

The Revelation to John: A Case Study in Apocalyptic Propaganda and the Maintenance of Sectarian Identity

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Sociologists of religion and biblical scholars often define the function of apocalypses and apocalyptic eschatology as a means of comforting the oppressed, a form of otherworldly theodicy in Berger's terminology. Careful scrutiny of the circumstances surrounding the writing and transmission of the Revelation of John leads to another possibility — apocalyptic literature and ideology may serve as a call to action and to protest of the dominant societal institutions and values. In this study, I examine the tensions weighing on the Christian communities at the close of the first century C.E. and explore Revelation's interaction with these circumstances, particularly the imperial cult, as a summons to the churches to choose a path that will maintain the integrity of the subgroup's boundaries. Rather than comfort the disenfranchised, Revelation appears to have set the Christians on a course of action that would lead to ultimate disenfranchisement. Apocalyptic literature here displays itself as revolutionary in character and intention.

The phenomenon of the apocalyptic movement continues to picque the interest and challenge the understanding of the sociologist of religion, both in its contemporary and historical occurrences. Careful study may be impeded, however, by certain presuppositions about the rise of apocalypticism and its function in a given situation. These presuppositions are gradually coming under examination, and it is toward the furtherance of this examination and the formation of a new understanding of apocalyptic that this present study is offered. As the canonical book of Revelation provides modern millenarian groups with the starting point for their rallying, an investigation into its historical situation and function may provide sociologists as well with a fresh assessment of the significance and function of apocalyptic.

Apocalypses such as Revelation, Daniel, and Second Esdras (as well as several lesser known Palestinian Jewish apocalypses) share in common the theme of "restoration and reversal" (Sanders, 1983:456-57). That is, they posit a time in the very near future when the present incongruities between the author's convictions about her or his group's destiny and the author's experience of reality will be resolved. Apocalypse is a special literary form in that it is interested in creating a whole cosmos that lends meaning to experience of the visible world and that often undermines the dominant societal power's legitimation of its order and confidence in its destiny. The canonical

apocalypses demonstrate this aspect clearly.

Reconstructions of the groups or circles in which apocalypses were produced and preserved usually involves depictions of the group as an oppressed or disenfranchised sector of society (Hanson, 1976:30; Wilson, 1981:84-87; Berger, 1967:68-69). Apocalypses are regarded largely as serving the needs of theodicy for such groups, providing consolation in the face of present evils with the hope of future reversal and restoration — even the illusory experience of future bliss (Gager, 1975:49-57, 64-65). This study seeks to demonstrate that the Revelation to John seeks not merely to offer comfort to downtrodden and disenfranchised people; by means of apocalyptic, John challenges the unsuffering among the churches in Asia Minor to adhere to the sect's principles and to risk — indeed, embrace — disenfranchisement rather than compromise the sect's boundaries for the sake of continued enfranchisement in the world of the Roman province of Asia.

THE FUNCTION OF THE REVELATION TO JOHN¹

New Testament scholars have long debated the date, and thus the historical situation, of Revelation.² Without going into the intricacies of the various arguments, one common feature may be noted. Many positions assume that open persecution of Christians would be a necessary prerequisite of the writing of an apocalypse or, conversely, that if an apocalypse was written at a certain date this provides certain evidence that there was an open persecution of Christians at that time. A fundamental presupposition regarding apocalyptic thought and its literary expressions involves the equation

¹For readers unfamiliar with the Revelation to John, the contents may be summarized as follows: In chapter 1, John addresses himself to his readers and reports a vision of the glorified Jesus who commissions John to declare the visions he is about to be shown. John then addresses the seven churches each in turn in chapters 2 and 3 in the voice of the glorified Jesus. These are rather formulaic oracles, consisting of address, commendation, rebuke, warning, and promise, though not all seven oracles contain all these elements. In chapters 4 and 5, John sees the throne of God and the Lamb coming forward to take the scroll of the final plagues, which are revealed as the scroll is opened in chapter 6. Plagues and judgments, in cycles of seven, occupy chapters 6, 8, 9, 15, and 16. Inserted into this progression are visions of the "sealed of God" in chapter 7; the career of the "two witnesses" who serve as a sort of paradigm for the faithful believer in chapter 11; the war between Satan, the angels of God, and the followers of Jesus in chapter 12; the two beasts from land and sea in chapter 13; the judgment of Rome (the "Great Whore") in chapters 17 and 18; the final judgment of Satan, his forces, and followers, in chapters 19 and 20; and finally the vision of the City of God, "New Jerusalem," in chapters 21 and 22. For those interested in millenarian sects and apocalyptic groups, knowledge of this and related works (Daniel, 2 Esdras) is essential.

²Most scholars favor the traditional date of 95 C.E., near the end of Domitian's troubled reign, particularly as this date is corroborated by Irenaeus of Lyons. The testimony of Eusebius concerning a persecution of Christians under Domitian further commends this date. Those scholars who are not satisfied that Domitian conducted himself or urged his provincial representatives to conduct themselves in this way have sought an earlier date in the tumultuous times at the close of Nero's reign and the beginning of the civil wars of 69. As early as Engels (1964) we find scholars "counting heads" on the beast and arriving at Nero and Galba, again citing a time of severe, deliberate, and open persecution of Christians. Most recently, Downing (1988) has carefully studied Pliny the Younger's famous proceedings against the Christians in Bithynia. As these trials appear to have been completely Pliny's innovation and as Pliny cites no precedents which guide his action, Downing offers the suggestion that Revelation actually originates in the latter half of Trajan's reign — again, when Christians are being openly persecuted.

of apocalyptic with theodicy. Clearly this is how Engels (1964:316) understood it when he interpreted Revelation as the wish-fulfillment fantasy of the underprivileged classes — from which classes the Christians were drawn. Peter Berger's classification of theodicies in *The Sacred Canopy*, based on the work of Weber (1963:138-50), appears to advance this same understanding of millenarianism. Berger (1967:69) does make a positive advance over this position, however, as he goes on to acknowledge that an apocalyptic theodicy may be revolutionary if it allows for or calls for human cooperation with the divine reversal.

The evidence of Revelation demands a reevaluation of apocalyptic as theodicy, the promise of a future time that will remedy the ills presently felt by the oppressed community. The best analysis of pagan and Christian sources suggests that Revelation was indeed written toward the end of Domitian's reign, which, though a time of terror for many leading Roman officials, was not a particularly worse time of intolerance toward Christians in the heart of the empire. It was, however, a time of great tension in the provinces. The Jewish community was engaged in a battle to reestablish its center and its unity after the disastrous war in Judea and its aftershocks. Greco-Roman culture was exerting its continuous pressure upon nonconformists who eschewed civic, economic, and political associations and functions because of some ill-understood devotion to a foreign *superstitio*. The State, as well, exerted a continual challenge to Christian sensibilities and allegiance through local activities of imperial cult.

