

"DO NOT TAKE PART IN HER SINS" (REV. 18:4):  
REVELATION'S CRITIQUE OF COMMERCE  
IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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**“Do Not Take Part in Her Sins” (Rev. 18:4):  
Revelation’s Critique of Commerce in the Roman Empire**

by

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## Abstract

The book of Revelation in the New Testament is addressed to seven churches in Asia Minor. But it is not simply a letter to these churches. Rather, it is an apocalypse, an “uncovering” or “revelation” of the future in esoteric and symbolic language. Apocalypses have always been difficult to interpret because of their arcane symbolism and obscure references. The book of Revelation in particular has been the subject of many speculative interpretations among those who see it as some sort of record of future events. Recent modern scholarship, however, has focussed more and more on the historical circumstances which gave rise to the writing of Revelation in an effort to uncover the intention of the author. This thesis is situated within this context of modern scholarship and seeks to uncover the intention of the author by examining the historical background which may have given rise to it.

The esoteric and symbolic language of first-century apocalypses was often a veiled criticism of the might and power of the Roman empire. But the criticism was almost always vague and general. The argument of this thesis is that the book of Revelation is different in that its critique of Rome is very specific and focuses on the ideology which drives trade and commerce within the Empire. The Empire was founded on a polytheistic culture. The author of Revelation sees clearly why in this culture the worship of Roman gods is so all pervasive: it is because it goes hand in hand with trade and commerce, which were activities in which almost everyone, by necessity, was involved. The author of Revelation finds polytheistic worship unacceptable. Only the worship of the one true God is acceptable. But his criticism

of polytheism extends beyond simple repudiation of the gods of Rome to the criticism of trade and commerce because he sees the two as bound together. This makes his message unique in the New Testament. This thesis is an examination of why and how he sees the worship of Roman gods and commerce and trade as so inextricably linked together and what the implications of such an indissoluble union are.

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All Greek texts are taken from the fourth revised edition of the Greek New Testament edited by Barbara Aland, Johannes Karavidopoulos, Carlo M. Martini, and Bruce Metzger (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft United Bible Societies, 1994).

All English translations of the Bible are taken from the New Revised Standard Version except where otherwise stated.

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# *Introduction*

## *Interpreting the Book of Revelation from a Historical Perspective*

Traditionally, the book of Revelation has been regarded as a futuristic prophecy with an eschatological message concerning God's judgement of the world and the coming of God's kingdom. For this reason, the book of Revelation has been a central component of the philosophies of millenarian groups. While this interpretation of Revelation is still popular today, there is a growing movement that regards Revelation as a book that is indicative of the historical circumstances of the time in which it was written, as they were interpreted by John, the writer of Revelation, according to his Christian perspective.<sup>1</sup> This interpretation of Revelation is described by Christopher Rowland in his book *Radical Christianity*. Rowland says that Revelation is "an ancient Christian form of the critique of ideology."<sup>2</sup> Basically, from his Christian vantage point, John gazes upon the world in which he lives and critiques it. This world was dominated by the Roman empire and its rulers and officials who retained dominance through their ideology of power and economic exploitation. The critique of this ideology, which was the foundation upon which the Roman empire rested its power, is the core of the message found in the book of Revelation. Indeed, Revelation may be described as a sweeping critique of all the aspects of the Roman empire. As Richard Bauckham says, "The spurious attraction of the Roman ideology is one of the purposes of John's prophecy

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<sup>1</sup>I shall follow the convention of speaking of the author of the book of Revelation as "John." In doing so I am not taking a position on who actually wrote Revelation.

<sup>2</sup>Christopher Rowland, *Radical Christianity: A Reading of Recovery* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988), p. 75.

to expose."<sup>3</sup> The ideology and rule of the empire was accepted by its inhabitants because it came in the guise of the *Pax Romana*. Chiefly, Revelation reveals the *Pax Romana* as a deceitful illusion. Furthermore, Revelation leaves no room for compromise, either one accepts the ideology that undergirded the Roman empire or one accepts the world view of the author of Revelation.

### *The Ideology that Sustained the Roman Empire Versus Christian Belief and Practice*

The main concern of John throughout Revelation is the conflict that he perceives between an adherence to the ideology which sustained the Roman empire and to the worship of God. Revelation is a book steeped in "worship language" which persistently and urgently stresses the need to worship God always to the fullest of one's abilities. God is continually worshipped throughout the book of Revelation by winged creatures (4:8; 19:4-5), the twenty-four elders (4:10; 5:9-10; 5:12; 5:14; 11:16-18; 19:4-5), all the creatures of heaven and earth (5:13; 7:12; 19:1-3; 19:6-8), those marked with the seal of the redeemed (7:10; 15:3-4), and those who have come out of the great ordeal and wear white robes (7:15). The worship of God, however, is vitiated by worship of Rome. Rome was upheld by its many institutions, predominantly the imperial cult and emperor worship that existed throughout the empire, especially in Asia Minor. It was conventional to express gratitude to Rome for the *Pax Romana*, and even more conventional to participate in the worship of a variety of gods at social occasions, banquets, parades, trade guild meetings and business association meetings. Syncretistic practices and polytheistic worship pervaded the whole of the Roman empire and

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<sup>3</sup>Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 37.

was an integral part of the Greco-Roman culture that dominated the first century C.E. For various reasons, the worship of these gods was practically inescapable for anyone who wanted to live their day-to-day lives peacefully. Nevertheless, John's ideology concerning Christianity leaves no room for the worship of these other gods, directly or indirectly, and demands that Christians in the seven churches worship God alone. This is shown not only in John's constant degradation of Rome's "blasphemous" claims, but also through John's own mistakes, for he too was twice chastised for worshipping the messenger of his Revelation instead of worshipping God, the author of the Revelation (19:9-10; 22:8-9).

#### *The Prevalence and Uniqueness of the Economic Critique of Rome in Revelation*

John's sweeping critique of all facets of the Roman empire (political, social, and religious) is not unique among apocalyptic literature written during the first years of the Roman empire. It was common to critique Rome, its "blasphemous arrogance," and its political and military dominance. It is unique, however, that John decided to include an *economic* critique of Rome in his apocalypse. As Richard Bauckham says:

This condemnation of Rome's economic exploitation of her empire is the most unusual aspect of the opposition to Rome in Revelation, by comparison with other Jewish and Christian apocalyptic attacks on Rome, and it has also received the least attention in modern study of the book.<sup>4</sup>

John's economic critique of Rome includes a condemnation of all those who participate in the political economy of Rome. This may include those who are directly involved in commerce such as merchants and seafarers who gain a livelihood from trade, and also those

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<sup>4</sup>Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), p. 338.

