self-defense groups. The Heads of State of East Africa made a decision, and all groups present signed the agreement. How does that implicate me?

They also asked, “Why are you still working in Minembwe when all other intellectuals and humanitarian agencies have left?” Is this a problem or a compliment? I asked. My question was: why has everyone left local people with no support from anyone, even from the government? These people need my help, and that is why I am still there. After this marathon of interrogation, I was sent back to the cell and remained in custody until the end of October 2023, when I was sent to Military Court (*auditorat militaire*).

At the time of my arrest I was ill and on medication. Through an ambassador, my family sent new medicine and a note. The security services showed me the medicine and clothes my family had sent, but wouldn’t let me have them. All efforts of family members and friends to reach me were fruitless.

Finally, one day in August 2023, I was summoned to the office of General Roger Makombo (alias Mobutu) who was in charge of the intelligence department (by then). He asked me why I

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was there; I replied that I was asking the same question. They allowed me a 20-minute call with my wife and one of my children. I told them that "all was well," not wanting to alarm them or put myself in further trouble. At least the family and friends were reassured that I was still alive.

In early October 2023, I was summoned by the judicial military officer and told me that, based on his investigations, my case is baseless. He had not found no evidence of my involvement in the allegations against me. However, he informed me that the military intelligence hierarchy would be the ones to decide the ultimate direction of the case.

It was not a surprise, instead of liberation, I was transferred to the Military court with two main charges against me: treason and collaboration with an insurrectional movement. Both charges are punishable either by death penalty or lifetime sentence. The person who escorted me to the Military court in the afternoon of 27 October, 2023 presented my file to the reception officer and said in front of me, "I bring you a detainee, but his case has no evidence."

I remained in the Military high court cell for two weeks. During this time, I managed to negotiate staying out of the standard cell.;I slept on a small foldable mattress on the floor of a small office and was allowed to spending my days outside in the compound. For the first time in months, visits from family and friends were possible, and food was available. These conditions were world away from the horror of DEMIAP, where the physical and psachological toll had been so great that I had lost over 35kg.

When the magistrate eventually reviewed my dossier, he echoed the previous findings, telling me that he found no evidence that would incriminate me. Yet, he explained that he was powerless to free me: "Since your case comes from the military intelligence services, they still have to authorize us, otherwise I have to send you to Central Prison of Makala and wait for the court decision." With no other option and my health rapidly deteriorating, I was sent to Makala. It was only after two months of incarceration there that I was finally granted permission to seek the hospital treatment I so desperately needed.

### *7.2 Life in Prison*

On my first night in the military intelligence cell in Uvira, known as *Bureau 2*, officers took some of my money. I was told that if I wanted to avoid the bad room, I had to pay 10,000FC (Congolese Francs) per night; I negotiated to do so. There were about ten people in the room, all on the floor with neither mattress nor a mat. Even to use the toilet, we had to pay for a "cigarette", roughly 500FC. My hope was that I would be interrogated and released again, or at least be taken to court in the city where I could access to my lawyers and family visits.

In the morning, the military intelligence officer who told me, "I was instructed to arrest you but personally, I have no evidence of what you are being accused of, because of that I cannot even take any statement from you. But I am sending you to Bukavu. Maybe there, they may direct your case. Mostly, you will go to Kinshasa." He served me a piece of bread and a coke, then sent me off to Bukavu in a pickup truck with an escort of ten soldiers. Upon arrival in Bukavu, I was

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taken to the Provincial army chief who in turn told me that he also had nocase against me. That very night, I was sent to Goma by boat. I received another drink the following evening at the Goma airport on my way to Kinshasa.

The *colis* (the parcel) had arrived. I was no longer a person, but an object; a parcel, to be handled with or without care depending on who “owned” me at that moment. Being exchanged from hand to hand among the military intelligence services was an experience defined by a volatile mix of sympathy, intimidation and insults. My spirit was well enough prepared to receive these treatments with tenderness determined not to let my emotions or blood pressure spark. Another school of life had just begun at a very high-cost, one that felt like swimming the narrow channel between life and death.

After a night of shame and hell, masked and tied-up to a pillar with no way even to scratch myself in the waters of Lake Kivu, I was treated like the worst criminal on a boat filled with hundreds of passengers. They were stunned by my presence though they could not recognize my face. At the port of Goma at 7:00 am, my escort team of five soldiers, led by a colonel, handed me over to the local military service of Goma. I was held in custody for the whole day without food or water.