The situation was thus one of ferment, in which a relatively powerless sectarian movement had to make decisions about its future course. We learn from Revelation that there are other prophets offering their suggestions, urging an increasingly open attitude toward the larger society and a peaceful coexistence through compromise. Into this dialogue, John sends his Apocalypse. From being a millenarian theodicy designed to comfort its readers and hearers for persecutions suffered in the past, Revelation provides a vision calling for a reassessment of the present and a response for the future.

This study of the interaction of Revelation with its situation will demonstrate its function as an identity-forming and boundary-maintaining device in a time when sectarian communities are faced with questions as to how they will respond to the demands of the larger social environment. It becomes thus truly "prophetic" in the sense of forging a religious interpretation of the situation that enables the recipients to identify and meet the challenges of the moment as the apocalypticist has understood it. The apocalyptic vision functions in many ways as Geertz suggests with regard to religion — calling for particular attitudes and stances toward various elements of the larger social order and clothing these elements, attitudes, and stances with a thick cloak of religious legitimation or delegitimation (as in the case of imperial cult).

The early churches find themselves at the juncture in the development of a sect so carefully examined by Bryan Wilson (1967:22). Revelation, as apocalyptic, will be seen to function as the switchman's lever, as John moves the early Christian communities away from a "denominationalizing" stance with regard to Greco-Roman society back toward the harder track of a "sectarian" attitude, toward the maintenance and endurance of "sectarian tension" rather than the alleviation of it. Its language performs not so much the task of comforting, but rather the ideological work of delegitimizing

society's definitions of reality, decentering its centers, and reinforcing the counter-definitions of the sectarian group in accordance with which the *ekklēsiai* are called to act.

SOURCES OF SECTARIAN TENSION

Benton Johnson (1971:124) has identified a crucial part of a religious body's definition as the "attitude towards its social environment." Denominations display a relative openness to the larger social environment, whereas sectarian groups are more guarded about their interaction with the outside world. Bainbridge and Stark (1980:122) have followed Johnson in conceptualizing the "church-sect dimension in terms of tension with the surrounding sociocultural environment," noting three sub-dimensions of this tension: difference between the norms of the sect and the standards set by the majority or powerful members of society, mutual antagonism of sect and society, separation in social relations between sect and society.

While there is not a "church" dimension at the time of the Apocalypse, there are denominationalizing tendencies urged by factions within the sect as a response to the tension experienced by its members. While we cannot, with Bainbridge and Stark, measure the tension between the Christian communities of the province of Asia with the larger Greco-Roman society, we may explore the sources of this tension and the consequences of continued tension for the communities. Such a reconstruction will enable us better to understand the program both of the so-called Nicolaitans (Rev. 2:6, 15, 20) and the apocalypticist, whose prophetic ministries call for, respectively, a more open, "church-like" attitude toward society and a continued posture of protest and resistance, a "sectarian" attitude. Apocalyptic provides the perfect genre for inciting the communities towards the latter stance.

External Pressure from the State

One of the more prominent expressions in Revelation is "the image of the Beast," and its worship, as well as the "mark of the Beast." The eschatological destiny of the inhabitants of the world appears to be, for John, directly linked to participation in or resistance to the cult of the Beast, which we may identify with certainty as the imperial cult. The meaning of the cult for its participants — most of the inhabitants of the Roman Empire — makes it clear how those who refused participation earned the suspicion and even hostility of the local population, as the cult became a central religious expression of political and social order and cohesion.

The imperial cult served its purpose as an expression of loyalty and gratitude on the part of the citizenry. "In moments of mortal danger or exceptional prosperity, the Hellenistic mind went so far as to honor its benefactor or deliverer as a god" (Hansen, 1967:142). Ramsey (1909) and Bowersock (1982) have both located the origins of the ruler cult in the relationship of benefactors to clients. Nicolaus of Damascus, a first-century historian, records the widespread regard for Augustus, the first *princeps*, as the bringer of peace and prosperity to the Mediterranean world, so long torn by civil war.

The honor of cult served as much as "a means of securing favour in the future as . . . an acknowledgement of favour already received" (Bowersock, 1982:171). The

imperial cult thus functioned as a means of building relationships between the central power in Rome and the provinces, and was particularly strong in the eastern province of Asia. The roles and relative positions of the parties involved are clearly defined and also clearly connected through the activity of the cult. While the imperial cult was clearly regulated and often directed from the center, its origin and primary initiative comes from the periphery, rising from “below” rather than simply imposed from “above.” John’s vision offers quite a different perspective on this, but the difference becomes intelligible as we realize the basic dynamics of the cult’s motivation.

The imperial cult is the way in which the province made sense of an otherwise incomprehensible intrusion of authority into their world. The people of the province could represent to themselves the power of the emperor through the use of terms familiar through their religious tradition and earlier Hellenistic ruler cult. They were able to construct a meaningful connection between their existence now at the periphery of power with the center of power. It was a religious phenomenon which also brought about political reenfranchisement. They were not ruled by one who was remote and inaccessible to them, but rather by one with whom they had established a cultic rapport in the tradition of the cults of benefactors. In this sense, the passage in Wisdom of Solomon 14:17-21 captures a part of the truth of the ruler cult, namely that it represented the distant one as present and established a deeply religious connection between them through the cultic image.

The cult thus provided a language for diplomacy. The relationship was one of power, that is, of voluntary respect for the authority of the emperor, which could hope for favorable treatment and honor. This is to be distinguished from a relationship defined by force, where the subjects reject the authority and must be coerced (Price, 1984:242). An active imperial cult replaced the need for the use of the Roman army to keep Roman authority in place. The imperial cult in addition “enhanced the dominance of local elites over the populace” by awarding to these local elites prominent positions in the cultus, “enhanced the dominance . . . of cities over other cities [through the awarding of such titles as *neokoros*, temple-keeper], and of Greek over indigenous culture. The cult was a major part of the web of power that formed the fabric of society” (Price, 1984:248).

If we approach the cult synchronically, say, at the time of the Apocalypse, then we may conclude that the rituals of the cult serve the purpose of legitimating the political arrangements of the social order as well. The cult served to propagate a clear ideology of the emperor and the relationships of individuals in the provinces to him. That the emperors accepted and often enthusiastically supported the expansion and continuation of cult in the provinces ought to alert us to the fact that in it they had found, although not created, an effective organ for maintaining a particular power relationship between the center and the provinces.