who participate in commerce indirectly in everyday transactions required to purchase the basic necessities of life. John classifies all people who participate in the Roman imperial economy as adherents to the ideology that sustained the Roman empire and thus in opposition to God. Richard Bauckham concentrates his study of economics on chapter eighteen of the book of Revelation in which the merchants and seafarers are judged and destroyed. This chapter contains the core of John's critique of Roman economics. John's economic critique, however, is far more sweeping than Bauckham's analysis addresses, and its continuous connection to John's condemnation of the worship of other gods which he sees as idolatry is indicative of John's overall message. The economic critique of Rome begins in the letters to the seven churches. Here, John condemns those who accommodate with Rome by eating meat previously sacrificed to gods of the Roman empire (2:14; 2:20), an act that was necessary in order to participate in trade guild meetings and business associations which were well represented in many of the seven cities of Revelation. The economic critique continues with the black horse of the four horsemen (6:5-6), the "economic ultimatum" of the mark of the beast (13:16-17), the image of the prostitute (17:1-18), the fall of Babylon (18:1-24), and the absence of any form of commerce in the New Jerusalem (21:1-27). Each time Rome is condemned for its trade and commerce, this condemnation is connected to the worship of the other gods in the Roman empire, including the worship of the emperor in the imperial cult. John's unique inclusion of an economic critique in Revelation should therefore be seen as deliberative and useful for his argument against the worship of gods other than the Christian God.

### *The Purpose of the Genre of Apocalyptic Literature*

The characteristics that define an apocalypse are directly related to the purpose of the genre of apocalyptic literature. Apocalyptic literature generally contains esoteric language, prophecies, eschatological discussions and references to a supernatural world. Apocalyptic literature is not, however, easily defined. The broad and varying definitions attributed to apocalyptic literature has made it somewhat difficult to discern which ancient writings actually belong to the genre of apocalyptic writings, and to offer a satisfying definition of what an apocalypse is. The book of Revelation is unique for it is the first known book to refer to itself as an *apocalypse*. Furthermore, this book contains almost all of the characteristics generally associated with the genre of apocalyptic writing such as the inclusion of an otherworldly mediator to a human seer who foretells future events.<sup>5</sup>

John J. Collins and Adela Yarbro Collins have contributed significantly in helping to define and understand the genre of apocalyptic writings. In his book *The Apocalyptic Imagination* Collins describes an apocalypse as:

A genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to this, Yarbro Collins says that an apocalypse is:

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<sup>5</sup>Paul D. Hanson, "Apocalypses and Apocalypticism: The Genre," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6n vols., ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), vol. 1, p. 279.

<sup>6</sup>John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), p. 5.

intended to interpret present, earthly circumstances in light of the supernatural world and of the future, and to influence both the understanding and the behaviour of the audience by means of divine authority.<sup>7</sup>

Both of these definitions of an apocalypse are useful for discerning the purpose of apocalyptic literature. J. J. Collins' definition determines which ancient writings are apocalyptic and which are not. According to this definition, the book of Revelation is apocalyptic for it does relay a revelation in the form of various narrative frameworks including discussions about the beast, the dragon, the prostitute and the four horsemen. Furthermore, this revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being, an angel, to a human recipient, John. The book of Revelation is also temporal for it does discuss the end times and the salvation that will be attained at that time, and it is spatial, for it describes the end-time salvation as occurring in the New Jerusalem which is a supernatural world. The book of Revelation is, therefore, a member of the genre of apocalyptic literature.

Yarbo Collins' definition of an apocalypse is indicative of the purpose of apocalyptic literature. Within the cities to whom the book of Revelation was addressed, a crisis was occurring which involved the Christians there making a choice as to whether or not they would participate in the Roman imperial economy that led to the worship of other gods, which John interprets as idolatry. The book of Revelation interprets this crisis in light of a futuristic and supernatural world using divine authority in an effort to influence the understanding and behaviour of the audience. As Leonard Thompson says, the book of Revelation is:

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<sup>7</sup>Adela Yarbo Collins, A. ed. 1986. *Early Christian Apocalypticism*. *Semeia* 36. Chico.

a minority report on how Christians relate to the larger Roman society. The seer is apparently advocating attitudes and styles of life not compatible with how most Christians were living in the cities of Asia.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to these definitions of an apocalypse there is also the world view associated with apocalyptic writing called "apocalypticism." Apocalypticism is a belief in the judgement of the dead at the end of time, and the promise that the faithful would rise in glory. It also believes in the influence of angels and demons on human life.<sup>9</sup> This world view is associated with all apocalypses, but it can also be held by groups which have not produced apocalyptic writings. It is apparent that this world view is important for John in the book of Revelation. J. J. Collins says, "The prospect of a final judgement creates a context for the clarification of values."<sup>10</sup> In other words, an apocalypse, such as Revelation, offers the readers an alternate viewpoint perpetuated by the creation of a supernatural world. This supernatural world along with its promise of final judgement helps the reader to put things into perspective and concentrate on the end times and on what is needed for salvation, instead of on earthly things and the crisis surrounding them. That is why Paul D. Hanson says:

It is evident in general terms that they [apocalypses] all reflect a situation of crisis and aim at offering assurance of salvation to those alienated from the power structures of this world and suffering for their religious convictions.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Leonard Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 10.

<sup>9</sup>John J. Collins, "Early Jewish Apocalypticism," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols., ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), vol. 1, p. 283.

<sup>10</sup>J. J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, p. p.

<sup>11</sup>Hanson, "Apocalypses and Apocalypticism: The Genre," p. 280.

The definitions of apocalyptic literature and the purpose of this genre have a direct influence on how the book of Revelation is interpreted. The message in the book of Revelation is not an easy one to accept. It is probable that John did not find ample support for his case against accommodation with the Roman way of life, especially since there were Christian leaders in the seven churches (i.e. Jezebel, Nicolaitans, followers of the teachings of Balaam) who advocated that accommodation with Rome was allowed and that the Christian life and participation in Greco-Roman culture were compatible. The message of these Christian leaders was much easier to follow than John's message. John's exaction would alienate Christians from the larger world and threaten their lives and livelihoods. For this reason, John could not simply condemn the churches' participation in the Roman imperial economy and the society in general as he probably would not have gathered much support. John needed to change the hearts and minds of his readers in order to make them realize the folly of their ways and to create a real change in their behaviour and the way that they related to the larger surrounding culture.

