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Recommended Citation
https://www.mackseysymposium.org/virtual2020/all/presentations/78

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Introduction

The Apocalypse of John begins with John stating himself as a witness to Jesus Christ and establishing the letter as both apocalyptic and prophetic. Integral to our understanding of Revelation is its audience. It is a letter to seven churches in Asia Minor: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. John’s purpose lies in his to the seven churches, rather than a letter depicting the literal end of time.

The word apocalypse comes from the Greek ἀποκάλυψις, meaning revelation. Hence the alternative title “Apocalypse of John”. This reframing is necessary to understand the Book of Revelation and dispel preconceived notions of it. The apocalypse itself, its true meaning, is not debunked, but rather the idea that Revelation somehow holds untold knowledge of how this all will end. To respect the text, we must view John’s revelation through the lens of the first century, apocalyptic elements and the letter’s purpose.

Historical Background

Failing to place Revelation in its proper historical context of the Roman Empire has been the main cause of its misinterpretation. Understanding the nuances of the symbols, easily recognizable to John’s audience, opens up Revelation to a vibrant, instructive, highly symbolic, piece of literature that can be useful to Christians even today.

Most scholars give the book of Revelation a date around 90 CE, which places it in the reign of Emperor Domitian, who ruled over Rome from 81 to 96 CE. The tension between God and empire came less from systemic persecution and more from emperor worship. The church’s role in emperor worship was a particular concern for John. All but one of seven churches in Asia Minor had temples to a deified emperor. Thyatira had no provincial temple but had evidence of
worship of Augustus since the beginning of the first century\textsuperscript{4}. Most people would assume that the Roman Imperial Cult began in Rome. Shockingly, the first temple to the deified Augustus started in Pergamum\textsuperscript{5}, described in Revelation as the “throne of Satan”.

Emperor Domitian is infamously the first emperor to be deified while he was still living\textsuperscript{6}, this honor was previously awarded after death. Emperor worship had so permeated the culture of Asia Minor that it was impossible to avoid. The problem here is not active persecution of Jews and Christians\textsuperscript{7}, but the role the imperial cults played in Asia Minor. Provincial cults depended on Roman authority in a way that other imperial cult institutions did not\textsuperscript{8}. Roman Emperors did not deny Christians the right to worship God, but it did demand that it worship them also, something John says is impossible.

There are various theories about deprivation under Domitian. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argues the general deprivation of all Roman society in Asia Minor, citing oppressive taxation, famine, colonial corruption, slavery and others\textsuperscript{9}. Leonard Thompson that there is no case for persecution or even deprivation in this time period. Instead he asserts that the urban setting where Christians worshipped was “stable and beneficial to all who participated in its social and economic institutions”\textsuperscript{10}. The message of John is not lost either way. If in colluding with the beast Christians are offered prosperity, John says that they offer their allegiance to Rome rather than God.

That being said, I do believe there is evidence for a deprivation theory concerning Asia Minor. J. Nelson Kraybill discusses this in his description of the four horsemen\textsuperscript{11} in Revelation who symbolize the brutality of Roman conquest, famine, civil wars, and Rome’s ability to execute its subjects (death)\textsuperscript{12}. There are four crises surrounding the writing of Revelation named

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{4} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{5} Kraybill, pg. 56. Figure 2
\item \textsuperscript{6} Figure 7
\item \textsuperscript{7} The Roman Empire did not legally distinguish Jews and Christians until Emperor Nerva (96-98), Schiffman.
\item \textsuperscript{8} Friesen, pg. 54.
\item \textsuperscript{9} Ibid, pg. 144.
\item \textsuperscript{10} Friesen, pg. 145.
\item \textsuperscript{11} Figure 1
\item \textsuperscript{12} Kraybill, pg. 102.
\end{itemize}
in *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John*, namely increasing alienation between Christians and Jews in the cities of Asia, a mutual antipathy between Christians and Gentiles due to Christian reservations about mainstream culture, conflicts over wealth in western Asia Minor and in the churches, and the precarious legal situation of the churches in the late first century\(^\text{13}\).

Thus, there are areas of social crisis, dominance and hegemony that coincide with living under Rome\(^\text{14}\). Apocalyptic texts often aim to resist the dominant social power, subverting images and symbols to reinstate God’s power over an empire. Revelation does not encourage revolt but resists the economic and political beast of Rome. While the Gentile world was complicit with Rome’s conquests, the charge of Apocalyptic literature is that Jews and Christians cannot do the same without prostituting themselves to “Babylon”\(^\text{15}\). To take part in the Roman economy and emperor worship is to aide in the growth of the beast. Where allegiance is, there also is the object of worship.