The ideology inherent in the imperial cult, including the depiction of the emperor as “savior,” “benefactor,” or “divine,” and the expression of the proper attitudes, postures, and forms of address to be internalized and employed by the participants, appears as an extremely important part of John’s apocalyptically fashioned protest. His use of the symbols of the “image” and the “beast” and all that surrounds them can be fruitfully understood as an attempt to decentralize the ideology that he

understands to be communicated through the cult and to raise up a counterideology on which the churches may take their stand. That is, John the Seer assigns a new, negative valuation to the emperor and his cult and develops a different ideological landscape in which the emperor is no longer in central position, but rather off-center and antagonistic toward the center, which is now represented as God, or the Lamb, and their cult. As one would expect, the imperial cult will not easily suffer detraction. Opposition to an important part of the machine of world maintenance would prove dangerous.

An important question with regard to the imperial cult is how it affected the life of the Christian communities. Under Domitian, did it become an instrument for seeking out Christians and putting them on trial, or was its oppression more subtle? The evidence has been discussed at great length between Thompson, Collins, Keresztes, and others. While Domitian's reign was a time of apparently increasing activity in imperial cult and extravagant adulation of the emperor, he does not appear to have instigated an empire-wide persecution of Christians *per se*. It is rather the case that mounting tensions within the society cause John to see such persecution in the near future as plausible and probable.

John of Revelation knows of only one martyr, Antipas, "the faithful one," in Pergamum. Against Keresztes, I can see no cause for regarding the persecutions in Revelation 6 through 18 as comments on current events. Such a reading of chapter 13, for example, violates John's claim that these are the things which "must shortly come to pass." Rather, the company of martyrs beneath the altar awaits a future time when its number will be completed. John is sure that Antipas is about to become the firstborn of many brethren, as he sees in Antipas the shape of things to come, namely the confrontation between the Christian confession (Antipas is a *martyr*) and the supporters of the dominant world-construction, which includes imperial ideology.

The imperial cult was a powerful and pervasive presence in the cities of Asia Minor. The architecture, sculpture, and cultic activity conspired, as it were, along with the less dramatic media of inscriptions and coins, to place the ideology and meaning of the cult in the most prominent and frequented parts of civic life. For most of the population, this omnipresence was probably not unwelcome. It enwrapped the realities and activities of everyday life like a security blanket, giving everything a place in the large picture. But what about those for whom the cult was an unwelcome presence, an articulation of an offensive ideology? Here, as we move into a consideration of the Christians' encounter with the imperial cult in Asia Minor near the end of Domitian's reign, the sensitive insights of Adela Yarbro Collins may help us to imagine their position. She suggests that the imperial cult festivals provided an occasion for the mutual rejection of Christian and non-Christian society to intensify, increasing also the precariousness of the Christians' positions.

For Collins (1984:101), the closest parallels to the experience of these Christians would be the experience of "the Jews of Skokie, Illinois, when the neo-Nazis announced a public march in their town or the reaction of black people to a parade or festival openly sponsored by the Ku Klux Klan in a city where black people had no organized political clout." The analogies suffer in several respects. First, imperial ideology did not have the extermination of Christians in primary focus. The memory of Nero's

holocaust, however, does help to bring the analogies back to their full value. Second, neither neo-Nazis nor the KKK expresses the official ideology of the United States and its territories. The imperial cult did, and this would, I believe, have made the experience of watching or hearing the festivals all the more marginalizing and oppressive.

In such a situation, Revelation, as apocalyptic literature, may have functioned not as solace for the oppressed, but as ideological warfare calling for a strengthening of boundaries and response to the larger society that reflects those ideological commitments and boundaries. While the imperial cult was an imposing presence in Asia Minor, John brings it into the picture as a point of conflict. He selects it as a particularly powerful feature of the cultural ideology in which all that stands opposed to Christian values, as John sees them, crystallizes, and against which the Christian counterdefinitions can crystallize, decentering and relativizing the dominant set of reality definitions.

The literary genre and theological frame of apocalyptic is perfectly suited to pushing aside one world order in favor of promoting another, delegitimizing the former, legitimating the latter. As for open persecution, these things would “shortly come to pass,” according to John, and the astute social analyst was quite correct. Within fifteen years, confessing or cursing Christ, offering or not offering incense to the image of the emperor “as to a god,” would become a life and death issue, a conscientious and rigorous trial, almost inquisition, for the Christian communities in Bithynia on trial before Pliny, Trajan’s envoy.

External Pressures from Greco-Roman Society

The oracles recorded in Revelation 2 and 3 provide some indication of the external demands being placed on the young Christian community. Among the tensions they faced were the cultic practices that accompanied participation in trade guilds.³ Each guild had a patron deity, and the guild’s activities included sacrificing to that deity

³First Corinthians 8 and 10 provide a window into the tension experienced by Christians, particularly Gentile Christians, with regard to contact with their former cultic associations. Paul appears to accept as unharmed the meat that is sold in the market place, even though that meat was probably supplied to the market by pagan temples making some revenue from the sacrificial victims. What is unacceptable for Paul is that Christians should continue to participate in the cultic ceremonies in which the meat is offered and eaten (1 Cor. 10:14-22). This would include a wide range of settings forbidden Christians, with varying degrees of consequence for their daily lives. Papyri and stone tablets have been found on which were written or inscribed invitations to private banquets to be held in one of a temple’s several dining rooms “in honor of the god.” Civic festivals would be centered as well on the temples and their rituals, the meat for the feasts coming from the sacrifices at the temple. Most important for us here, we find the existence of voluntary associations usually formed by members of a common trade. The silversmiths’ guild in Acts 19 provides us with one example of this phenomenon, as well as of the pressure it was able to bring to bear on Christian missionaries. These guilds or associations clothed their dinners and business gatherings with an aura of religiosity. Often the social dinner would take the form of a feast in honor of the patron deity of the guild, whose statue would “preside” at the head table. Such trade associations would thus also be forbidden to Christians under Paul’s ruling, as they brought the Christians once more to “the table of demons.” Theissen (1982:127-28) provides a review of the primary evidence from inscriptions and pagan authors for the different cultic settings in which one would be exposed to “meat offered to idols.” See also Meeks (1983:31) for an overview of the phenomenon of associations in the Roman Empire.

(and no doubt to the emperor's *genius* as well), followed by a common meal the main dish of which was the sacrificed animal. As Durkheim (1965:378) noted of totemic rituals, "meals taken in common are believed to create a bond of artificial kinship between those who assist at them. Relatives are people who are naturally made of the same flesh and blood. But food is constantly remaking the substance of the organism. So a common food may produce the same effects as a common origin."