In that cell, I found many other detainees: civilians, soldiers and many M23 rebels captured on the battlefield. As we rested pondering what would be the next move, I was shocked to see colonies of lice and bedbugs swarming over the plastic sheeting spread on the floor. In the evening, three soldiers led by a colonel took me to the airport. Surprisingly, they were kind and spoke to me in a respectful manner. We discussed the social and humanitarian situation of Minembwe, as one of them had lived there. He then told me “Prof, you are going to Kinshasa.” I simply replied “Ok.”. After a while, I was escorted to the tarmac and boarded a CAA flight to Kinshasa via Kindu with only one military escort, a major. This time my hands, legs and face were free.

We arrived at Ndjili airport, Kinshasa, where we were met by another military intelligence service team who then led us to their offices in the city. It was late in the evening around 9:00 pm. In the process of registration, they asked the Major about my file. He said, there isn’t one, only my identity card, my Burundian driving license and two phones. “The justice of this country! How come that you can bring someone all the way from Uvira to Kinshasa without a dossier?” Exclaimed the person! Anyway, I was handed over to the guard in charge of the night shift who offered a place to sleep in his office.

Early in the morning, the officer in charge of detention arrived and asked me to go to his office. He called on the phone and said “*Bonjour mon Colonel, le colis d’Uvira est arrivé, ou est-ce que je vais le mettre?* (Good morning colonel, the parcel from Uvira arrived, where am I going to put it ?) *Dans le cachot*, (in the cell) the colonel replied. It was mid-day on Sunday, 1 July 2023, I was asked to take off my clothes, put on the detainee’s uniform, and was then led to the cell. It was the time when all detainees were allowed outside to relax and get some sunshine. I sat next

to a man who happened to be from South Kivu and quickly asked him what the cell was like, how they lived, etc. He explained, and hearing it made the reality horrible even before I experienced it myself.

“What brings you here in Zaire?” asked the “president of detainees.” Every newcomer must introduce themselves to a committee of fellow prisoners to explain their identity and the allegations against them. I explained who I was and how I had been arrested from Uvira and brought to Kinshasa without a warrant. “PM (police militaire), find him a place in Somibor”, he commanded.

“Somibor” (Sobibor) was the worst room in the cell, named after the Nazi extermination camp in Poland, where newcomers and those accused of crimes are held. The space measured about four by four squaremetress intended to host between 16 and 27 people, though often it held more. We could hardly sit, let alone sleepbreathing was hard for many. The room had no window and no light. It was extremely hot, with Kinshasa’ humid temperatures between 28 and 32 degrees Celsius. Our breath and sweat generated so much moisture that the walls in the room stayed wet as if buckets of water had been splashed inside. We hardly wore clothes and stayed half naked to try to breathe and cool our bodies. With no no mattresses or mats, we sat, ate and slept on the floor till our bottoms and heels grew numb. A single, blocked toilet and shower served over 125 people (sometimes over or less); when the sewage backed up into the cell, we simply had to accommodate that too. Legions of mosquitos fed on us until they were too heavy to fly, and our blood through them would decorate the rooms.

“I can’t breathe” I pleaded with the “military police” of our room, when he saw me in the middle of night leaving my room in search of air in an open space close to the door. He said “you are not allowed to stand there, go back to your room.” After some time, I went back to my room only to find my place was already occupied by the crowd. I had to negotiate just to sit back down.

Soap, toothbrush and toothpaste were distributed once in a while. A single bar of soap was expected to last eight people for two weeks or more, same as toothpaste. I literally went over a month without either. After a month, I began to receive these “benefits,” but they never lasted long, and then we were left as we were. We had no option of changing clothes, so, we would wash them at night, with no soap of course. The cell carried an unbearable stench, but we finally got used to it.

Mealtimes were not respected, and both quality and quantity fell below any standard. Hunger was so constant that our only concern was simply that meals be provided at all. We hardly had tea and bread in the morning and dinner would be served between 4:00 pm and 6:00 pm. Many times, we went hungry with no food at all. Other times they would alternate, if tea was served, there was no bread and vice versa. If a piece of bread is served, there was no dinner. We went for forty-eight-hour stretches with no food at all.

People died from lack of medical attention, hunger, suffocation due to the extreme congestion particularly for people with chronic health issues. It became clear that this was a place where

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the secret services intended for you to die a “slow death.” We developed all kinds of infections with very little medical support. This looked like a breeding ground for infectious diseases, yet we had to fight for survival.

