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# Revelation's Visionary Challenge to Ordinary Empire

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Revelation addresses the ordinary challenges facing Christians under Roman rule, rather than speaking only to those enduring a time of terror. Some of the readers were struggling, but others were affluent and complacent. The book's visions seek to alter the way they see the political, religious, and economic dimensions of imperial life and to call them to renewed faithfulness to God and the Lamb.

**R**evelation is known for its pointed critique of imperial Roman power. Through satirical imagery, it portrays the city that rules the world as a tawdry harlot on a horrific beast, whose seven heads recall Rome's traditional seven hills (Rev 17:9). The ruling power conquers the nations and threatens the saints, while seducing the peoples of the world with dazzling prospects of commercial profits and lives of luxury. In scenes of cosmic conflict, the harlot is destroyed in a fiery conflagration and the Lamb defeats the imperial beast with the sword of his mouth. The horizon of the book extends to the new Jerusalem, but its visionary rhetoric sharply challenges the political, religious, and economic patterns of the Roman world in which its first readers lived.

The contrast between God and God's opponents is clear in the visionary world of Revelation. But it almost certainly would not have been so clear in the social world of its early readers. The book addresses Christian congregations in seven cities of the Roman province of Asia, where many Christians lived relatively comfortable lives. Some were poor but others were well off; some found themselves in conflicted situations while others blended more easily into society. For many, John's critique of the empire would have seemed strange and excessive. It would not have been obvious to them that the empire posed a threat to the faithful.

Revelation's visions would have functioned in different ways depending on the reader's perspective. For readers who were impoverished or intimidated by conflict, the visions may have affirmed what they already believed to be true: the empire was no friend of the faithful. But for those who prospered in the Roman era, the visions would have been a summons to see things differently, to recognize the political, religious, and economic patterns that ran counter to the claims of God, and to exhibit the resistance that comes from faith in the contexts where they lived.

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## CHANGING PERSPECTIVES ON REVELATION'S IMPERIAL CONTEXT

Interpreters have often assumed that Revelation was written under the specter of rising imperial persecution of the church. This is based in part on Irenaeus' comment that Revelation was written near the end of the reign of the emperor Domitian, who was assassinated in 96 C.E. (*Against Heresies* 5.30.3). The final years of Domitian's reign were marked by violent action against those he suspected of disloyalty. After his death, he was condemned by the senate and his name was removed from inscriptions and public monuments. When vilifying Domitian, Roman writers charged that he had made excessive claims about his own divinity, arrogantly demanding that people call him "lord and god" and summoning his wife to join him on his "divine couch" (Suetonius, *Domitian* 13). In Christian tradition, Domitian was remembered as one of the persecuting emperors, second only to Nero in his brutality against the church (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.17).

This reconstruction of Revelation's context has endured because it seems to make good sense of the book's terrifying visions. The great seven-headed beast from the sea that John describes exhibits the kind of blasphemous arrogance traditionally associated with Domitian (Rev 13:1–10). This great beast has an ally, portrayed as a beast from the land and as a false prophet, who forces people to take part in the ruler cult and slaughters those who refuse to comply (13:11–18). Later, a brazen prostitute, who represents the city that rules the world, rides on the beast and is drunk on the blood of the saints and witnesses to Jesus (17:1–18). For readers living in a context of terror, Revelation would provide encouragement to resist to the point of death in the confidence that God will prevail in the end.

There are, however, good reasons to revise this scenario. Historians have found remarkably little evidence of imperial persecution of Christians in the late first century.<sup>1</sup> When there was violence against Christians, it was typically a local affair rather than a systematic campaign initiated by the Romans. In the mid-60s of the first century, the emperor Nero did initiate savage attacks against Christians, but the violence was apparently confined to Rome and did not extend into the provinces. Later in the first century, there is no evidence that Domitian was ever called "lord and god" in public documents. The coins and inscriptions produced during his reign use standard titles for the living emperor and refrain from calling him "god." Instead, such divine titles seemed to have been used unofficially by those seeking to win the emperor's favor through flattery.<sup>2</sup> In the final years of his reign, Domitian acted harshly against those suspected of disloyalty, yet there is no evidence that Christians were special victims of persecution.

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<sup>1</sup> Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 69–73; Leonard L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 95–115.