The genre of apocalyptic literature is designed to change people's hearts and minds by promising that at the end of time those who are against them now will undergo judgement whereas the true Christians who are suffering will be united with God in a supernatural world. As J. J. Collins says, "The function of the apocalyptic literature is to shape one's imaginative perception of a situation and so lay the basis for whatever course of action it exhorts."<sup>12</sup> The apocalypse's description of the future reality of God's kingdom and the hope

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<sup>12</sup>Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, p. 42.

that this brings to present Christians is a motivation to Christians to remain steadfast in the face of turmoil. Moreover, the description of a future kingdom serves to display the inadequacies of the present world, not directly, but through hints and imagery leading the readers to discover for themselves the difference between right and wrong. This disclosure is meant to create a change in heart through a realization of what is proper Christian practice and what is erroneous, according to the author of the revelation. Christopher Rowland describes apocalyptic literature, and Revelation in particular, when he says:

Apocalyptic visions offer a hope of a better world which shows up the inadequacy of the present. As such they played an important part in creating a critical outlook on the world order and promoting a distance from the fabric of society as presently constitutes. This alternative perspective on the world is a vehicle for reality to be unmasked. The injustice in the world and the temporary nature of the present order is demonstrated as a spur to action in pursuit of the goal of the reign of God.<sup>13</sup>

Apocalyptic literature “unmasks reality” by showing its inadequacies. Against the overwhelming allure of the ideology which sustained the Roman empire which may or may not have even been recognized by many of the Christians, John sets-up an alternate world, revealing this ideology to his readers and motivating them to strengthen their resolve and resist the Roman lure, even if this means a threat to their lives and livelihoods.<sup>14</sup> An apocalypse, through its belief in future judgement, its use of futuristic language, its eschatological discussions, and its promise of better times in a supernatural world all combine to encourage, support and strengthen the resolve of the readers of the revelation to

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<sup>13</sup>Rowland, *Radical Christianity*, p. 74-75.

<sup>14</sup>Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), p. 129.

follow the way that the revelation exhorts them to live. This is the purpose of apocalyptic literature and the purpose of the book of Revelation.

### *The Goals and Objectives of this Thesis*

Reading the book of Revelation as a text that is indicative of the historical perspectives of its time allows the reader to understand not only John's message, but also the pressures and questions that the early Christians struggled with on a daily basis that made this message necessary. John's message is designed to combat what he considered a large degree of "idolatry" among Christians. The pressure to worship the gods of Rome came partially from the syncretistic and polytheistic culture of the Roman empire, and partially from the claims of divinity from Rome and its emperors. John sought to convince the Christians of Asia Minor that their participation in Roman customs and their participation in the imperial cult was a form of "idolatry" and thus wrong. But there are some aspects of the book of Revelation that are not as easy to decipher. One such aspect is John's inclusion of an economic critique of the Roman empire. This was not a common occurrence in apocalyptic literature of the time. What does economics have to do with worshipping other gods, and what relevance does economics have to John's overall purpose in his address to the seven churches?

This thesis will address these questions. The first step in answering these questions is to realize that the genre of apocalyptic literature is not merely futuristic, but instead is meant to change the heart of the reader and to help the reader realize not only the immediate problem, but also what lurks behind the problem being addressed - namely the cause. This

is the purpose of the critique of the Roman imperial economy in Revelation. John considers commerce as the impetus to "idolatry." It is an inescapable element of the Roman empire which leads to the worship of a variety of gods. A call to abandon any economic transaction, no matter what size, would not have aided John's purpose since few would willingly give up buying necessities such as food. Hence, John uses an apocalypse to change the hearts of his readers. He achieves his goal by continually linking commerce to the worship of these gods, and then condemning this "idolatry" throughout Revelation by counteracting it with the praise of those who hold fast in this life and worship God alone. He reinforces his goal by promising the everlasting kingdom of God, the New Jerusalem, to all those who avoid worshipping any other god in the present world order. By viewing the book of Revelation as a condemnation of "idolatry" and the impetus behind this condemnation, as well as the Roman ideology and the commerce which upholds Rome, John's judicial sentence against the eating of sacrificial meat in the letters to the seven churches becomes apparent. By denouncing sacrificial meat, John is making a sweeping critique of the Roman way of life which is governed by economic transactions. The commercial world was dominated by the meeting of trade guilds and business associations which always worshipped a patron god and served food that often included sacrificial meat. Thus, the impetus behind John's condemnation of sacrificial meat in the letters is commerce. John reinforces this disapproval of economics throughout the book of Revelation by continually linking it to the condemnation of "idolatry."

The first chapter of this thesis addresses the historical motifs of Revelation by

studying the social, economic and religious background of Asia Minor during the first century C.E. This highlights the social and economic disadvantage for those Christians who refused to eat sacrificed meat. This illuminates the background to Revelation. More importantly, this chapter highlights the fact that participation in Roman economic transactions, the imperial cult, and the worship of a variety of different gods were all practically inseparable. One had no choice but to worship various gods if one wanted to participate in commerce. John makes the case that Christians participated in idolatry when they bought and sold on a daily basis. This chapter demonstrates that Christians were indeed faced with the worshipping of a multitude of gods when they participated in the Roman imperial economy in Asia Minor.

Chapter two is a study of the letters to the seven churches found in Revelation 2-3. It highlights the differences between John and his opponents (Jezebel, the Nicolaitans, and the followers of the teachings of Balaam), and how these differences are linked to differences in opinion over participating in the Roman economy. The "opponents," according to John, allowed Christians to eat sacrificed meat and thereby worship the Roman gods. This permitted Christians to participate in trade guilds and business associations where sacrificial meat was served, especially in Asia Minor where there was an abundance of trade guilds. John, on the other hand, does not agree with allowing Christians to eat sacrificed meat and sees Roman dominance as entering the churches because of this and its association with trade guild meetings and economics.

The third chapter turns its attention to the imagery used in Revelation and its relevance to the historical circumstances of its time. Furthermore, it discusses John's use of

texts from the Hebrew scriptures concerning Tyre, Babylon and the Prostitute, and how these images all have dual purposes in the Hebrew scriptures of being symbols of “idolatry” and commerce. In chapter 13 of Revelation, the image of the two beasts connects the worship of Rome to commerce by describing the beast (Rome) as a blasphemous character that seeks worship. A second beast is introduced who encourages people to worship the first beast by presenting them with an economic ultimatum, forcing them to participate in commerce. Chapter 17 of Revelation describes Rome as a prostitute that traditionally is linked to the worship of Roman and imperial gods and to the Roman imperial economy in the Hebrew scriptures. Chapter 18 of Revelation is a direct critique of commerce and those who engage in trade in the Roman empire.

Chapter four is a discussion about the New Jerusalem. The first aspect of the New Jerusalem examined is the absence of all economic transactions. The New Jerusalem is characterized by a complete lack of all the negative aspects of the Roman empire. This is exemplified in this chapter by comparing the letters to the seven churches with the New Jerusalem, by comparing the Bride of the New Jerusalem with the Prostitute of Rome, and by comparing Babylon/Rome with the New Jerusalem. This chapter stresses that the New Jerusalem is a place centred wholly on the worship of God which leaves no room for the worship of anything else, or those things that are an impetus to the worship of other gods, such as the Roman imperial economy.

## *Chapter One: Asia Minor in the First Century C.E.*

### The Imperial Cult in Asia Minor

#### *The Nature of the Imperial Cult in Asia Minor*

The imperial cult was a well-established form of socio-political expression in Asia Minor that had a long and successful life, lasting from the time of Augustus until long after the reign of Domitian.<sup>15</sup> Certainly, by the time that John wrote his Apocalypse, the imperial cult was well entrenched in Asian culture. The organization and administration of this institution was controlled by the *koinon* (commune) which met annually to plan the various cultic events that would take place in Asia Minor that year. Each meeting was chaired by a chief priest known officially as the “chief priest of Roma and Augustus.”<sup>16</sup> This chief priest may have also been known as the *Asiarch*, although the use of this title is less probable and it may have also denoted another type of imperial official. Steven J. Friesen maintains that the position of the *Asiarch* was not the chief priest and may not have been involved in provincial temples.<sup>17</sup> The position of the chief priest was elected annually from one of the Asian cities. This office was one of great prestige and honour in which the chief priest wore

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<sup>15</sup>Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 107.