The effect of the ritual meal, as can be seen from the Christian eucharist as well, is to impress upon the participants the bond created and maintained between them. What Durkheim (1965:122) says is true of the members of the clan is also, in some instances, true of the guild. The guild would take on such familial duties as, for example, performing the burial and appropriate rites for its deceased members. By the time of John's writing, some Christian prophets (i.e., the Nicolaitans and Jezebel of Rev. 2:6, 14-15, 20-24) were advocating revision of the prescribed abstinence from these rituals in order to assure a peaceful and prosperous coexistence with Greco-Roman society. John, however, would see these meals as incompatible with the eucharist, which looks forward to the "marriage feast of the Lamb."

The ritual was thus important socially and economically. When the Christian, who had formerly participated in the guild as a good devotee and member, finds it necessary to withdraw from this central ritual of the guild, that person often both violated the familial bond of the guild members and jeopardized his own economic well-being. Such a one could be seen as a "hater of the human race," who has thus drawn back from affirmations of loyalty and kinship. The issue, of course, was how far one could compromise one's dedication to Christ as Lord for the sake of economic survival. Christians practiced their trades and lived their lives among the pagan society.⁴ As they could not form an effective commune, they had to come to terms with how to live at peace with their environment while remaining faithful.

Some were able to argue in Paul's Corinthian congregation that outward conformity provided no peril to the spiritual state of the believer. Those who knew "that an idol is nothing" could simply live out that knowledge in their freedom. Paul, however, did not share that view. The outward witness of allegiance to Christ had to be preserved for him, and so nothing which could be interpreted as "partaking of the table of demons" was allowed, despite what economic hardships such a course of action would bring. John, like Paul, could not conceive of any assimilation in form to pagan society apart from assimilation in actuality. The public acknowledgment of the idol, as surely as the confession that "Caesar is Lord," was a public denial of Jesus.

⁴We can assume, for example, that many slaves after conversion to Christianity would have remained the slaves of their non-Christian masters and in non-Christian households, and have evidence in First Corinthians 7:12-16 of questions raised concerning marriages between converts and non-Christians. Such marriages were to be preserved, if the "unbelieving" partner did not request separation. We know also from First Corinthians 8 through 10 from the question raised about eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols that Christians had to buy food from the same market as non-Christians. They could not supply food for themselves from a nonpublic market, as one would expect that Jewish communities intent on keeping *koshrut* laws would have to do, even as they do today. Finally, it is generally agreed that local churches were small groups, such that the whole community could assemble under a private roof (cf. the frequent greetings of Paul to "the church in [a prominent member's] house"). It would have been too small a group to insure its own economic survival without participation in the economy of the larger society.

External Pressure from the Synagogue

The oracles to Smyrna and Philadelphia (Rev. 2:8-11, 3:7-13) embody the prophet's polemic against the Jewish synagogue and the record of the synagogue's hostility toward the Christian churches. The *synagōgē* is clearly represented as a separate social entity from the *ekklēsiai*. We enter here upon the problem of the need of Judaism during this period to consolidate its identity over against sectarian movements and the claim of the nascent church upon the title "True Israel," the body of those who were "Jews inwardly," in Pauline terms, and thus the true chosen assembly. The relationship between the church and the synagogue was thus especially strained as *both* groups were struggling with questions of preserving their identity over against the large society, and the two groups had competing ideological claims which, under the circumstances, made these two groups hostilely oriented toward one another.

During the period after 70 C.E., Judaism underwent a period of consolidation in which sectarian groups became proscribed in favor of the emerging center of rabbinic Judaism. The general denunciation of sectarianism such as one encounters in the *Birkat ha-Minim* (Cohen, 1987:228) must necessarily include, reflect, and encourage incarnations of this attitude in particular denunciations of particular sectarians. The sect of Jesus, the crucified Messiah, would be an appropriate recipient of this hostility, all the more as it laid an exclusive claim to the name of "Jew."

Hostility from the synagogue appears to have taken some penal form, at least in Smyrna. If the forecast of imprisonment, suffering, and testing is related in some causal way to the "slander of those who say that they are Jews," then we may see in Revelation the emergence of a complex social problem that could conceivably have severe consequences in the years ahead. It is generally agreed that Christians would have begun to be endangered by official powers only after it was made clear that these were no longer Jews. The Jewish people had received the favor of Julius Caesar and, later, Augustus in the establishment of Judaism as a *religio licita*, or at least a *religio tolerata* in the empire. The Jewish people, both in Palenstine and the Diaspora, were thus allowed to practice their religion freely under imperial rule and were notably exempted from the conflicting requirements of the empire, including participation in the imperial cult.

Where the aegis of Judaism is removed from the Christian movement, however, so is the status of *religio licita* and the relative safety of the new religion with respect to official intervention. In their fervor, therefore, both to absorb sectarians within the synagogue and remove the recalcitrant ones, it is highly likely that Jewish propaganda made it clear what constituted Jewishness. The rabbis' thoughtful proceedings were claimed by the popular contingent in the sort of energetic self-definition and consolidation, the sort of powerful investment in a given set of boundaries, that often includes denunciation of those just outside the new boundaries. While this served the necessity of the times for Judaism, it could easily have been regarded as "slander" by the author of Revelation — dangerous slander at that, as it brought with it for the first time the attention of local authorities toward a potentially newly illicit religion. It may be noted that the imperial cult had previously served as a weapon in local disputes, its power arising from the inherent danger in overt opposition to the cult

ideology, activity, and props (Jones, 1980:1027).

Internal Pressures — Prophets of Denominationalization

The oracles to Pergamum and Thyatira address the response of the congregations to the teaching of the Nicolaitans, who seem also to stand behind Jezebel. In these cryptic references we find a key to the social situation of the Christians in two major cities as well as a key to the purpose of the Apocalypse that explodes more naive conceptions of the function of apocalyptic literature.

The Nicolaitans, “who hold to the teaching of Balaam,” and the followers of “Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess,” are all depicted as morally deficient — they “eat food sacrificed to idols and commit fornication” (Rev. 2:14, 20). In light of the situation described concerning the economic pressures of trade guilds, and in light of the fact that “teaching” (*didachē*) is used to describe the activities of the Nicolaitans, these groups must also represent a doctrinal affront to the communities, or at least to John. Indeed, Collins (1984:88) declares that these represent another group of itinerant prophets who present an alternative interpretation of the gospel and therefore an alternative response to the social order which may be regarded as faithful.

Perhaps the best clue to their message and the significance of their invitation can be found in the imagery drawn from the Hebrew Scriptures to describe them. The name of Balaam was attached to the apostasy of Israel at Peor, recounted in Numbers 25:1-3, wherein the Israelites “began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab,” with the consequence that they accepted the Moabites’ invitation to bow down to their gods and eat of their sacrifices. The rabbinic tradition preserves a reference to the disciples of Bile’am as the opposite of the disciples of Abraham (*Pirke Aboth* 5:29). Balaam became thus a figure for apostasy, the false teacher. The Deuteronomic danger associated with this is loss of identity as the “people of God,” becoming indistinguishable from the nations around them. The possibility of syncretism became the threat of losing ethnic and religious identity, and consequently losing the blessing and promise of God.