<sup>2</sup> Martial, *Epigrams* 5.8.1; 7.34.8; Dio Chrysostom, *Orations* 45.1; Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 67.5.7; 67.13.4.

Revelation's critical view of Roman dominion cannot be adequately understood as a response to a heightened threat of imperial violence against the church. Whether John wrote at the end of Domitian's reign or some years prior to that, circumstances would not have been markedly different. Rather than speaking against an ominous change in imperial policy, Revelation challenges the dominant currents of ordinary imperial life.<sup>3</sup>

## THE VARIED SITUATIONS OF JOHN'S READERS

The messages to the churches in Rev 2–3 provide a window into the situation of John's intended readers, who lived under imperial rule. In these chapters there is again little evidence that Roman persecution was the dominant threat for Christians in Asia Minor. Instead, we find readers facing a spectrum of challenges. Some encountered local hostility against the church. For others, the principal threat was assimilation into the dominant Greco-Roman culture. For still others, the issue was the complacency that grows out of economic prosperity. I will consider each of these issues in turn.<sup>4</sup>

1. *Open hostility.* This was a problem for Christians in two of the cities addressed by Revelation: Smyrna and Philadelphia (2:8–11; 3:7–13). The situation at Smyrna, which is most fully described, fits the usual pattern of persecution. It begins when people at the local level verbally denounce Christians to the authorities. At Smyrna and Philadelphia this was done by members of local synagogues, although conflict between Jews and Christians did not seem to have been a problem in other cities. The verbal denunciation initiated a process in which the civic or provincial authorities had to determine whether the Christians posed a threat to the social order.

Christians were viewed with suspicion by some because their distinctive profession of faith in Jesus as "Lord" and "Son of God" did not fit accepted social and religious patterns. They did not revere the Greco-Roman deities that were honored by most people in Asian cities, yet they were increasingly distinct from the local Jewish communities, whose beliefs could be tolerated since they were part of their ancestral traditions. For some, Christianity was "a new and mischievous superstition" that needed to be suppressed for the sake of good order in society (Suetonius, *Nero* 16.2; cf. Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44; Pliny the Younger, *Epistles* 10.96.8–9). Accordingly, Christians could be put in prison for questioning, and if they proved to be noncompliant, they could be put to death at the direction of the Roman proconsul.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Steven J. Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 150.

<sup>4</sup> Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 54–69.

<sup>5</sup> Denunciation is followed by imprisonment in Acts 16:19–24; cf. 17:5–9; Heb 10:32–34; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 4.9.1–3. Denunciation leads to the arrest and death of Christians in some other instances (Pliny the Younger, *Epistles* 10.96–97; *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 3.2). On persecutions, see Paul Achtemeier, *1 Peter* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 28–35.

Significantly, the overt threats against the church seem to be local. Christians in two cities faced open hostility, but this is not identified as a problem in the other cities. Revelation recalls that a Christian named Antipas, who is called a “faithful witness,” was put to death at Pergamum at some point in the past (Rev 2:13). Yet even in this instance the rest of the Christians at Pergamum seem to have been left alone, and the message to Pergamum does not suggest that such violence was a persistent problem.

2. *Assimilation.* Christians lived in cities where most people adhered to traditional religious beliefs. Some of the most popular events in public life were the festivals honoring local deities such as Artemis, Athena, or Dionysus. At the heart of a typical festival was a procession in which animals adorned with ribbons or garlands were led through the crowds of onlookers to the place of sacrifice. After the animals were properly slaughtered according to traditional rites, there were often banquets hosted by civic officials and wealthy benefactors where the meat was served. Such situations presented complex social issues for Christians: How fully can one participate in forms of public life that conflict with one’s own faith convictions?

Private social gatherings also could have religious aspects, which compounded the problem. Greco-Roman temples sometimes had dining facilities where people could share meals that included meat from sacrifices offered to a god or goddess. Family celebrations commemorating a birthday or a child’s coming of age might be held in a temple’s dining area. Similarly, trade guilds and business associations had gatherings that included rites honoring a particular goddess or god. What were Christians to do if their friends or business associates expected them to take part in gatherings involving beliefs they did not accept? Was it best to maintain one’s social and business connections, even when this meant suppressing one’s faith? Or was it better to be clear about one’s faith and refrain from participating, even if this brought the risk of heightened tensions with non-Christians or ostracism from them?<sup>6</sup>

Christians did not agree about the extent to which people could compromise their convictions before they lost their integrity. Some took a latitudinarian view and taught that it was no problem for Christians to eat food that had been offered in Greco-Roman religious rites or to share in meals in the local temples.<sup>7</sup> In the messages to the churches, this is the view associated with figures nicknamed Balaam and Jezebel (2:14, 20). John sharply disagreed, insisting that this practice was a form of religious infidelity that was incompatible with Christian faith. This dispute over assimilation presses readers to consider the extent to which their faith sets them apart from a wider non-Christian culture.