<sup>16</sup>Roland H. Worth, *The Seven Cities of the Apocalypse and Roman Culture* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), p. 117-118.

<sup>17</sup>Steven J. Friesen, *Twice Neokoros: Ephesus, Asia and the Cult of the Flavian Imperial Family* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993), p. 113.

ornate crowns imbedded with miniature busts of the emperor.<sup>18</sup> In the earlier years of the Roman Empire there was generally one chief priest in Asia Minor, but as the imperial cult spread and became more influential in that province, the number of chief priests increased.<sup>19</sup> Chief priests were chosen from the wealthy classes since one of the conditions for becoming a chief priest was wealth. This was because it was the responsibility of the chief priest to fund the annual imperial festivals and any other expenses that the cult may incur throughout the year.<sup>20</sup> If the *Asiarchs* were indeed the chief priests, then there is evidence that the chief priests also participated in non-imperial communal events such as animal fights and gladiatorial contests.<sup>21</sup> In return for such financial generosity, the chief priest received great honour and respect from the people as well as from the higher ranking officials in Rome. During the second quarter of the first-century C.E. the position of the high priest also became accessible to women.<sup>22</sup>

The *koinon* consisted of several other official positions, each with varying tasks and responsibilities that were essential for the continuation and successful maintenance of the imperial cult and festivals. The *gymnasiarch* and the *agonothete* were appointed for the administration of the annual imperial festival. Music was an integral part of imperial worship

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<sup>18</sup>Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgement* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), p. 194.

<sup>19</sup>Friesen, *Twice Neokoros*, p. 81.

<sup>20</sup>Worth, *The Seven Cities of the Apocalypse*, p. 119.

<sup>21</sup>Friesen, *Twice Neokoros*, p. 98.

<sup>22</sup>Friesen, *Twice Neokoros*, p. 89.

thus the *hymnodies* were employed to sing at imperial festivals. Furthermore, the *sebastophanes* were appointed to supervise the imperial mysteries.<sup>23</sup>

There were a multitude of designated areas for emperor worship throughout Asia Minor. The most prominent of these were the official temples. Pergamum was the site of the first imperial temple in Asia Minor in 29 B.C.E. when it was then given an official sanction to build a temple to the "divine Augustus and goddess Roma."<sup>24</sup> Smyrna and Ephesus followed suit, with Smyrna building its temple around 26 C.E. and Ephesus around 89-90 C.E.<sup>25</sup> In 26 C.E. Sardis competed with ten other Asian cities for the right to build a temple in honour of the emperor but eventually lost this right to another city. Other places of worship included statues, shrines, and altars. Statues, imperial iconography, and cult tables used for sacrificing, were placed throughout the cities, and imperial shrines were often found in buildings that held the city headquarters and organizations of merchants.<sup>26</sup> Freestanding buildings were erected for the sole purpose of emperor worship, but it was also common for the emperor to share a temple with another deity. Because of this sharing of a temple, the emperor was sometimes worshipped and addressed by the name of the god, instead of his own name. Thyatira, for example, worshipped the emperor by calling him

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<sup>23</sup>Worth, *The Seven Cities of the Apocalypse*, p.120.

<sup>24</sup>Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgement*, p.193.

<sup>25</sup>Worth, *The Seven Cities of the Apocalypse*, p. 120.

<sup>26</sup>Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 162.

Apollo incarnate and the son of Zeus.<sup>27</sup> The emperor Hadrian, in 129 C.E. during his fourth visit to Asia Minor, found himself “everywhere, in inscriptions, dedications, statues, temples and festivals” being proclaimed as Zeus Olympios.<sup>28</sup>

Ephesus, in particular, was riddled with emperor iconography. There were shrines and imperial statues in public buildings, on streets, on fountains and on city gates. In addition to this, there were temples to Roma and Julius Caesar, to Augustus, to the Augusti, to Domitian, and to Hadrian.<sup>29</sup> In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries thirteen inscriptions were discovered in Ephesus pertaining to the imperial cult. These inscriptions indicate that it was Domitian who permitted the erection of the imperial temple in Ephesus in 89/90 C.E. Furthermore, they show that it was not only the Ephesians, but also inhabitants of other cities who used the Ephesian imperial temple to attest their loyalty to the emperor by worshipping in his cult and reverencing his image.<sup>30</sup>

Emperor worship included festivals, feasts, sacrifices and singing which were all the combined financial responsibility of the city, the chief priest, and individual endowments. A number of the cities in Asia Minor celebrated imperial festivals on a regular basis, but there was also a tradition of celebrating imperial festivals at critical times during the

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<sup>27</sup>Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgement*, p.193.

<sup>28</sup>Worth, *The Seven Cities of the Apocalypse*, p.121.

<sup>29</sup>Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 162.

<sup>30</sup>Friesen, *Twice Neokoros*, p. 49.

emperor's reign.<sup>31</sup> The practice of having sporadic imperial festivals became so common that one governor of Asia wrote:

For as often as more cheerful news comes in from Rome, people use this for their own private gain, and, making the outward form of the imperial house a cover, they sell the priesthoods, as if at public auction, and invite men of any type to purchase them.<sup>32</sup>

The regularly held festivals were usually celebrated every four years. These city festivals included competitions among athletes and musicians, and attracted people from all ranks and professions, both inside and outside the city, including governors, orators, prostitutes and craftsmen.<sup>33</sup> There is also evidence of a biannual cycle for civic imperial festivals, and there were annual imperial athletic games. These games first began in Pergamum with the eventual participation of seven more cities.<sup>34</sup>

The imperial festivals were an economic benefit for the cities since they provided extra revenue for their inhabitants, especially for the shopkeepers and craftsmen, as there was a special tax break given to them for selling their wares.<sup>35</sup> This tax break attracted traders not only from Asia, but from all parts of the Mediterranean.<sup>36</sup> It was also a chance for prominent

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<sup>31</sup>S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 103.

<sup>32</sup>Price, *Rituals and Power*, p. 103.

<sup>33</sup>Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 161.

<sup>34</sup>Price, *Rituals and Power*, p. 104.

<sup>35</sup>Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 161.