John casts the Nicolaitans as “disciples of Bile’am,” an especially appropriate choice as the issue again appears to be a literal participation in the sacrifices to pagan deities (Mounce, 1977:98), an element of membership in the trade guilds. The asceticism for which John calls is not, as Troeltsch (1931:332) would say with regard to the Catholic church, against sensuality, but rather, as he would say with regard to sectarian movements, against participation in the world. It is a life-style asceticism, an asceticism of allegiance reserved for the Lord and the *communitas*.

The Nicolaitans, then, advocated accommodation to the society. It is not inconceivable that their teaching descends from the Corinthians’ notion that “an idol is nothing,” and therefore participation in an idol feast would be without spiritual significance. If it were thus no denial of the gospel, nor affront to the lordship of Jesus, why should the Christian community suffer economic hardship and even social ostracization? The way for the community to survive would be through accommodation in form while preserving the essential meaning unharmed, or else the community would simply be completely marginalized and eventually could no longer survive.

It was obviously a persuasive argument, as the Nicolaitans gained notable ground in Pergamum and probably Thyatira as well.⁵ The figure of Jezebel in the Hebrew Scriptures affords some light on our “Jezebel,” who calls herself a “prophetess.” Jezebel supported materially the prophets of Baal in Israel, and supported their cause vocally. In her identification with them and obvious endorsement of them, she became a virtual prophet of Baal herself. John may be indicting, therefore, a woman of prominence who has opened her house to the Nicolaitan prophets, supporting them in the same way as others supported John in his itinerant ministry.

Those who “commit adultery with her” and “her children” are violently threatened and condemned by John in this oracular denunciation precisely for their compliance with her way of thinking, for embracing an open relationship with the pagan society. Mounce (1977:98), citing Caird, concludes that “the sum total of the Nicolaitans’ offense is that they took a laxer attitude than John to pagan society and religion.” This laxer view, however, came at a dangerous time for the community, a time when the social pressures were mounting in a way that the Nicolaitans did not see, which could result in total absorption of the Christian *communitas* into the pagan environment if the boundaries were not fortified. Such, at least, was John’s analysis.

Wealth and Compromise

The examination of tensions surrounding wealth and deprivation executed by Collins (1984:94) provides a window into the broader social tensions surrounding the communities addressed by Revelation. John, however, has a different perspective on wealth and poverty that needs to be examined. There is a sociological reason for his attitude toward wealth, grounded in a theological one, but it is not simply the one commonly attributed to the hostility of the poor against the rich.

Babylon is presented in the eighteenth chapter as the image of wealth and conspicuous consumption. The city lacks for nothing (until the day of its visitation!). From our discussion above, it seems clear that the only road to riches was the way of accommodation and compromise. When the boundaries of the community could be abrogated, the members of the community could freely participate in the pagan economy, in league with Babylon, as it were, and share in her prosperity. It was a tainted prosperity, however, because, on the one hand, Babylon is already drunk with the blood of the saints who held up an alternative definition of life, and on the other hand, material prosperity had been purchased at the cost of denying “the testimony of Jesus.”

The oracle to Laodicea has been acclaimed as yielding the most fruit for reconstructing the city’s setting and conditions. It is intriguing that John felt that Laodicean Christians could be addressed only on the basis of their civic identity, as if to say that the church and society shared everything in common and that there was no basis on which to address the church in terms that the whole society would not share. The appeal to the images of the tepid, nauseating water that formed their water supply, the medical achievements of the school in the city, and the civic sense of pride

⁵Note the numbers of those involved in their “defection” from the faith in Revelation 2:14-15; 22:24; Ephesus has apparently resisted these prophets (cf. Rev. 2:6).

in their riches and need for nothing — an allusion to the city's ability to rebuild itself after an earthquake in the 60s without imperial aid (Mounce, 1977:123) — all depict the Laodicean Christians first as Laodicean citizens. They are called to trade in their civic identity for a renewed Christian identity.

Their "wealth" John calls "poor" and "wretched" (Rev. 3:17), while for their poverty John calls the Smyranean assembly "rich." Here the true nature of the tension between wealth and poverty in John's mind reveals itself to be precisely that, in the social situation, wealth attaches itself to accommodation and assimilation, while poverty attaches itself to those who seek to maintain the boundaries against the external social pressures and who thus have no defense against economic embargoes. John considers that the economic pressures will only increase now that the official status of Christians is becoming manifest as a *religio illicita*, hence the boycott on buying and selling without the mark of the beast envisioned in chapter thirteen and noted as such as early as Engels (1964:340). The churches cannot be allowed to believe the *societas'* definition of what constitutes desirable wealth. Only if they accept John's attribution of true wealth to the faithful who suffer economic hardship and social ostracization for the sake of the "testimony of Jesus" will the churches survive the economic pressures that will rise along with the political pressures in the decades to come. For this reason, Laodicea is depicted as in the gravest danger, but also given the most tender promise of table fellowship with Christ and a place in Christ's lap.

JOHN THE PROPHET

The situation of the seven churches who are the recipients of the Revelation proves to be one of high tension between sect and society, with the consequence that the churches are becoming increasingly disenfranchised within the larger political, social, and economic order. Questions arise concerning whether or not the communities need to continue to maintain such a tension, and a group of prophets have already appeared with a word of "good news" — which has not, however, met with complete success. Into this unsettled time came the prophet John with a powerful interpretation of what was at stake and a challenge to the churches to remain "faithful," to "overcome."

The identity of the author is another of the pressing questions of New Testament studies, but for social scientific purposes it is less important to identify a name than to clarify the function that this person serves. The manner in which John portrays himself, simply as a "brother" (Rev. 1:9) and fellow-sharer in "tribulation, the kingdom, and patient endurance," together with the denotation of John as a "slave" in the preface (1:1) appear to deny any qualitative distinction between John and the recipients of the letter such as would cling to the office of "apostle" or "presbyter." Paul the apostle and John the presbyter, at least, seem willing and eager to uphold this distinction.

Perhaps even more suggestive that this John was no bearer of a charisma of office is the choice of genre itself. Those whose office is sufficiently legitimated in itself, as apostle or presbyter, need no other sort of legitimation. Our author, on the other hand, appears to base his appeal — both his claim to the right to define the counter-definitions and his claims to the right to define salvific action — solely upon charismatic legitimation throughout the work. One finds in the Apocalypse not an assumption

of authority, but rather the attempt (successful, one might add) of a prophet to legitimate his message in the ultimate, and therefore unquestionable, realm. Very quickly into the book, John's voice recedes, and the message is delivered by Jesus himself, the charismatic leader of the group. Throughout, John rests on the passive authority of one who "sees" what is divinely given him to see.