In the midst of this deprivation, we were given permission to hold prayer meetings. These were organized every morning at dawn for about an hour, and again in the evening. On Sundays, prayers were held at mid-day. After one month of my detention, I became an elder in our prayer team committee at DEMAIP. We were asked to pray quietly so as not to attract public curiosity, but prayer through songs and loud petitions became a vital way to discharge our emotions and anxieties. We expressed ourselves to this unseen God, the advocate, the one we could pour out our frustration, fears and claims. We brought everything before Him: the food, water, toilet, room congestion, health issues, detention cases, liberation or transfers to prisons, to families without forgetting our sins!

This was a healing process in the absence of all other mechanisms. For some, accepting the reality of detention was almost impossible; not knowing when this calvary would end added deep trauma. On the other hand, prayer was one way we positively used to survive the harsh conditions of detention. We also created occasions of laughter, light moments of jokes and storytelling, and friendship development, which all worked together for many of us to survive.

#### *The Anatomy of Accusation*

Detainees mutually shared their stories, and it was frightening to hear conditions in which people were arrested, detained or transferred from one place to the other. For those of us from the Eastern DRC, all our arrests were linked to rebel movements, even when the real issue was something else entirely. Secret services used these terrifying accusations not only to intimidate victims but often as a mechanism for ransom. One young man from North Kivu, was arrested in Kitona military training center, because of his name. He was a volunteer from Goma who joined the mass military recruitment, and when they arrived in Kitona, they found that his name is Habyarimana! He automatically became an *infiltré*, an intruder. He was arrested and brought to DEMAIP. He tried by all means to justify his innocence with no success. Another one was arrested because a friend of his had joined M23.

Another was arrested because he is a Tutsi tending cows in Kongo Central province and was assumed to be linked to M23. Another one was arrested after being found in a hotel with his newly wedded wife from Goma; both were accused of spying for Rwanda. Another case was a young man was arrested for speaking Shwahili on phone with his wife. The list of such flimsy accusations is long.

However, there were also detainees who really committed real crimes, particularly those from Beni and Butembo linked to the Allied Defense Force (ADF), M23 fighters captured on the battlefield, and others accused of domestic violence or armed robbery just to name a few. We were prohibited to speak our local languages particularly Kinyamulenge or Kinyarwanda, but we spoke it anyway.

*Acts of Mercy Amidst Bureaucracy*

While in the cell at the *auditorat supérieur* (Military court) cell, I regained some access to food and funds through family visits. This allowed me to share supplied with other detainees who had nothing. Among them were two orphaned teenagers who were arrested for domestic violence. Their grandmother, who was their sole caregiver, came to see them upon their release, only to find she could not afford the required release fee of 20,000Fc.

The grandmother had managed to gather 13,000FC but lacked the remaining 7,000FC. She cried as they were being sent back into the cell because of that small deficit. Feeling a deep sorrow for her, I called her and gave her the remaining funds. She paid and was finally able to take them home.

*Transfer to Makala*

On November 7, 2023, I was transferred to Makala Central Prison. My health was very weak, my family members worked with the Military court to secure me a room in a “VIP quarter.” I observed the standard prison trucks as it went from cell to cell, roughly collecting and handling detainees; knowing I could not endure that, I negotiated with the driver and paid for a vehicle to transport me alone.

Upon arrival, I was greeted by the directors of detention and the military quarter. I registered and a room was already allocated and I settled. Each ward /quarter has its governor and administration and a general governor and its administration managed by prisoners themselves and work closer with the prison’s administration. At each level you pay tributes in order to live in harmony with established administration, including facilities of using phones, staying longer outside and facilitation to visits, etc.

Because my health was weak, I made it a point to go for a walk and perform body exercises most mornings between 6:15 am and 7:30 am. I was usually among the first out early before the grounds were crowded with people. I could read from the faces of thousands of desperate youths longing to live but with no hope even for the current day. Their bodies were weak and filthy; infections had eaten their flesh down to their bones. Some looked half-dead, lying on the ground with no support. We all passed them helplessly, our minds filled with sympathy and our eyes fixed in a hollow gaze. The courageous among us would ask another, "does our government have a human heart? Does it see this?" Makala is, quite literally, hell on earth. Yet, even there, we were forced to negotiate with the devil’s angels just to find a way to survive another day.