<sup>36</sup>Price, *Rituals and Power*, p. 107.

citizens to show their status by contributing financially in honour of the emperor.<sup>37</sup> The economic benefit of these festivals is described by Dio of Prusa when he addressed the Apamea Celaenae saying that the imperial festivals:

bring together a huge throng of people, litigants, jurors, orators, governors, attendants, slaves, pimps, muleteers, tinkers, prostitutes and craftsmen. Consequently those who have goods to sell get the highest price and there is no lack of work in the city, either for transport, or houses or women.<sup>38</sup>

The imperial festivals and worship also included sacrifices which were performed either by individuals or by a city representative(s) on behalf of the city's residents. These sacrifices themselves ranged from simple liquid libations and rice cakes to elaborate sacrifices using incense and the offering of an animal.<sup>39</sup> The sacrifices during festivals were numerous and were made throughout the city at the council house, in theatres, in the central square, in stadiums and in gymnasiums. Residents of the city could also make their own sacrifices on small altars outside their homes as the procession passed through the city.<sup>40</sup> These elaborate imperial festivals were held in at least eight Asian cities, six of which were cities mentioned in Revelation, with the exception of Thyatira.<sup>41</sup>

### ***Christian Interaction with the Imperial Cult in Asia Minor***

The imperial cult in Asia Minor was a popular and influential religious expression

<sup>37</sup>Worth, *The Seven Cities of the Apocalypse*, p. 115.

<sup>38</sup>Price, *Rituals and Power*, p. 107.

<sup>39</sup>Worth, *The Seven Cities of the Apocalypse*, p. 122.

<sup>40</sup>Price, *Rituals and Power*, p. 112.

<sup>41</sup>Worth, *The Seven Cities of the Apocalypse*, p. 122.

used to judge political loyalty to Rome. This cult was primarily a socio-political cult which was scarcely seen as anything more than an expression of civic loyalty.<sup>42</sup> Christians, as citizens in the Roman-Asian cities of Revelation, were confronted to some degree with this form of worship on a daily basis. Attendance at the gymnasium complex in Pergamum would confront those in attendance with a chapel delegated specifically for emperor worship. Likewise in Ephesus, there existed a large Antonine altar used for emperor worship. One could not miss the multitude of statues and smaller chapels littering the cities of Asia Minor where the imperial cult prospered. Even monotheists, such as the Christians, could not avoid the overwhelming influence of the manifestations of emperor worship.<sup>43</sup>

Christians were also confronted, in a less common though more startling way, with the cult of the emperor through persecution. There is little evidence that Christians were systematically persecuted at the end of the first-century C.E., but, there is evidence that Christians lived under a cloud of suspicion for their association with Christianity and for their refusal to offer a pinch of incense and wine before the image of the emperor. Indeed, a letter from Pliny, the governor of Bithynia (a province bordering the region of the seven churches of the Apocalypse) to the emperor Trajan, shows that Christians were regarded as somewhat politically dangerous.<sup>44</sup> Christians brought before the governor had to actively participate in

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<sup>42</sup>John G. Gager, *Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1975), p. 98.

<sup>43</sup>Worth, *The Seven Cities of the Apocalypse*, p. 120.

<sup>44</sup>"I interrogated them whether they were Christians; if they confessed it I repeated the question twice again, adding the threat of capital punishment; if they still persevered, I  
(continued...)

emperor worship in order to demonstrate their innocence and prove that they were not politically dangerous in an attempt to save their lives.

### *Implications for Christians Refusing to Participate in the Imperial Cult*

Both Christians and Jews were monotheists in a polytheistic world. The Jews, due to the ancient origins of their faith, were exempt from emperor worship, but the Christians were not. The implications for the Christian refusal of the imperial cult were ruinous. They were viewed as being disloyal to Rome and therefore they aroused political suspicion. In addition, they were socially and economically at a disadvantage since polytheism was everywhere - "at civic celebrations or public forums, at sporting events or theatre, in the marketplace or the private collegiums of the trade guilds, at weddings or burials or banquets."<sup>45</sup> Therefore, to avoid worshipping the emperor and other Roman gods, the Christians had to avoid basic social interactions and even risk financial distress by not participating in trade guild meetings and business associations.

The imperial cult was a daily reminder to Christians that they lived in a polytheistic

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<sup>44</sup>(...continued)

ordered them to be executed. For whatever the nature of their creed might be, I could at least feel no doubt that contumacy and inflexible obstinacy deserved chastisement...Those who denied they were, or had ever been Christians, who repeated after me an invocation to the gods, and offered adoration, with wine and frankincense, to your image, which I had ordered to be brought for that purpose, together with those of the gods, and who finally cursed Christ - none of which, it is said, those who are really Christians can be forced into performing - there I thought it proper to discharge." Walter E. Pilgrim, *Uneasy Neighbors: Church and State in the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), p. 147-148.

<sup>45</sup>Walter Pilgrim, *Uneasy Neighbors: Church and State in the New Testament*, p.149.

world. Their refusal to participate in the imperial cult or to worship any other god, aroused the suspicions and sometimes the hostility of the rest of the population, who feared that by being exclusive, the Christians were alienating the goodwill of the other gods and therefore endangering society as a whole. It may be that the non-Christians were more interested in the Christian refusal to participate in the traditional cults than in their refusal of emperor worship.<sup>46</sup> Whatever the reasons may have been, the Asian population denounced the Christians to the Roman authorities, who were simply concerned about the loyalty of their subjects, and not so much their religious preferences. The Roman officials used the worship of the emperor to gauge public loyalty to the emperor. The refusal to worship the image of the emperor, when asked to do so by the Roman governors, placed the Christians in a precarious and sometimes dangerous position.

### *Importance of the Imperial Cult from a Roman Perspective*

The existence of the imperial cult was discouraged by some emperors. For instance, Augustus would only tolerate the imperial cult as long as it included the worship of Rome as well as himself. Furthermore, he agreed to be worshipped as a god only after his death.<sup>47</sup> Despite this, the imperial cult was an advantageous religious movement for the unification of the empire. The Roman empire engulfed a multitude of regions, cultures and religions. Instead of trying to enforce Roman customs and religion on all of the people they conquered, Rome simply added the imperial cult to a long list of other cults already existing in the

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<sup>46</sup>Price, *Rituals and Power*, p. 125.

<sup>47</sup>Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), p. 71.

polytheistic world. This worked relatively well in the largely polytheistic culture and unified the Roman empire through the shared religious experience. The imperial cult thus functioned in three ways: it was a religious cult that served the purpose of visually displaying political loyalty to Rome, it created a 'cultic rapport' between the people and their ruler, making the emperor appear less remote and distant, and it brought together people of all classes both emotionally and socially during parades, public meals, lavish games, and feasts in honour of the emperor.<sup>48</sup>

### **The Roman Imperial Economy in Asia Minor**

#### *Natural Resources, Industry, Shipping and Taxes in Asia Minor*

Asia Minor was a very rich province in the first-century C.E due to its commercial activities including its vast shipping industry and the export of its natural resources and finished products. Cicero said, "In the richness of its soil, in the variety of its products, in the extent of its pastures and in the number of its exports it [Asia Minor] surpasses all other lands" (*Leg. Man.* 14).<sup>49</sup> The vast commercial activities of Asia Minor, especially in the western region, was due to the "abolition of exploitation, remission of taxes and debts, stimulation of building activity (temples, administrative buildings, roads, and ports), and the establishment of secure trade routes" established by imperial Rome to help in the recovery of this once wealthy province.<sup>50</sup> The economic backbone of the Roman empire was

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<sup>48</sup>Worth, *The Seven Cities of the Apocalypse*, p. 114-115.