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<sup>6</sup> Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*, 88.

<sup>7</sup> Some Christians at Corinth took this approach, which is critiqued by Paul in 1 Cor 8:1–13; 10:19–22. Paul was less concerned about eating sacrificial meat purchased in the market (10:25).

3. *Complacency arising from wealth.* This is most evident in the message to Laodicea, which addresses Christians who are lukewarm in faith. They are depicted as those who say, “I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing” (3:17). For these Christians the problem is not that social conditions are too threatening. Instead, the issue is that life is so comfortable that it has diminished the vitality of their faith.

Aspiring to wealth was not unusual, of course. Greek and Latin writers frequently tell of the wealthy upper classes setting the tone for society as a whole. Wealth was displayed by the clothing one wore, by the servants that attended the members of one’s family, and by the opulence of one’s home. Banquets were occasions at which the upper classes sought to impress their guests. Using tableware of gold, reclining on scarlet cushions, and serving many courses of fine food and wine were established marks of success in Rome and the provinces of its empire.<sup>8</sup>

Equating wealth with status is something Revelation critiques. John likens the situation at prosperous Laodicea to a banquet, where Christ might relish either a cup of fine wine chilled with snow or a soothing drink of hot wine and water—only to be given something tepid and distasteful. What is tepid loses its appeal by conforming to the temperature of the air around it, and this is the way the Christian community is depicted. In their self-satisfaction with wealth they have lost their vitality and become indistinguishable from the surrounding social climate.<sup>9</sup>

## **POLITICAL, RELIGIOUS, AND ECONOMIC ASPECTS OF EMPIRE**

The messages to the churches in Rev 2–3 deal with problems that are primarily local and immediate, but visions later in the book situate these issues within a broader framework. The struggle portrayed in the visions is ultimately between God and evil, yet this conflict engages the political, religious, and economic features of the world in which the readers live. A sketch of these dimensions of the context can help to show the nature of John’s response.

1. *Political Domination.* Asia Minor had been firmly a part of the Roman empire for generations by the time Revelation was composed. The region was not conquered by the Romans but was bequeathed to them by the last king of Pergamum in 133 B.C.E. After this, Asia Minor became a Roman province. There was some violent resistance to Roman rule during in the first century B.C.E., and this was suppressed by the Roman military. During the reign of Augustus, however, conditions improved significantly and by the end of the first century C.E., when Revelation was written, the Roman military presence in Asia Minor was minimal. The wars of conquest continued east and north of the province.

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<sup>8</sup> Naphtali Lewis and Meyer Reinhold, eds., *Roman Civilization: Selected Readings* (3d ed.; 2 vols.; New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 2.155–62.

<sup>9</sup> On the imagery of hot and cold, see Craig R. Koester, “The Message to Laodicea and the Problem of Its Local Context: A Study of the Imagery in Revelation 3.14–22,” *NTS* 49 (2003): 407–24, esp. 411–16.

Authority over Asia ultimately belonged to the Romans, who sent proconsuls to administer the province. The Romans had the power to tax the region and they oversaw the judicial system. Good relations with Roman officials had the potential to yield favorable legal settlements, civic improvements, and desirable appointments to public service. Rome won the loyalty of many people by its benefactions, such as tax relief during times of disaster and the construction of roads, buildings, and water systems. In response, the public was expected to show its gratitude to the ruling power.

One way that Asia honored its Roman overlords was by adopting a calendar that began each year with the birthday of Augustus. The decision was made around 9 B.C.E. The decree said that since divine providence brought Augustus to serve as a benefactor for all humanity, the birthday of the god Augustus marked the beginning of good news for the world. By identifying his birthday (September 23) as the beginning of each new year, time itself was restructured to recognize Roman rule.<sup>10</sup> This dominion of Rome was understood to be enduring. Texts from the period look for “the eternal continuation” of imperial rule and the “permanence” of the empire. Revelation’s insistence that such an empire will end poses a challenge to this aspect of the ideology.