*The Prison Nursery*

Although my health was very weak, on 30 December 2023, I ordered 2 fruit trees, a mango and an avocado, to plant within prison grounds. When I went to the administration to request for a permission, they were visibly surprised that a prisoner would want to plant trees, yet they agreed. On January 1, 2024, I was escorted to a designated spot to plant them. I kept watering and visiting them regularly; they became “my” trees.

This initiative, while in prison, continued and I started making nurseries in the small room I shared with four other inmates. I gathered several seeds from oranges and citrons, planting them in plastic water cans and they grew into beautiful nursery plants across my broken window. This exercise was deeply therapeutic. My mind and soul found moments of profound relaxation as I tended to my trees alongside my other humanitarian activities embarked on in the prison.

Eventually, I grew over sixty fruit trees in this “room garden” and some of my inmate friends came to watch and learn how I do it. “I am curious to know how it is done. It will help me to plant trees in my field when I am out,” a detainee from Walungu told me. Some of the prison’s administration officers visited me regularly and saw how my nursery was doing. One officer finally took them all and went to plant them at Luzumu prison in Kongo Central, where there was more space for them to flourish.

### *Literacy*

In February, 2024, after conducting a survey and discovering a vast number of inmates who could neither read nor write, I approached the La Borne/ Assemblies of God chaplaincy with a proposal to start literacy classes. I also realized that for a population of more than 15,000 prisoners, there were no organized programs for prisoners, e.g. educational programs, vocational training or any recreational activity. There were religious activities organized by about 26 different chaplaincies, they all prayed in the mornings including Catholics, Protestants in their diversity, Islam, Hinduism and local religions. Here, prayers absorb a large number of people in the mornings. Other activities, such as a small computer program, volleyball, or soccer, reached only a tiny fraction of the population, as the pitches were constantly used as resting places for thousands of people.. Few women were involved in small handcraft activities, but nothing was for children and minors.

After several meetings with the chaplains’ committee, we reached an agreement to start a literacy program, provided that I managed the logistics and the motivation of the teachers. In April 2024, the program officially started. I managed to secure funds to buy all necessary equipment and provide support for the teachers. All the while, I remained a political prisoner (Matthew 25:31-46)!

The initiative soon attracted the attention of the authorities and many goodwill individuals. About a hundred people, men and women, boys and girls joined the classes and benefited from the program. To date, more than fifty of them have learned to read, write and do arithmetic. “I didn’t expect to learn to read and write in prison,” one adult student told us. “Thank you for this initiative.” Many of these people who did not have the opportunity to go to school are from the Kinshasa area and grew up as Kuluna (street children). When a prisoner learns to hold a pencil and manages to write, read and calculate, I praise the Lord, Master of times and circumstance, who changed my situation into an amazing opportunity.

A detained child once asked his teacher, “Why doesn’t the program run every day? Learning is good for us. It also keeps me busy.” Another adult told us, “Now I need a Bible that I can read

myself.” We were eventually able to distribute Bibles, which have had a profound impact not only on our study groups but also on evangelistic teams. I have watched these teams moving from cell to cell, Bibles in hand, reading and sharing verses with fellow inmates.

In addition to literacy classes, we also launched a vocational training course in the production of soap, detergent and disinfectant for fifty-four students in April. The teacher was also a fellow inmate. We used the products from these classes to directly improve the sanitation of our own living conditions. These initiatives expanded to include a tree-planting project, a course on climate change, and a course on paint and pigment making.

The “theology of work” program I taught even expanded outside of prison. One of our inmate students was released recently and, surprisingly, got a new job with the government. He called me to ask for my course notes: “I want to use them to mobilize members of the provincial legislature to learn and apply these things.” Another person testified: “What I like is that they not only teach spiritual salvation, but also address physical needs.”

I felt encouraged. There are many more stories to tell, for God never ceases to surprise us with His "tricks." He makes us smile again. Within the chaplaincy committee, we were faced daily with problems that needed solving, even while our own legal and personal issues remained unresolved. We met many who could not afford basic necessities like clothing, food, or medicine. I encountered over a dozen individuals whose only barrier to freedom was lack of funds to settle their legal fees. I remember in particular the release of a family of five, detained for more than ten months; they were finally able to return home after we secured the necessary funds. In another case, the music director of our church within the walls of Makala sat in my small room and explained his financial problem to me. When a solution was found, he cried with joy: “I sang to bless the church and today I am blessed too!” These moments reminded me that being in prison did not make me, or any of us, less human.