<sup>49</sup>Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 146.

<sup>50</sup>Helmut Koester, *History, Culture, and Religion of the Hellenistic Age* (Berlin: (continued...))

its many cities, and there was an ongoing effort by the emperors, since the time of Augustus, to revive and stimulate the economic activity of the cities. Augustus himself went to Rhodes several times, once for the duration of two years (21-19 B.C.E.), to supervise the reorganization and revival of the cities of Asia Minor.<sup>51</sup>

The land in Asia Minor was very fertile. Four great rivers (Caicus, Hermus, Cayster, Maeander) ran through Asia Minor, each separated by mountains. This created valleys that were rich for agriculture which produced grains, wine, olives, fruit, nuts, aromatic flowers for perfumes and ointments, textile plants and forest products. There were also rich animal pastures for sheep, goats and pigs.<sup>52</sup> In coastal valleys and hills there grew an abundance of figs, grapes and olives.<sup>53</sup> The rich land was not only beneficial to the farmers, but also for the cities themselves since many ancient cities in Asia owned extensive tracts of land that were cultivated by tenants.<sup>54</sup> This land was of great importance to the cities since it provided much of their food supply and also a sizeable portion of the income for the aristocracy.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>(...continued)

Walter De Gruyter, 1995), p. 315.

<sup>51</sup>Koester, *History, Culture, and Religion*, p. 319.

<sup>52</sup>Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 146.

<sup>53</sup>Worth, *The Seven Cities of the Apocalypse*, p.26.

<sup>54</sup>M. Rostovtzeff, *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), p. 255.

<sup>55</sup>Koester, *History, Culture and Religion*, p. 319.

Major revenue for the cities was also generated by the “produce” or “farming” tax.<sup>56</sup> Other natural resources included lead, copper, iron, salt and marble.<sup>57</sup>

Industry and the export of finished goods was also integral to Asia’s economy. Lydia was famous for its embroideries, Sardis for its red dyes, Thyatira for its wool, tanners and leather- workers, Ephesus for its hemp, Pergamum for its parchment, and Smyrna for its silversmiths and goldsmiths.<sup>58</sup> Perfumes also came from Sardis, Smyrna and Ephesus and dyes came from Smyrna.<sup>59</sup>

The export of finished goods was made possible by the transit system available in the Roman Empire. Practically all the cities of Asia Minor were connected by roadways, including the seven cities of Revelation.<sup>60</sup> The Roman road system was one of the most impressive accomplishments of antiquity. Many of these roads were paved and straight with viaducts across valleys and dams across swamps.<sup>61</sup> However, seagoing vessels were the preferred method of long-range transportation in the Roman empire since they could carry more material and move faster than transport by roadways.<sup>62</sup> Asia Minor was at an advantage since it was situated in a pivotal place for all commodities coming to and from the eastern

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<sup>56</sup>Worth, *The Seven Cities of the Apocalypse*, p. 14.

<sup>57</sup>Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 147.

<sup>58</sup>Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 152.

<sup>59</sup>Worth, *The Seven Cities of the Apocalypse*, p. 70.

<sup>60</sup>Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 148.

<sup>61</sup>Koester, *History, Culture, and Religion*, p. 314.

<sup>62</sup>Worth, *The Seven Cities of the Apocalypse*, p. 18.

Mediterranean and the Black Sea.<sup>63</sup> It was the cities with seaports that had the economic advantage. Ephesus was one of those cities which benefited economically from its location, and during the first-century was a major sea-port and centre of trade, commerce and travel.<sup>64</sup> Five of the seven cities of Revelation had major seaports. Two of these cities, Ephesus and Smyrna, served as outlets to the major river valleys behind the coast, and Ephesus was also a gate to the most important roadways to the interior.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, it was the individuals involved in shipping produce and manufactured goods that were the wealthiest locals in Asian cities. The Roman economy survived on the countless tons of commodities that were shipped over large distances. Financial gain was increased by the 2.5% tax levied at every seaport.<sup>66</sup>

Taxes were imposed on the citizens of cities for various activities. One had to pay taxes for a license to practice an occupation, to rent space for merchants, to enter theatres and public baths, to use public water, and as a direct per-person tax.<sup>67</sup> These taxes meant that many of the poorer inhabitants of Asia Minor were staggering economically under an oppressive taxation system, ruinous interest rates, and a widening gap between the rich and

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<sup>63</sup>T. R. S. Broughton, "Roman Asia," in *An Economic Survey of Ancient Rome*, ed. Tenney Frank, vol. 4 (New York: Octagon Books, 1975), p. 857.

<sup>64</sup>David E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5* (Dallas: Word Books, 1997), p. 154.

<sup>65</sup>Broughton, "Roman Asia," p. 858.

<sup>66</sup>Worth, *The Seven Cities of the Apocalypse*, p.13.

<sup>67</sup>Worth, *The Seven Cities of the Apocalypse*, p.59.

the poor.<sup>68</sup> These taxes, however, were still not enough to cover the expenses of the cities. The rest of the expenses were the responsibility of the civic leaders. Those seeking to hold office were expected to make substantial donations prior to their election and, once elected, were expected to fund many ongoing expenses of the city including projects such as aqueducts, fountains, theatres, etc.<sup>69</sup> The members of council had to own a minimum amount of property and they were also responsible for the upkeep of the gymnasium which was the main centre for social interaction in the city.<sup>70</sup> Wealthy citizens were also responsible for the maintenance of buildings and roads, and had to perform other public duties known as liturgies. Examples of liturgies include establishing foundations, the upkeep and maintenance of the gymnasia, school systems and religious festivals, and for providing food. These liturgies improved and sustained the splendour of urban living and may have been prompted by a need to impress the emperor.<sup>71</sup> There were, therefore, some very wealthy citizens in each city. Raymond Goldsmith estimated that the top 3% of the people made 20-25% of the total personal incomes while the other 97% made 75% of the income.<sup>72</sup> Temples were also centres of great economic power. Many temples had land and their own sources of revenue. For example, the temple to Artemis at Ephesus was a repository for much of the

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<sup>68</sup>Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, p. 127.

<sup>69</sup>Worth, *The Seven Cities of the Apocalypse*, p.60.

<sup>70</sup>Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 151.

<sup>71</sup>Broughton, "Roman Asia," p. 803.