Central also to understanding the context of Revelation is Christianity’s relationship to Judaism in the first century and the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE\(^\text{16}\). Early Christianity was a sect of Judaism. This sheds light on the plain use of Jewish theology and scripture in Revelation but also the use of the Jewish apocalyptic genre (though not yet called this). This text is in some ways a response to Rome’s horrific violence after the destruction of the Temple\(^\text{17}\). For all intents and purposes, it is important to view the book of Revelation as theologically and historically Jewish (but still Christian) to understand its context and purpose.

**Apocalyptic Elements**

A key part to any apocalyptic work is a mediator to *reveal* heavenly wisdom. Apocalyptic texts are based on the dichotomy of heaven and earth, and what asserting heaven’s reality and authority means for earthly events. The mediator in the case of the Apocalypse of John is Jesus

\(^{13}\) Friesen, pg. 144.

\(^{14}\) Indeed, I would find it difficult to say that Roman subjects were not deprived in any way, as a great majority of them were conquered and sold into slavery.

\(^{15}\) Rome is called “Babylon” in a number of other texts (2 Baruch & 4 Ezra) post the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 AD. This is an allusion to the enemy of Ancient Israel who destroyed the first temple and subsequently took the Jewish people into captivity and exile.

\(^{16}\) Figure 5

\(^{17}\) The destruction of the Jerusalem Temple catalyzed the writing of various other Jewish Apocalyptic texts, e.g. 2 Baruch and 4 Ezra.
himself, the Christian messiah. Already this text is distinctive from other Jewish texts by naming a messiah.

Eschatology, judgement, and resurrection are found throughout Revelation, signs of its relation to the genre. Its images however are perhaps the most integral and confused parts of the text. Some images in particular have been gravely misunderstood.

A Harlot Drunk with Blood: Rome’s Persecution and Idolatry

The “harlot drunk with blood” appears in Revelation 17. This woman is described as sitting on a beast with seven heads and ten horns. She is called Babylon, reinforcing the connection of Rome to Ancient Babylon after the destruction of the temple. A graphic piece of this imagery is in verse 6: “And I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the martyrs of Jesus.” An image of a “harlot” portrays an element of adultery, a common allegory for idolatry in Israel. The entire book of Hosea is a story of a prophet who takes back his adulterous wife, just as Yahweh takes back “adulterous” Israel. At the heart of this metaphor is disloyalty to Israel’s covenant with God. Like marriage, God has united God’s self to Israel and the church, disobedience to this covenant is like infidelity in a marriage.

The harlot herself represents Rome, but more specifically the goddess Roma, often used to personify the city of Rome and its military power. Rome is described as a harlot because of its disobedience to the one, true god, Yahweh. Kraybill discusses the distinction between followers of Christ who are called virgins, as they have not been “whoring” with Roma (embracing her ideology). He explains that this is not related to a “puritanical aversion to sex” and is intimately connected to imagery in the Hebrew Bible of sexual infidelity in marriage as a metaphor for the spiritual unfaithfulness of Israel. Compromising with Roma is described by John as fornication. John critiques Rome’s tyrannical nature, but also its seductive nature, using

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18 Figure 3
19 Kraybill, pg. 117.
20 Ibid, pg. 117.
language of sexual immorality, wealth and intoxication. Rome, in John’s view, seduces the rest of the world into sin and deception\textsuperscript{21}.

*The Beast and its Mark: The Allegiance of God’s People in Rome*

The beast first appears in chapter 13 and seems to be a conglomeration of all the beasts from the book of Daniel\textsuperscript{22}. It rises out of the sea, a symbol for chaos in the ancient world, and is given authority by the dragon, or Satan. The beast blasphemes against God and has authority over the whole world\textsuperscript{23}. Verse 15 says that the beast is allowed to “give breath to the image of the beast” and cause those who do not worship the image of the beast to be slain. John gives us a clue in Revelation 17 as to the identity of the beast, which will come as no surprise. John interprets his vision for us: the seven heads represent seven hills. This can point only to Rome being founded upon seven hills.

Finally, the violent demise of the harlot (she is said to be made “desolate and naked” devoured by the horns and the beast and burnt up by fire) reflects the typical termination of an empire. Rome cannot survive without its clients buying into its ideology, and this will end as soon as the empire weakens and can no longer provide for its constituents. Though this took longer than John may have imagined, Rome’s own clients eventually turn against it, sacking the city in 410 CE\textsuperscript{24}.