2. *Religion and the Imperial Cult.* Elements of Rome’s political and military ideology were woven into the common religious life of Asia Minor over a long period of time.<sup>11</sup> The first temple to the goddess Roma—who personified the city of Rome—was constructed at Smyrna in 195 B.C.E., almost three centuries before Revelation was written (Tacitus, *Annals* 4.56). Later, the cult of the emperor was established in Asia Minor at the request of the province. In 29 B.C.E., provincial representatives asked Augustus for permission to dedicate sacred precincts to him and their request was granted. Soon a provincial temple to Augustus was constructed at Pergamum, helping to solidify the region’s good relationships with the ruling power (Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 51.20.6–9).

Other provincial temples followed. In 23 C.E., the province requested permission to build a second imperial temple, this one dedicated to Tiberius. This request expressed gratitude for the emperor’s favorable judgments in cases pertaining to Asia’s welfare. Cities from the region competed for the privilege of building the temple, and the honor was granted to Smyrna, enhancing that city’s status in the region (Tacitus, *Annals* 4.55–56). During the 80s, the city of Ephesus gained prestige by building a provincial temple to Domitian and other members of the imperial family. In addition to these provincial centers, many towns built local shrines to the emperor. Provincial and civic festivals honoring the emperors were pop-

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<sup>10</sup> On the calendar and permanence of Roman rule, see Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 32–36, 130.

<sup>11</sup> See S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 25–131.



ular events with contests and banquets that attracted many people. Individuals sought the honor of serving as priests in the imperial cult, since this office advanced one's social standing. By the time Revelation was written, the imperial cult had been a familiar part of Asian life for more than a century.

The cult of Rome and its emperors was based on an ideology that emphasized Rome's invincible strength, which was evident in its military conquests. Coins bearing images of imperial temples depict the emperors in military garb, being given a victory crown. Sculptures in the imperial temple at Aphrodisias, southwest of Laodicea, portray emperors standing in triumph over defeated figures representing nations ranging from Egyptians and Arabs in the east to the Callaeci of western Spain. The iconography also stressed the peace and prosperity that Rome brought to the world. At Aphrodisias, for example, the emperor was depicted as the source of abundance on the earth and safety on the seas.<sup>12</sup> The deification of imperial power did not replace traditional forms of worship but functioned along with them. At Ephesus, for example, joint religious rites honored the goddess Demeter and the emperors. At Pergamum, a festival to the emperor was held in the sacred precincts of the savior god Asclepius. In iconography, the images of traditional Olympian gods were blended with those of imperial Rome. This pattern of identifying the political order with the divine order is challenged by Revelation.

3. *Economic Networks.* Rome's ability to govern subject peoples depended in part on its ability to provide economic benefits. In the imperial period, networks of trade and commerce flourished. Rome itself was the world's largest single market for goods, and Roman fleets plied the seas in order to bring a steady supply of goods to the city. The depiction of seaborne commerce in Rev 18:11–20 is highly stylized, but it provides a point from which to consider the breadth of international trade.

Gold and silver were brought to Rome from Spain and other places. Gems and pearls came from India, the Red Sea, and the Persian Gulf. Silk came from the far east, expensive citrus wood furniture was imported from Morocco, and ivory came from Africa. Iron often came from Spain and the alpine regions, while the best bronze came from Corinth. Cinnamon and amomum, which were used in perfumes, were obtained from Arabia and India, and frankincense came from Arabia and Somalia. Freighters transported large quantities of wheat from Egypt, North Africa, and other agricultural regions.

Many people in Asia took advantage of the opportunities that the Roman-era economy offered. Asian producers marketed various types of textiles, including the expensive purple

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<sup>12</sup> R. R. R. Smith, "The Imperial Reliefs from the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias," *JRS* 77 (1987): 88–138; and "Simulacra Gentium: The Ethne from the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias," *JRS* 78 (1988): 50–77; Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 77–95.



cloth that marked high social status (Acts 16:14). High quality marble and wines, as well as select varieties of horses, cattle, and sheep were sold to Italian markets. The slave trade was of particular importance to the Asian economy. Slaves from Cappadocia and Phrygia were highly prized by Roman buyers. There were slave markets at Sardis, Thyatira, and especially Ephesus, where Roman slave traders sent a steady supply of human beings for sale in Rome and elsewhere.<sup>13</sup> Revelation's critique of commercial practices is not only directed at distant Rome, but also at the local networks of trade in the cities where its readers lived.