<sup>72</sup> Raymond W. Goldsmith, "An Estimate of the Size and Structure of the National Product in the Early Roman Empire," *Review of Income and Wealth* 30 (1984): p. 263.

wealth of that city and practically served as a public bank.<sup>73</sup>

### *The Presence and Importance of Trade Guilds in the Asian Cities*

The majority of local trade and industry developed in the cities. Thus, there was an increased need for labour and a place where professions were recognized. These professions formed themselves into guilds according to the crafts they practised. Their craft or trade was usually hereditary.<sup>74</sup> Such organizations had several features. They arose particularly to address the needs of their members when the local government or family circles did not. One such need was the burial of its members or even coming to the need of those members who were sick.<sup>75</sup> Of greater importance is the fact that these guilds always had a religious dimension and the unity of the club found its expression in the worship of a particular deity, just as the unity of the Roman empire found its unity in the worship of the emperor.<sup>76</sup> As is the case with most religious observation, it included the communal eating of meat sacrificed to Roman gods, which is opposed by the author of Revelation. Eating meat sacrificed to Greco-Roman gods in a setting such as the trade guild or business association was socially very important in the ancient world. Not only would the refusal to eat such meat be awkward, but the sharing of food created a sacred bond between individuals and between the

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<sup>73</sup>Broughton, "Roman Asia," p. 804.

<sup>74</sup>Rostovtzeff, *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*, p. 178.

<sup>75</sup>Jules Toutain, *The Economic Life of the Ancient World* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1968), p. 300.

<sup>76</sup>Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*, p. 97.

individual and the god with whom they worshipped and sought favour.<sup>77</sup> As David Aune says, "Participation in cultic meals united the participants, those who avoided such occasions erected barriers between themselves and their neighbours."<sup>78</sup> Banquets and parties expressed social connections and common causes and, as Gerd Theissen says, those Christians involved in the economic world or who had civic responsibilities had more occasions to participate in the eating of sacrificial meat than those Christians who were poor and less involved in economics.<sup>79</sup>

These guilds often congregated in a union hall or *collegium*, and attracted members from all social ranks and status - wealthy people as well as ordinary plebeians.<sup>80</sup> The wealthy which participated in these associations were usually the owners of large plants that employed a number of people. But these associations also included craftsmen, free citizens, resident aliens, freedmen, and even slaves.<sup>81</sup> The guilds became significant associations with a presiding officer, treasurer and sometimes even a steering committee. And, in continuance with the custom, many guilds had a patron or patrons.<sup>82</sup>

The trade guilds of Asia Minor were ancient associations and may have first existed

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<sup>77</sup>Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, p.192.

<sup>78</sup>Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, p.193.

<sup>79</sup>Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), p.127-132.

<sup>80</sup>Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 119.

<sup>81</sup>Koester, *History, Culture, and Religion*, p.320.

<sup>82</sup>Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 153.

as *collegia* which were organizations that the Romans eventually tried to suppress, but due to their antiquity and their deep integration into the communities, they could not dispose of them entirely.<sup>83</sup> The Romans did, however, discourage and frequently outlaw the formation of new guilds. For example, Pliny the Younger, governor of Bithynia around the beginning of the second-century C.E., inquired of the emperor Trajan if he could establish an association of firefighters in Nicomedia since that city had no present means of fighting fires. The emperor refused this request on the grounds that such societies disturbed the peace and would, before long, become a political society.<sup>84</sup>

Due to their antiquity, the trade guilds of Asia Minor were numerous. Thyatira had an unusually large and influential number of guilds.<sup>85</sup> Colin J. Hemer recognizes, in the letter to Thyatira, many phrases that are related to the practices found in the local trade guilds of that city.<sup>86</sup> Thyatira had an organization of wool-dealers and an unusually prosperous guild of dyers and of linen-weavers, and also guilds of tanners and leather workers.<sup>87</sup> Both

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<sup>83</sup>Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in their Local Setting* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986), p. 108.

<sup>84</sup>Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*, p. 98.

<sup>85</sup>Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia Minor in their Local Setting*, p. 107.

<sup>86</sup>Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia Minor In their Local Setting*, p. 128.

<sup>87</sup>David Magie, *Roman Rule in Asia Minor to the End of the Third Century after Christ* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1950), p. 48-49.

Thyatira and Ephesus had guilds of bakers.<sup>88</sup> Ephesus also had guilds and organizations of wool-workers, wool-dealers, and cloak-dealers. Philadelphia was known for its guild of wool-workers and Smyrna for its guilds of goldsmiths and silversmiths.<sup>89</sup> Other cities such as Pergamum had dyers, Sardis had builders, and Laodicea had fullers and dyers.<sup>90</sup> This is only a short list of the diversity and number of guilds found in Asia Minor. Jules Toutain says that the guilds found throughout the Roman empire were very specialized. For example, there was a distinction between the makers of three types of footwear (the *caligarii*, *crepidarii*, and *solearii*). Likewise, the textile industry had many different guilds including fullers (*fullones*), wool-workers (*lanarii*), linen-workers (*linarii*), cloak-makers (*sagarii*), tailors (*vestiarii*), and purple-dyers (*purpurarii*).<sup>91</sup>

### The Christian/Jewish Relationship in Asia Minor

#### *The Jewish Social and Economic Position in the Asian Cities*

According to P. W. Van der Horst, there may have been as many as one million Jews in Asia in the first-century C.E.<sup>92</sup> Although this number is speculative, it is highly probable that by the first-century the Jewish communities in Asia Minor were rather large and

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<sup>88</sup>Broughton, "Roman Asia," p. 825.

<sup>89</sup>Magie, *Roman Rule in Asia Minor*, p. 48-49.

<sup>90</sup>Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 153.

<sup>91</sup>Toutain, *The Economic Life of the Ancient World*, p. 299-300.

<sup>92</sup>Peter W. Van der Horst, *Essays on the Jewish World of Early Christianity* (Gottingen: Vandenhoech & Ruprecht, 1990), p. 167.

influential.<sup>93</sup> Furthermore, Jews were present in practically every important city in Asia Minor, especially in the cities of Sardis, Laodicea, and Pergamum. Evidence shows that most Jews lived in or near major urban centres and may have consisted of 20% of the population.<sup>94</sup> There were several dozen well-established and flourishing synagogues in Asia Minor with the most prominent being at Sardis. The discovery of the synagogue at Sardis reveals that the presence of Jews in Sardis was very large and that its members, and the synagogue itself, were wealthy and influential.<sup>95</sup> Archeologists have unearthed the large social centre in Sardis which included a gymnasium, shops, *palaestra* complex and the attached Jewish synagogue.<sup>96</sup> The Jewish synagogue at Sardis, which dates from the third-century C.E., was large and imposing. Inside, there was a large table supported on either side by two slabs “decorated with a powerful Roman eagle clutching thunderbolts.”<sup>97</sup> This symbolizes that the Jews were integrated into the Roman culture. From Smyrna there is also epigraphical and literary evidence that indicates the existence of an active Jewish community.<sup>98</sup>

The Jews, according to available evidence, were also very active in their surrounding Greco-Roman culture. Strikingly there is evidence, especially in Acmonia, Sardis and

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<sup>93</sup>Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, p. 169.

<sup>94</sup>Worth, *The Seven Cities of the Apocalypse*, p. 72.

<sup>95</sup>Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, p. 170.

<sup>96</sup>Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 140.