I continued to dream, to be creative, determine to show that I was capable of transforming these dire circumstances into opportunities. I am made to have a positive impact on my environment. I had received much grace. I had good prison companions and this was a blessing. We shared everything and this communal life strengthened our faith, our hope, our friendship and our resilience. I spent time tending to my nursery in the plastic water bottles in my cell. This dialogue with the environment is not new to me; it stretches back to the 1970s, with my small potato shamba (farm). As I told my fellow prisoners and in my theology of work class, nature is our parent, relative and neighbor. Tending to these plants gave me with some peace of mind.

Through the chaplaincy, I organized theology of work classes focused on a positive approach to labor and on leading our families, communities and nations. In addition to literacy, we added vocational training initiatives such as making disinfectant and paint, and ordered teaching materials. Hundreds of students were enrolled and graduated from courses taught by two pastors, one of whom was a prisoner. Products made during training were used to improve our toilets and

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we painted some of our rooms. More importantly, these activities of vocational training made many of us feel that we are still members of society: humans with marketable skills, less dependent when we leave prison. The overall living conditions I witnessed in DRC prisons gave me the burden to champion for better policies and more humane incarceration structures.

### *7.3 The Night of the Failed Prison Escape*

On the night of September 1 and 2, 2024, a deadly, failed jailbreak transformed Makala prison into a living hell. We felt, saw and touched death on our fingertips. Around midnight, inmates in all the eleven pavilions of the prison started yelling and breaking the doors until morning. Electricity had been cut earlier and remained disconnected for several days of harrowing uncertainty. For several days, we witnessed showers of bullets from police and military forces on one side, and on the other, stones were being thrown over our windows and doors from rioting inmates. All pavilions were broken into, administration blocks and food stores were set on fire and reduced to ash. Tragically, the women's quarter became the target for criminal inmate men who broke into it and committed mass rape against hundreds of helpless inmate women and three of them died as a result of the sheer cruelty of the acts while others were left with the trauma of unwanted pregnancy. One of the two women survivors who were not lucky spoke to Al Jazeera. "I was raped by several people, I don't even know what happened and I am wondering what kind of justice we have in this country," one woman said (Al Jazeera, 2024)

The true number of the fallen remains a mystery; hundreds of inmates were killed by bullets from government police and army and others died from suffocation in crushes as they all fought for exit from their overcrowded wards. On the morning of September 2, 2024 bodies were being collected all over the facility and we lived through the most terrified and darkest moments of our imprisonment in Makala. While the initial official death toll was placed at 129 (The National Herald, 2024), estimations from inside the prison spoke of several hundred victims and well beyond. The prison was completely sealed from the outside and the inside leaving us with no food, no water, no electricity, and no visits. Confined in a four by four meter room (Room16, Pavilion 1), five of us survived seven days of horror that felt like the open gates of hell. We struggled through that week of horror, until the prison administration reopened and visits were allowed again. Through the walls, we could hear screams: "we are tired of dying this way."

In the deep dark night, prisoners defied the death threat that was imposed on them and marched towards it like heroes, emerging from systematic injustices done to them by the institutions meant to protect them. The majority of inmates had never been prosecuted; neither sentenced nor freed, they had spent years in prison dying in silence. Their fear was eventually overpowered by a profound grief and nostalgia to either reach home alive or dead but free. Would there ever be justice to these victims, or their exact number be known? Would these deaths in prisons turn into a sacrifice that would change the position of the oppressor to do good, change the living conditions of prisoners and incarceration policies? The blood of innocent people is the ink and their death is a seal that things need to change, and that death is no longer a threat to those who stand for their rights.

*7.4 Process to freedom*

In the attempt to decongest the facility, the Minister of Justice established a commission to review various cases that need conditional liberation for cases of sicknesses and those that had served three-quarters of their sentence. The commission started its work in mid-July 2024. My own health had begun to fail significantly a month earlier in June 2024, I got very sick and had to be transported to a hospital outside the prison walls. Medical tests were not impressive at all and my spinal nerves had suffered deformation causing such acute pain that I could hardly sleep nor walk correctly. Furthermore, my prostate was severely swollen with infections.

These Medical reports were shared with the Ministry of Justice and my lawyers sought an immediate intervention in order to get appropriate medical attention outside the prison. My medical case alongside thousands of other similar and worse cases were brought before the commission for deliberation. This process took many weeks. Finally between late July, and September 2024, ministerial orders were signed and people en masse were released.