## THE THEOLOGICAL BASIS OF JOHN'S CRITIQUE

Revelation's critique of the empire is theologically driven. John's perspective cannot be understood apart from the theological convictions that are conveyed through the visions. The question at the heart of the book is, "Who is the true Lord of this world?"<sup>14</sup> John's response to this question takes us to the heart of Revelation's message.

1. *God the Creator is sovereign.* Revelation's theological center can be seen in 4:1–11, where John has a vision of the heavenly throne of God. The throne identifies God as the rightful ruler of all things and shows that all things must be understood in relationship to God. The vision resembles those of the biblical prophets, who told of the God enthroned by heaven's crystal sea and attended by heavenly beings (Ezek 1; Isa 6). The creatures by the throne have the faces of a lion, an ox, an eagle, and a human being. These reflect various aspects of the created order, including birds, wild and domestic animals, and human beings. Significantly, the one with the human face does not sit on the throne but stands beside it, along with the other representatives of the created order (Rev 4:6–7). No human being occupies the central seat of power. That place belongs to God.<sup>15</sup>

God's dominion is based on creative power. All things are called to honor the God who gives them existence and life. As the heavenly creatures praise God, they are joined by twenty-four elders, who declare, "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created" (4:11). Authentic power is life-giving power, and this belongs to God. In antiquity it was common to offer one's crown or head wreath to human rulers in order to recognize their sovereignty, but in John's vision the elders cast their crowns before God, identifying the Creator as the legitimate power that all others are to recognize. The chorus of praise that begins with the creatures and elders around the throne is taken up by countless angelic hosts in heaven. Then the waves of praise surge outward, until "every creature in heaven and on earth and

<sup>13</sup> See Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), 338–83; J. Nelson Kraybill, *Imperial Cult and Commerce in John's Apocalypse* (JSNTSup 132; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996); Allen D. Callahan, "Apocalypse as Critique of Political Economy: Some Notes on Revelation 18," *HBT* 21 (1999): 46–65; Peter S. Perry, "Critiquing the Excess of Empire: A *Synkrisis* of John of Patmos and Dio of Prusa," *JSNT* 29 (2007): 473–96; Craig R. Koester, "Roman Slave Trade and the Critique of Babylon in Revelation 18," *CBQ* 70 (2008), 766–86.

<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 58.

<sup>15</sup> On God and the empire in Rev 4, see Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 31–35 and David E. Aune, "The Influence of Roman Court Ceremonial on the Apocalypse of John," *BR* 2 (1983): 5–26.

under the earth, and in the sea” has taken up the song (5:11–13). In Revelation, the reign of the Creator is manifested in the harmony of the creation.

2. *Jesus the Lamb is the conqueror.* God does not act alone but accomplishes God’s purposes through the Messiah, who is portrayed in Rev 5. In God’s hand is a scroll that contains the mystery of the divine will, yet John learns that no one is worthy to make God’s will known except the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, who has conquered (5:1–5). These messianic titles recall Gen 49:10 and Isa 11:1, which speak of a powerful lion-like ruler from the line of David. But when John turns to see the Lion, he is confronted with a Lamb, standing as if it had been slaughtered (Rev 5:6).

God’s promise of the Lion is fulfilled in the Lamb, according to Revelation. And this is the way true “conquering” is done. Divine power is unleashed through the Lamb’s faithful suffering, and God’s kingdom is built through Jesus’ self-sacrifice. The Messiah’s death conveys the power of divine love, which claims people for life in God’s kingdom (1:5–6). When the love of God grasps people, it frees them from sin and gives them a priestly vocation to serve on behalf of others (5:9–10).<sup>16</sup> The image of the Lamb is the principal way that Jesus is portrayed in Revelation, and it defines the conquest to which Jesus’ followers are called. They live out the Lamb’s conquest of sin by faithfulness to God in the face of evil, and they share in the Lamb’s victory by speaking the truth rather than capitulating to falsehood (12:11; 15:2).