The arrangement of the seven churches to whom the author addresses the vision returns here as an important observation. A fair number of commentators regard these seven churches as "representative churches." This affirmation, based on the notion that everything in the Apocalypse must conform to traditional apocalyptic numerology, whereby "seven" indicates perfection or fullness, may actually obscure a more adequate and substantiated explanation. These seven churches were those particularly associated with John's "ministry" or calling as an itinerant prophet.

Such itinerant prophets, who mostly relied upon charismatic legitimation, are a well-attested phenomenon in early Christianity. Paul's troubles in the Corinthian church, particularly the later stages as attested in Second Corinthians 10 through 13, were occasioned by itinerant preachers who built themselves up by charismatic legitimation. These itinerants slight Paul as not measuring up precisely in terms of charismatic legitimation, whereas Paul claims that an apostle rests on a wholly other and superior sort of legitimation than these charismatic preachers.

"Charismatic legitimation" is an admittedly slippery term in contemporary studies. Perhaps a word of clarification is in order here. Preachers or prophets increased the persuasive power of their message through personal demonstration of a level of prowess in oratorical skill and "stage presence" that measured near the top of the average person's estimation of human capacity, as well as through the demonstration of a close connection with the transcendent, otherwise inaccessible realm of the divine, which the preacher or prophet seemed to make present and accessible in his or her person and proclamation. This is essentially Weber's conception of charisma:

The term *charisma* will be applied to a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a "leader." (1978:1112)

Such figures would appeal to people who were in need of a renewed link with the order of the divine cosmos, as would particularly be the case when traditional sources of "world-legitimation" failed to meet the threat of anomie and chaos posed by averse social, economic, or political circumstances.

The *Didache* as well bears witness to a body of prophets within the larger church communities. While there were several tests prescribed for these itinerant charismatics, to determine whether they were true or false, there was considerable *carte blanche* given to them while speaking "in a trance." As long as they neither asked for food or money while in the Spirit, the community was "on no account to subject such a one to any tests or verifications," for "every sin shall be forgiven, but this sin shall not be forgiven" (*Did.* 11).

It appears all the more likely that John the Seer would have belonged to this group

of prophets. The Apocalypse shows him anchoring his challenge to the churches in the legitimation afforded by claims to direct experience of supernatural realities and direct contact with the divine realm. The visions of the glorified Christ, the oracles from the Lord, and the visions of the activities taking place behind the veil, as it were, fortify his attack on the (for him) clearly “manufactured charisma” of the working of the imperial cult. Such “charismatic legitimation” affords him a long enough lever to displace the world constructed by Greco-Roman society, assimilation with which threatens the boundaries and definitions of the young church. He understood his ministry to be to the seven churches cited in Rev. 1:11, which were conveniently enough arranged for an itinerant mission, a horseshoe circuit along which the prophet went back and forth, encouraging the churches to keep a pure faith and pure walk in that faith, as he defined pure, until he was removed for his inflammatory preaching.

Suetonius and other historians of Rome and the provinces are familiar with the sentences of *relegatio ad insulam* and *deportatio ad insulam*, the practice of removing certain potentially dangerous persons from their sphere of influence to some significantly distant island in order to curtail their activities. Given John’s attitude about the Roman empire and its representatives, not to mention the social consequences of following his exhortations, it would not be at all surprising, nor even really blameworthy from a political point of view, to remove this prophet from his circuit and relegate him to some sufficiently distant island within the province. Patmos would certainly be an option, although it was not a completely effective means of stopping his mouth.

In sum, we have in John an itinerant prophet who exercised his ministry along the circuit of the seven churches listed in Rev. 1:11. He anchored his message in the charismatic legitimation afforded by relating it through visions and oracles from the Risen Lord and the Spirit of God. It appears that such would have gained him an almost unconditional hearing, though of course not every prophet’s every message is received, let alone followed, by the community he or she addresses. At some point prior to the composition of the Apocalypse, John was removed from his circuit to the island of Patmos by the local governor as a potentially politically dangerous dissident.

THE PROPHETIC WORD OF REVELATION

John’s prophetic work speaks to the situation of high sectarian tension in two forms. The seven oracles of Revelation 2 and 3 deliver instructions from the Lord, accessible now only through the Spirit. The call John issues in this voice is clearly to avoid at all costs the lowering of the boundaries of the sect and adopting a more open attitude toward the demands of Greco-Roman political, economic, and social institutions. Prophets of such a “compromise” are vilified, and stand under the judgment of Christ along with their supporters and followers in the communities. The synagogues, too, are denounced for their part in making the Christian position more costly to maintain. These oracles call the Christian to “overcome,” promising great rewards to *ho nikōn*, the “one who overcomes.” As such it is not a work of consolation except insofar as consolation enables future action.

The greater part of the work, from chapter 4 through the end, attends to the task of decentering the institutions and practices which form the center of the Greco-

Roman world view, and reinterpreting these against the background of the cosmic battle between Christ and the Dragon, Satan. In place of these “secular” centers, John reinforces the centrality of God and of the Lamb, Christ, who work toward their triumph and the triumph of the “saints” over the forces of Satan, namely the Beasts from land and sea and their followers. What Revelation “reveals” is the ephemeral nature of the powers in the world that demand allegiance and conformity to their own norms as if they were the ultimate powers. Along with this “unveiling” of the powers comes the challenge to the Christians to carry on in accordance with their ultimate allegiance to the ultimate Power, namely God and the Lamb.

As it is impossible in a study of this kind to read all of Revelation through this lens, our focus will be on Revelation 13 and 14, on John’s reinterpretation of the imperial cult and challenge to Christians to protest what it represents through nonparticipation. It is this aspect of Revelation that leads to the most significant conflicts between the *ekklēsia* and the State in the decades that follow. For our purposes it is informative to note how an apocalypse contributes to this situation of conflict rather than consoles the victims after its occurrence.

As noted above, the imperial cult honors the emperors as benefactors and saviors, welcoming, in effect, the place of the province under the shadow of the eagle’s wings as a position of prosperity, peace, and security. The conquest of the world is a legitimate achievement of Rome. Its violence is not criticized, its empire not questioned in the cult. Rather, these are glorified.

This public discourse is changed in Revelation 13. Thompson (1990:181) describes Revelation as providing “deviant knowledge” with respect to the “public knowledge passed on and taken for granted in the society, its myths, and its rituals.” It is particularly deviant, Thompson claims, in its critique of the social order and the cosmology that supports that order, for example the conviction that role acceptance in the imperial social order fulfills obligations to the divine order. John provides a distinctly different interpretation of the nature and significance of the imperial cult from that of the public discourse. His critique extends to the person of the emperor, the validity of the empire, and the source of its strength.