I was among the group of 1,862 liberated between September 22 and 23 exactly 20 ordinary days after the failed attempt of the Makala prison jailbreak. At that time, even a glimpse of hope was like a hand reaching into a grave, everyone in that facility longed to get out of hell we had endured. My lawyers worked tirelessly, pressing hard with the Military Court, the Ministry of Justice and the President's Office to secure appointments to explain my case and the gravity of my situation. Their efforts were bolstered by several letters of petitions from many human rights and humanitarian organizations. My lawyers were also denouncing the blatant irregularities of my case, fifteen months of detention without trial based on allegations that were entirely baseless. Ultimately, this convergence of legal advocacy and international pressure convinced the commission to act, resulting in the positive recommendation for my release

Late in the afternoon of Sunday 22, 2024, rumors began to circulate that the Minister was arriving to grant liberations. Usually, those on the list were notified a day in advance for them to prepare, yet hundreds from the 11 pavilions made their way towards the main offices, driven by a desperate hope. The Minister arrived late in the afternoon initiating a time of commotion and anxiety for those departing and those remaining. He inaugurated the process of liberation and departed, leaving his aides to supervise the releases till late that evening. My name, however, was never called. I remained uncontacted, a silent observer until the heavy doors were closed for the night.. Though, many hundreds remained on the list but were not able to go that night. Early morning on September 23, 2024, I woke up as usual at six to do my morning walk and I was met by a big crowd of people with health issues heading towards the administration block. They were being supervised by the director of security service at the Prison holding a junk of papers with lists of people liberated by the Minister's order. "Is my name not in those lists that you have?" I asked, "how can I know your name in thousands of names? Let us go to the office and check," he answered. I had heard rumors that my name was on the list and was curious to verify. I ran into my room to change into my uniform the only garment that would grant me passage to the administration block.

Time passed, Lists were arranged under civil and military jurisdictions. I began to go through the lists in alphabetical order. Full of emotion, I found my name under the military jurisdiction. I could not believe that it meant what I read and everything in me jumped for joy as I could not hold back tears of joy and I asked the official, what does that mean? Am I free to go home? “Yes, if you find your name, get ready,” he answered. I decided not to go back to my cell, I feared that if I went back, the door might close on me one last time. Instead, I sat among others who were also waiting for their names to be called. A few minutes later, we are told to start moving toward the big gate that led us to freedom as our names were being called! Escorted by 2 policemen to the gate, soldiers guarding the gate slowly opened the gate and one of the policemen spoke the words I had been waiting fifteen months to hear “you are now free to go in peace.”

Outside the gate, there were hundreds of family members waiting to hear news about their loved ones. Some families were desperately searching the whereabouts of their beloved since the failed jailbreak attempt. I am a stranger, no one was waiting for me. I approached one of the policemen and asked him to help me with his phone to inform my family that I am freed! "Jules, I am free! Come and get me, I am waiting for you outside the gate of Makala!" It felt like we were all dreaming. Jules came immediately with Aimable. On their way, they could not resist the busy morning traffic jam of Kinshasa. Jules quickly decided to leave the car behind and jumped on a motorcycle to quickly find his way to Makala. When he finally arrived, we both cried for joy before jumping on the same motorcycle to where he had left the car with Aimable. My mind was at peace that I was, at long last, free.

## **8. Conclusion**

The experiences of the prisons of Patmos and Kinshasa share one thing in common: the reality of becoming a victim because of who you are and what you believe. In both contexts, political oppression, imprisonment, intimidation and torture are weaponized to silence individuals, inflicting a slow death upon the victim, regardless of whether they are wrongfully or lawfully detained.

There is also the bitter reality of betrayal. Just as John was betrayed by members of his own Christian community who chose allegiance to the Roman empire and compromised their faith, I found myself targeted by The UN Group of Experts report that was both baseless and complicit in a larger, systemic plan to dismantle the Banyamulenge community from their land. Finally, the vision from Patmos, the narrative of rebuilding processes of our promised lands, new heavens and a new earth are partly influenced by the political context under the Roman empire in the aftermath of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. It reminds us that every creature's identity is tied to location, a land that it can call its own in time and space. Our Christian faith is anchored in God's promise that there is a space that we belong; there is a life and freedom before and after death that every creature must enjoy.

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