3. *Evil rages because it is doomed.* Satan wields power in opposition to God and God’s people, but it is crucial for Revelation that Satan is not all powerful. The vision that reveals evil’s true character is given in Rev 12, where Satan is pictured as a seven-headed dragon, who wears the diadems to show his aspirations to rule. The dragon seeks to devour the messianic child, who is born of a woman, but its savage attempt is foiled when the Messiah is taken to God’s throne in heaven. Satan then battles the angels, but is defeated and thrown down from heaven to earth, where he now rages like a wounded animal who knows that time is running out.

Revelation 12 does not depict a mythical fall of Satan at the dawn of time. Rather, it speaks of the defeat of evil that occurred through the work of the Messiah. The vision assumes that Satan long had access to both heaven and earth, and that he could come before God’s throne to accuse the righteous (12:10; cf. Job 1:9–11; Zech 3:1). Following the Messiah’s exaltation, however, Satan is banished from heaven and restricted in action—like an angry caged beast. This is the perspective that is essential for faith. Evil rages not because it is

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<sup>16</sup> Brian K. Blount, *Can I Get A Witness? Reading Revelation through African American Culture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 69–89.

invincible but because it is desperate. Those who think that evil reigns supreme have no incentive to resist it. In their eyes giving in to evil is the only logical course of action. But those who recognize that the evil one is vulnerable do have incentive to resist, knowing that God and the Lamb are supreme.

## VISIONARY CRITIQUE OF EMPIRE

The claims of God and the Lamb clash with those of ordinary empire in Revelation's visions. Some of John's readers may have seen things as John did, but others would not have seen the problems with the same urgency. So Revelation's visionary imagery must challenge them to see the world in light of the radical claims of God and the Lamb. The book takes up and transforms aspects of ordinary empire in order to show that seemingly irresistible political realities actually call for resistance, that apparently benign religious practices are actually insidious, and that glittery commercial practices can actually degrade those who take part in them.

1. *The Beastly Side of Empire.* Revelation recognizes that evil goes beyond any one political system. If Satan is the "ancient serpent," who has been active since the dawn of time (Rev 12:9), then it is clear that evil was at work long before the rise of the Roman empire. Yet John recognizes that evil does work through political systems, and this is what is portrayed in the vision of the beast from the sea. Recall that Satan is a seven-headed and ten-horned dragon, who is evicted from heaven and confined to the earth. Outraged, the monster stands on the seashore and conjures up a beast in his own image. Like the satanic dragon, the beast has seven heads and ten horns, and it rises from the sea to do the bidding of the evil one (12:18–13:1). Politically, this means that the beast can claim no ultimate authority. It is the puppet of a higher demonic power.

The beast is an image for the Roman Empire—and yet is more than that. John's imagery lumps Rome together with other great empires that have risen and fallen. The monster that John sees rising from the deep looks very much like the four great beasts that Daniel saw coming from the sea. In Dan 7:1–7 there are four separate beasts: a lion, a leopard, a bear, and a ten-horned monster. And the four beasts represent successive empires: the Babylonians, the Medes, the Persians, and the Hellenistic kingdoms of Alexander. Yet Revelation blends the traits of all of the beasts together in its vision of the sea beast. The implication is that the many empires that rise and fall over time belong to the same phenomenon: that of empire itself.

Are there distinctly Roman elements in John's vision? Yes, most provocatively in the observation that the beast from the sea was slaughtered and yet is alive (Rev 13:3, 12, 14). Here John evokes imagery from ancient pop culture, where sensationalistic stories circulated about the emperor Nero. According to reliable reports, Nero met a sordid end when he put a dagger to his own throat in 68 C.E. (Suetonius, *Nero* 49.3–4). Yet there were rumors that Nero was actually alive and would return again. (The phenomenon was something like modern tabloid reports about purported sightings of a dead celebrity.) Revelation transforms this popular Nero tradition in order to show that the beast is the demonic counterpart to the Lamb, who was slaughtered but now lives (5:6; 13:8).<sup>17</sup> The idea is not that the beast actually is Nero. Rather, it is that in the savagery of Nero, the empire shows its true face. If the slaughtered and living Lamb "conquers" by faithfully enduring suffering, the Nero-like beast conquers by brutally inflicting suffering on the faithful (5:5–6; 13:7). The suffering Christians at Smyrna would presumably see this. The question is whether the comfortable Christians elsewhere could see it too.