Giving breath to the image of the beast alludes more specifically to the practice of emperor worship, as discussed previously. The mark of the beast is described as being placed on the right hand and forehead of “all”, so that they cannot buy or sell unless they have the mark. This is meant to directly contradict the *Shema* (meaning ‘hear’), a section of scripture from Deuteronomy 6: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” Verse 9 says to “bind [these words] on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead”. Jews would

\textsuperscript{21} Tipvarakankoon, pg. 195.
\textsuperscript{22} See Daniel 7.
\textsuperscript{23} Or the Roman Empire, the whole world as perceived by the audience.
\textsuperscript{24} Kraybill, pg. 130.
literally bind these words to their hands and on their foreheads in boxes called phylacteries. This symbol of allegiance to God is juxtaposed with the mark of the beast, a symbol of allegiance to Rome. Allegiance to the Empire became so central to Roman society that it became impossible to “buy or sell” without also participating in beastly worship.

The infamous number ‘666’ also points more concretely to a person of the first century, rather than a modern antagonist of Christians. This number is not an invitation from John to speculate the identity of an antichrist in the 21st century, but rather refers to the notorious Emperor Nero, a well-known persecutor of Christians. Using the system known as gematria, Kraybill surmises that though the Greek form of Nero Caesar does not add up to be ‘666’, it does in Hebrew, a language John assumes his audience will be familiar with. Where some Christians had grown complicit with emperor worship under the relatively tolerant reign of Domitian, John uses Nero’s number to typify the still monstrous heart of the empire.

The New Jerusalem: A Symbol of Hope

Toward the end of the book of Revelation we see a change in the tides, Satan and his accomplices are thrown into a lake of fire. A new heaven and earth are established, and John sees the holy city coming down from heaven. The angel with John begins to measure the city, revealing it to be “twelve thousand stadia,” about fifteen hundred miles. Jerusalem appears gloriously restored, with no temple because the temple is the “Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb”. The measurements of the city give us some indication of the wider symbology of the city of Jerusalem, namely salvation and the global “church.” The measurement of the city is approximately the size of the entire Roman Empire, and, as far as John’s audience was concerned, of the entire world. The final vision John leaves us with is the salvation of God’s
people reaching the entire world and fellowship with God being achieved. The new Jerusalem is accessible to everyone, only those who willfully reject God remain outside\textsuperscript{30}.

**Purpose**

Ultimately the purpose of Revelation lies not in its obscure symbols and dualistic theology, but instead in its relation to the Roman Empire and its audience. The purpose is to subvert the power of the empire and call the seven churches to repentance. Rome will fall just like all other empires. God will remain. This is meant to both and encourage and reprimand the churches. Practically, John is asking the churches to no longer participate in emperor worship, to turn away from idolatry.

In reality the message of Revelation is about an end of *this* time rather than the end of *all* time. Rome will fall, just as the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Ptolemies, the Seleucids, and on.

God’s judgement is coming for Rome, and Christians will be included in that judgement if they do not separate themselves from the beast. Allegiance to God alone brings entrance to the New Jerusalem, the everlasting kingdom of God.

As the purpose is for the seven churches and not for us in modern times, where does the application of Revelation fall for the church now? Is it just an empty book that shouldn’t have ever made it into the canon at all? Certainly not. While Revelation is not written *for* us, it still holds key messages about the theology of early Christians that can influence our thinking as well as give us empathy for those in the present day who are under systems of oppression.

Revelation put the present evil in the context of Jesus holding the key to Death and Hades\textsuperscript{31}; Christians had already achieved a spiritual victory over the enemy of evil. The savior had already come, vastly different than other Jewish apocalyptic texts. They could live without fear of death or of the empire, because Jesus had proven that his own love will triumph not just over Rome, but evil itself.

\textsuperscript{30} Kraybill, pg. 178.
\textsuperscript{31} Figure 6
Image Glossary

Figure 1: Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse by Viktor Vasnetsov, found here.

Figure 2: Temple to Trajan at Pergamum, found here.

Figure 3 The Goddess Roma, found here.
Figure 4 Phylacteries, found here.

Figure 5 Arch of Titus: the spoils of Jerusalem, found here.

Figure 6 Hades and Persephone, found here.
Figure 7 The Temple of Domitian at Ephesus, found [here](#).

Figure 8 Map of Asia Minor in the 1st Century, found [here](#).
Bibliography


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https://www2.luthersem.edu/ckoester/revelation/Smyrna/Emperor.htm.