John rejects the thesis that imperial rule reflects the order of God. Quite to the contrary, the worship of the emperor in its cultic form stems from worship of the dragon, Satan, the primeval enemy of the divine order. While the non-Christian inhabitant of the empire may believe participation in the imperial cult to be a participation in the divine ordering of the cosmos, John posits the claim that such participation actually contributes to the disruption of the enacting of divine order on earth, contributing instead to the mounting tension of social and cosmic chaos. Revelation 14:9-11, as well as the other references to refusing worship of the image or overcoming the image and the beast, rejects the thesis that accepting one’s role within the “social organization of the Roman Empire” fulfills the will of God or one’s duty to God.

In the vision of Revelation 13, John takes up the imagery of the four beasts of Daniel 7 and combines them into a “fifth” beast, a fifth successor to world power that combines the strengths and evils of all its predecessors. This is the Roman Empire, the source of mounting tension for the churches and pressures to conform to Greco-

Roman society and religious practices at the time of John's writing. Hints such as are given in Rev. 17:9 — the seven hills of Rome — cement the identification. Rome has achieved and claims for itself a universal reign — the *orbis terrarum*, save only for the hostile “kings of the east,” the Parthian kingdom, which appear as a menacing presence in Rev. 16:12.

If the beast represents this successor to the empires of its predecessors, then its heads may be taken together to represent the new empire's rulers — taken together, the *Sebastoi*, the company of the *Augusti* who were worshipped commonly as a body, as one can surmise from the many temples to the *Augusti*. Revelation 13:1 begins the presentation of the emperor by declaring his claim to divine titles illegitimate. These are no longer titles of divine honor, but the “name of blasphemy.” Likewise the speech of the beast is described as blasphemous in 13:5, clarified in 13:6 as blasphemies against God and God's holy ones. *Eusebeia* or *pietas*, proper “reverence” toward the traditional gods, was a highly regarded virtue to the Greeks and Romans, so much so that neglect of the traditional religion was often interpreted in terms of treason or atheism. John subverts the entire system. Despite very frequent claims of his own *pietas*, the emperor is charged with *asebeia*, or “impiety toward God.” Blasphemy, an act and attitude of *asebeia*, is presented as a prominent aspect of the beast's activity (13:5-6).

The emperor or rather the collection of emperors, the *Sebastoi*, are worshiped by all, even as their authority is depicted as extending over the known world in 13:7-8a. The authority of the beast is linked, not with any positive divinity, such as the non-Christians would have considered the pantheon, but with the dragon, or Satan, the adversary of God and true piety (13:2b, 4). The emperors' authority resides not in the heaven of eternal power, but in the temporary and subversive power of Satan. Their rule is thus delegitimated, decentered in the cosmology of John. Positing Satan as the recipient of the empire's worship may carry on a Christian polemic against idolatry such as one finds in Paul.

In the Greco-Roman cosmology, the traditional gods (who were worshiped by means of visible representations) were the protectors of all aspects of civic life. The prosperity of the people and the well-being of the emperor alike were in their hands. Thus the gods of Rome, worshiped for centuries before the Principate, stood behind the power of the emperor. Paul in First Corinthians 10:20-21 makes the claim, however, that sacrifices offered to idols were in fact offered to demons, agents of Satan in Jewish and Christian angelology. Satan, so the polemic goes, is thus the ultimate recipient of idolatrous worship. Here, then, is John's polemic against the matrix of gods which upheld the emperor. Far from being representative of cosmic order, the enemy of cosmic order stands behind the masks of the traditional deities of Rome and Greece. The emperor's power is thus from a destructive source. The emperor is out of line with the ultimate cosmic center (God); the imperial cult thus also subverts the cosmic order by paying homage to the destructive forces of Satan. In effect, John turns the common pagan polemic against the Christians (and Jews) completely around upon the accusers.

The essential diairesis appears in 13:8. All will worship the emperors, save those whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life. The contents of the book are only negatively disclosed — those who worship the beast are not contained therein. Worship of the emperor stands out prominently as a mark of the one who shall be

cut off from the company of the redeemed, as the mark of eschatological exclusion.

The introduction of the beast from the land, as opposed to the foreign power of the beast from the sea, brings the worship of the beast closer home, to the province. As one stands in the area of Asia, one looks over the sea to the power of Rome, but in the land of the province itself one finds a number of agents who do the will of the distant emperor. Here there is need of an “image of the beast” to represent the “absent one as present” (Wis. 14:17). This beast, taken to represent some local authoritative body that would have had the charge of regulating and maintaining the imperial cult (Collins, 1984:125), causes the inhabitants of the land to worship the emperors, erecting a cult image, and performing signs and wonders in the cultic setting (Ford, 1975:225).

At this point, John begins to describe the consequences of not participating in this cult of the beast and its image: 13:15 names the penalty of death for those who refuse to participate; 13:16-17 posit a situation of economic disenfranchisement for those who refuse the mark of the beast. There is truly no consensus on what this mark is. One need not limit the understanding of this mark to a cultic setting. It need only be the society’s recognition of who are among its own and who withdraw from being among its own. In the environment of Asia Minor, resistance to the imperial cult would most assuredly incur the suspicion and hostility of pagan neighbors, which might take the form of boycott, either formal or, more likely, informal. These factors might be working together in John’s mind. At the very least, one can say that he understands resistance to the cult to entail the very worst consequences, both economically and politically.

The mark of the beast, which is the key to this world’s economy, is set antithetically with the seal of God, the key to association with the Lamb in 14:1. This juxtaposition is deliberate. Whomever the cipher 666 conceals — and interesting cases have been made for Nero, Domitian, and even Nerva — it is clear that this mark of compliance with the demands of the imperial cult and ideology is incompatible with the seal of the name of God and the name of the Lamb that appears on those who are to be saved, whose names are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life. The remarkable inclusiveness of 13:16 suggests that the mark of the beast is meant to unify a diversity of people. Unity of empire was in fact an important aspect of the universal observance of imperial cult, perhaps supplying the one consistent feature throughout the empire. John immediately offers an alternative source of unity, one that calls to mind Paul’s claim in Galatians 3:28 that in Christ all are one. Rejecting the call to conform and be “one” under the aegis of the divinized emperor, John calls his churches to remain “one” under the aegis of the “seal of the living God.”

After completing his negative presentation of imperial ideology, rejecting its local cultic expression, and positing the consequences of a conscious stance of protest, John in fact calls for the churches to take up this stand. We recall that his is not the only voice they may be listening to, as the false apostles and the Nicolaitans have been trying, and in the latter case succeeding, to gain a hearing. Against those who seek to justify participation in the traditional and imperial cult, who seek to make a place for imperial and pagan ideology alongside Christian commitment, John calls for an uncompromising stance of protest against the current ideology. His apocalypse has

lifted away the veil, as it were, from the phenomenon of the emperor cult. It is not what it seems — an expression of loyalty and civic unity — but rather the maintenance of a demonic power, a legitimization of blasphemy and violence.