John's portrayal of the crowd that fawns over the beast would have helped to startle the complacent and assimilated among John's readers into this different way of seeing. The crowds declare, "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?" (13:4). For John's early readers, such words would have echoed the familiar choruses of praise that celebrated Rome's seeming invincibility. And to all appearances, what the people say is true; the force of the empire cannot be resisted. "Who is like the beast?" The expected answer is "No one; the beast is incomparable." So "Who can fight against it?" Again, the anticipated answer is "No one; the beast reigns supreme." Yet Revelation seeks to alter these common perceptions and to evoke different responses. The beast from the sea serves a fallen and wounded dragon, whose ferocity stems from frustrated rage not calm control. Then who can fight the beast? From the perspective of John's vision, God and the Lamb can do so—and they are the powers who rightly claim the readers' loyalty.

2. *Unmasking false worship.* Revelation works with the assumption that people will worship something. The only question is whether they will worship the Creator and the Lamb or something else. In the early chapters of the book, the churches were warned about the usual forms of idolatry that were part of Greco-Roman religious life. But the latter part of the book concentrates on the ruler cult, which deified human beings and human power, and wove these beliefs and practices into ordinary life in the cities of Asia. Some Christians in the seven churches seemed to think that accommodating Greco-Roman worship practices posed no threat to the faith. But John asks, "Is this really the case?" Then he singles out this particular form of idolatry for special consideration.

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<sup>17</sup> Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 384–452; Hans-Josef Klauck, "Do They Never Come Back? *Nero Redivivus* and the Apocalypse of John," *CBQ* 63 (2001): 683–98.

From John's point of view, the deification of human power is demonic. When depicting the hideous beast, he observes that its many heads sport blasphemous names (13:1). This detail plays on the practice of giving the heads of the empire names like "god," "son of god," "master," and "savior," which were properly used for God and Jesus (2:18; 4:11; 6:10; 7:10). The beast dominates "every tribe and people and language and nation, and all the inhabitants of the earth will worship it" (13:7–8). Recall how the imperial temple at Aphrodisias celebrated this aspect of the ruler cult by its rows of sculptures, which showed the emperors standing in triumph over beaten figures representing tribes, peoples, and nations.

John brings the question closer to home by describing a second beast or false prophet, who promotes the ruler cult through deception and coercion (13:11–18; 16:13; 19:20). Under the auspices of this second beast, which comes from the land, the people fashion a statue of the deified ruler (13:14). The scene serves as a mirror, in which the readers are to see the leadership of the province of Asia readily spending their time and resources on statues and temples to the deified emperors. Interpreters have wondered whether the false prophet might be identified with a specific person or group, such as the council of Asia, the priests in the imperial cult, or perhaps its wealthy patrons.<sup>18</sup> But it is difficult to specify the false prophet's identity, since the imagery is evocative enough to encompass all who promote the imperial cult.

Political and economic pressures are employed in the service of the cult. The false prophet kills those who refuse to worship the ruler, and he compels people to bear the mark of the sea beast on their foreheads or right hands if they wish to engage in commerce (13:16–18). The reference to the mark of the beast is evocative, and interpreters have found it difficult to equate it with any single economic practice known to the early readers. Some have suggested that receiving the beast's mark on the hand means using coins inscribed with the emperor's name and image. Others wonder whether it warns against joining trade associations, whose gatherings included rites venerating the emperor.<sup>19</sup> Yet it is difficult to equate the beast's mark with one specific practice. It serves more broadly as a summons that Christians are to distance themselves from religious and commercial practices that are inconsistent with the faith.

3. *Harlotry and the seamy side of commerce.* The beast and false prophet are joined by a third figure, Babylon the great, pictured as a garish prostitute (17:1–6). The vision invites satirical comparison with Rome's staid images of itself. On Roman coinage, the goddess Roma was sometimes pictured as a sober female warrior, reclining on the seven hills where

<sup>18</sup> On the various proposals, see Steven J. Friesen, "The Beast from the Land: Revelation 13:11–18 and Social Setting," in *Reading the Book of Revelation* (ed. David L. Barr; SBLRBS 44; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 49–64.

<sup>19</sup> On these suggestions, see Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*, 126–27; Kraybill, *Imperial Cult*, 138–40.

Rome was built. In official imagery the woman is noble and sits calmly with her sword in her hand. In scathing contrast, the woman John sees is no longer a sober warrior but a drunken whore. The seven hills are transformed into the seven heads of the monster on which she rides (17:9). Instead of a sword, she holds a golden cup in her hand—but one filled with the sewage she so seems to enjoy.<sup>20</sup> The image is repulsive, but it serves a vital purpose in John's critique.

The harlot personifies a city and society that debases relationships by turning them into commodities. Revelation understands true relationships to be characterized by fidelity, as in a marriage. But prostitution transforms the most intimate of relationships into a business transaction—and this is the way John sees relationships with Rome. A liaison with a prostitute may have a seamy side, yet clients overlook this when they are bewitched by her opulent clothing, jewelry, and the promise of gratification. In the same way, people are dazzled by the opulence of Rome and the prospect of material gratification through trade with her. So John points to the seamy side of the ruling power's commercial networks.<sup>21</sup>

Rome could be arrogant and brazen, like the harlot in John's vision (18:7). Yet many were willing to overlook this since the city provided such a vibrant market for their goods. Rome could also be violent and cruel—as in the pogroms under Nero, when the city spilled “the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus,” as well as in its conquests of nations, when Rome imposed imperial rule by shedding the blood of many throughout the earth (17:6; 18:24). Yet some found such violence intoxicating and were willing to look beyond it as long as the harlot city kept up its spending spree and lined the pockets of those positioned to do business with her (18:3, 11, 15, 19).

The Christians at Laodicea said, “I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing” (3:17). But the vision of Babylon the whore counters with the question, “Where does your wealth come from?” and shows readers a picture of its principal trading partner in the debauched form of a Roman harlot. To those who might respond that their relationships with the ruling power are merely business arrangements, John replies, “Precisely.” That is what the prostitute does: she debases relationships into commercial transactions. Those who do business with her may be eager to sell her whatever she desires, whether gold, ivory, horses, or human bodies and souls (18:13). But in the process the prostitute's clients actually “sell out,” since the profit motive and self-interest trump all other principles in this game.

So a voice from heaven says, “Come out of her, my people, so that you do not take part in her sins, and so that you do not share in her plagues” (18:4). This is an exhortation to

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<sup>20</sup> David E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22* (WBC 52c; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 920–22.

<sup>21</sup> On the portrayal of the harlot, see Barbara R. Rossing, *The Choice Between Two Cities: Whore, Bride, and Empire in the Apocalypse* (HTS 48; Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1999).



disengage from commercial practices that are incompatible with the faith. John's visions assume that readers are entangled in the economic life of the imperial world, yet they urge people not to let Roman "Babylon" dictate the terms by which they live. Revelation does not outline a program by which human beings will produce the perfect society, but it does call people to resist aspects of ordinary imperial social and economic life that run counter to the claims of God and the Lamb.

## **FAITH AND RESISTANCE**

Revelation's visions work by shaping the basic convictions of the readers. The visionary rhetoric challenges people to see the world in light of the Creator and the Lamb, and to work out the implications in the contexts where they live. John understands that human beings live in a world of contending powers, where no one has the luxury of a neutral space. Therefore, the question is which forms of authority will most influence people and communities. Will it be the claims of the Creator, who brings all things into being, or will it be the authority of the imperial state with its deified rulers? Will conquest be defined by the Lamb's faithfulness and suffering, which redeem people, or will it be defined by the imperial pattern of defeating many nations? Does faith in the Lamb who "purchases" people by his blood (5:9) give people the capacity to resist commercial practices that are degrading, or is the obsession with making purchases in the vast imperial market what drives daily life?

John recognizes that no political change will usher in the kingdom of God. This is clear in the vision of the new Jerusalem, which must descend from heaven (21:1–2). John also understands that evil cannot simply be equated with the Roman empire. Evil was at work long before Rome rose to power, and it will continue to be active even after the great city has fallen and the imperial beast has been defeated (17:16; 19:20; cf. 20:1–3, 7–10). But John's visionary depictions of the beast and harlot assume that evil is active within the political, religious, and economic currents of his society. Revelation speaks to people like those at Smyrna, who face open hostility because of their faith, and calls them to steadfast faith in the God who raises the dead. And it also seeks to startle complacent Christians into seeing the contradictions between the claims of the empire and the claims of God. The visionary world portrays the clash of powers in extraordinary form in order to evoke the kind of faith and resistance needed to follow the Lamb in ordinary life.