He grounds this call in an alternative ideology, the set of Christian counter-definitions. By drawing attention to the Christian convictions that the Kingdom of God and of the Lamb alone is the ultimate polity and therefore that any earthly kingdom is a penultimate rather than ultimate phenomenon, he can literally undermine the claims of imperial cult and legitimate the call for protest in the name of the kingdom of God, which appears at last in complete antithesis to Babylon in chapters 21 and 22. Verses 9-11 of chapter 14 posit the consequences of participating in the legitimization of the Roman political and social order — being rejected from the Kingdom and falling under the wrath of God.

The call to give God reverence and glory (14:7) is followed by the announcement of judgment upon a kingdom which has established itself and carried on contrary to the principles of the kingdom of God (14:8). The unfolding of these three messages from the heavenly messengers leaves only one course of action for the convicted Christian. The final triumph and blessedness of those who conquered the beast and its image, even those beheaded (20:4) for their testimony to Jesus, through nonparticipation and passive resistance, alternates throughout chapters 14 through 20 with the exclusion and destruction of those who participated in the worship of the beast and its image.

A large part of Revelation, therefore, is concerned with undermining the ideology of the cult and motivating the churches to take a definite stand of protest, to remain pure for the Lamb exactly through denying cult to the beast. Glassman (1986:118) has introduced the helpful term, “manufactured charisma,” which he considers as an important “component of the legitimacy process.” In Revelation 13 we find John attacking the imperial cult, which he interprets as the attempt of human rulers and their supporters to arrogate divine status or, in Glassman’s terms, as part of the charisma-manufacturing machine of the Flavian emperors, a dynasty admittedly self-conscious of its need for legitimation as it could claim no relationship whatsoever to the Julio-Claudian house (Scott, 1936). He summons the churches to protest the claims made concerning the emperor (for John, by the emperor) and to find meaning in witnessing to the alternative. Thus one, like Antipas, “my faithful one, my witness,” can attain to a “good death” in Berger’s sense of the phrase (1967:44). The death of the martyr becomes ultimately meaningful in the context of remaining “faithful unto death” and not “denying [Jesus’s] name.”

As the throne of God and the Lamb replaces the throne of the emperor, so the New Jerusalem appears at the climactic moment of history to take the place of Babylon, Rome, the center of the world, the city which according to the prophet violates every concern for equality and justice for the poor, the city of conspicuous consumption, violence, and irreverence toward God. Announcements of the judgment of the world order come in a measured crescendo, and in ever more intensive cycles, as a revelation to the churches that they will give up nothing of lasting value by renouncing Babylon and a place in her social order.

REVELATION AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE EARLY CHRISTIAN MOVEMENT

We can see in Revelation a much more pronounced sectarian status of the churches being urged by the prophet John than in other early Christian literature where, for example, the element of antagonism is greatly reduced (e.g., Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:13-17). Revelation, particularly in relation to imperial ideology, stresses heavily the difference of standards and values, escalates antagonism, and posits a time in the not-to-distant future of mutual rejection. In response to the weighty tensions between sect and other elements of the larger society, two voices vie for the definition of the program which the Christian communities will follow — one urging a “denominationalizing” program in order to reduce the tension by lowering the boundaries that inhibit fuller interaction with the institutions of Greco-Roman society, and one urging the maintenance of the boundaries in order to preserve the identity and proclamation of the sectarian movement.

The crisis for John is one of Christian identity and what it means to profess Christianity. He sees that incorporation of the ideology of the Roman Empire would result in a subversion of that profession, ultimately turning the witness to God’s salvation in Christ into just another witness for the legitimacy of an illegitimate power. John advocates a “withdrawal of the sect from the political arrangements of society,” the “refusal to salute national emblems,” “the refusal of [the] sect to recognize the legitimacy of society’s legal arrangements, and the refusal to accept conventionalized sacred practices” (Wilson, 1967:39-40). Such a decision will have frightful consequences for the Christians in the kingdoms of this world, as becomes evident in Pliny’s famous letter which describes the procedures and penalties which he applies to those who, professing Christ, refuse to offer incense and wine to Trajan’s image and the statues of the Roman gods, but will also preserve the meaningfulness of calling oneself “Christian” and of “belonging to Christ” (Book X, 96-97).

John sees in the imperial cult a point in relation to which the Christian protest may crystallize and the Christian profession be made. He sets and elevates the churches’ boundaries there, provides motivations both positive and negative for abstaining, and provides liturgical formulations in the Apocalypse that create within the churches a more pronounced ideological critique of the cult and its ideology even as the Christians extol the “salvation of our God” and the *Kyrios* Jesus, the “Lord of Lords.” He chooses the imperial cult as such a crystallization point because of the cult’s imposing presence and offensive underlying ideology. These force Christians to come to terms with the phenomenon, and John offers such terms as we read in Revelation 13, a decentering, delegitimizing attack on a very important expression of the provinces’ social order and relationship with the center of power, the emperor.

In addition, John calls the communities to cease striving for political enfranchisement and a piece of the Roman pie — for him a sip from the Whore of Babylon’s cup of abominations — risking instead ultimate political, economic, and social disenfranchisement for the sake of not participation in the “sins” of Rome, namely its ravaging of foreign nations, demands for religious legitimation through worship of its rulers, and its economic system of vast inequality.

Persecution, initially local and unsystematic, is what John sees for the near future, "what must shortly come to pass" (Rev. 22:6), as a result of the churches taking a stand protesting Roman imperial ideology, which glorifies, although covertly, violence, conquest, and the acquisition of wealth and power at the expense and deprivation of others and at the expense of true *pietas* toward God.

By means of apocalyptic propaganda, John has directed the future course of the Christian movement in Asia Minor toward maintaining a sectarian posture. Pliny's correspondence with Trajan, Hadrian's edict concerning the trial of Christians, and the Acts of the Martyrs recording the trials of Christians under Marcus Aurelius, Decius, Diocletian, and many local representatives of imperial power bear witness to the powerful effects John and prophets like him had on the early Christian movement, when the Nicolaitans' path would have been much less painful. Just fifteen years after John's Revelation, Christians are taking their stand before the "image of the Beast," and bewildering their judges and spectators by their deaths for the sake of their counter-definitions of reality. This course, enabled by an apocalyptic vision of the challenges of the times, made it possible for the Christian critique of Rome and its world to continue to be heard, such that it remained a continual witness to other definitions of reality and other values throughout the next two centuries.

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