<sup>97</sup>Alf Thomas Kraabel, “Paganism and Judaism: The Sardis Evidence,” in *Paganisme, Judaïsme, Christianisme* (Paris: Editions E. de Boccard, 1978), p. 22.

<sup>98</sup>Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 143.

Ephesus, that the Jews participated in their surrounding culture by serving municipal, provincial and imperial posts while still being active in the synagogue.<sup>99</sup> At Sardis, inscriptions from the third-century C.E. indicate that Jews were members of the city council (*bouleutes*), and were citizens of the Empire.<sup>100</sup> In areas specific to Revelation, archaeological and literary sources indicates that the Jewish community in each of these cities was well-integrated into the colonial Roman and indigenous Asian cultures. One result of this integration was that Jews did not live in ghettos, but instead lived and participated socially with the surrounding non-Jewish world. For example, the Jews held reserved seats in the theatre, held normal occupations, were organized into trade associations and guilds, spoke the common language, and kept the traditions of their cities.<sup>101</sup> Some of the most common occupations held by Jews included vine growers, farmers, leather workers, tent makers, makers of hobnail boots, metal workers, makers of perfumes and makers of various textiles including dyers and carpet-makers.<sup>102</sup> Jews also integrated themselves into the local communities by setting up shops beside a public restaurant and beside shops of non-Jews in Sardis.<sup>103</sup> The Jews also integrated local non-Jewish customs into their festivals. For example, the Jews took over the Phrygian custom of decorating graves with flowers. The

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<sup>99</sup>Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 144.

<sup>100</sup>Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 141.

<sup>101</sup>Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, p.135.

<sup>102</sup>Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 145.

<sup>103</sup>Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 144.

Jews adapted this custom by decorating grave sites during the Jewish festivals of Unleavened Bread or Pentecost.<sup>104</sup>

*The Jewish Exemption from the Imperial Cult and Other Non-Jewish Customs*

The extent of Jewish integration with the local customs did have its boundaries. Judaism was an ancient religion with a national homeland. Because of this, and the Roman respect for ancient and well-established religions, the Jews were given various privileges that kept them separated from the polytheistic culture that surrounded them.<sup>105</sup> These included, above other things, the right to practice their religion in any part of the Empire, the right to be exempt from military service, and the right to be exempt from participating in the imperial cult.<sup>106</sup>

Josephus, in his *Antiquities of the Jews*, describes these special privileges and maintains that they were continually reinforced and preserved by decrees from Rome. For example, in a decree to the Ephesians it is stated that:

No one of them [Jews] should be hindered from keeping the Sabbath day, nor fined for doing; but that they may be allowed to do all things according to their own laws.<sup>107</sup>

Then in Sardis, Josephus reports that the Jews were given their proper foods:

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<sup>104</sup>Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 139.

<sup>105</sup>Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*, p. 85.

<sup>106</sup>Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgement*, p. 194.

<sup>107</sup>Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, in *Josephus: The Complete Works*, trans. William Whiston (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc., 1998), 14:10:25.

and that those that take care of the provisions for the city, shall take care that such sorts of food as they [Jews] esteem fit for their eating, may be imported into the city.<sup>108</sup>

So it was, by decrees of the Roman officials, that the Jews could enjoy both worlds. They could live among their syncretistic, polytheistic neighbours while maintaining their monotheistic worship and ancient ancestral laws. The special privileges of the Jews were sometimes an annoyance to their neighbours since the underlying assumption in a Greek *polis* was that every person should participate in the religious cult that the *polis* was founded upon.<sup>109</sup> Likewise, there was a fear that by worshipping only one god, the other gods of the Roman pantheon may become angry. Therefore, Judaism was sometimes regarded as strange and suspicious for its lack of participation in religious cults, the imperial cult, and to a lesser extent the political environment.<sup>110</sup>

### ***The Position of the Christians in Relation to the Jews***

Regardless of the suspicion of Jews, Christians, while participating in the synagogue and being regarded as a Jewish sect, still qualified to be adherents of the Jewish privileges. But, for various reasons, the Jews eventually expelled the Christians from the synagogue. Adela Yarbro Collins suggests that the controversies between the Jews and the followers of Jesus brought more public attention to their differences which caused the eventual split.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>108</sup>Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 14:10:24.

<sup>109</sup>Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, p. 170.

<sup>110</sup>Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgement*, p. 194.

<sup>111</sup>Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*, p. 85.

Roland Worth suggests that the tensions between the Jews and Christians were caused by the Christians increasing acceptance of the Gentiles. Christians affirmed that Gentiles could be accepted into the synagogue as equals without being circumcised or obeying the ancestral laws. This created open hostility between the Christians and Jews that caused the split.<sup>112</sup> Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza suggests that, after the destruction of the Temple, the Jews in Asia Minor may have decided to rid themselves of any potential political “trouble-makers” or “messianic elements.” This would have included the nascent Christian sect.<sup>113</sup>

It is possible that the Jews themselves participated in ostracising the Christians and actively reported them to the Roman authorities.<sup>114</sup> In the letter to Smyrna in Revelation there is an attack on the Jews followed by an exhortation about persecution. This suggests, as Collins says, that the Christians were already expelled from the synagogue and that the Roman authorities were pressed by the Jews to take action against the Christians at Smyrna.<sup>115</sup>

Christianity was a new religion without the protection of its Jewish ancient traditions and ancestral homeland. The Romans were suspicious of new religions and this placed the Christians in a precarious position especially since they no longer enjoyed the social, economic and political security that the Jews enjoyed. Therefore, when the Christians were

<sup>112</sup>Worth, *The Seven Cities of the Apocalypse*, p. 82.

<sup>113</sup>Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgement*, p.194.

<sup>114</sup>Robert M. Royalty, *The Streets of Heaven: The Ideology of Wealth in the Apocalypse of John*. (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1998), p. 36.

<sup>115</sup>Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*, p. 85.

asked to worship the emperor, they had to comply or else risk persecution and social and economic ostracism. The refusal to worship the emperor was perceived as an act of disloyalty and aroused political suspicion.<sup>116</sup> Thus arose the argument between certain Christian leaders as to how much Christians should compromise their faith to protect their lives and livelihoods.

### **Positives and Negatives of Participating Socially, Economically and Religiously in the Commercial Life of the Cities for Christians**

To understand the precarious position that the Christians found themselves in, one must fully understand the extent to which religion permeated every aspect of the Greco-Roman culture found in Asia Minor. Walter Pilgrim describes it well when he says:

Pagan religiosity was everywhere. At civic celebrations or public forums, at sporting events or theatre, in the marketplace or the private collegiums of the trade guilds, at weddings or burials or banquets, religion was in the air.<sup>117</sup>

It was the distinct disadvantage to the Christians that they were the one monotheistic religion in the Roman empire without special privileges and therefore without the right to disassociate themselves from the polytheistic world and syncretistic religious practices. The main problem facing the Christians was the choice whether or not to worship Roman gods, or the Roman emperor, for the sake of sociability and economic advantages.

The positives of complying with the state and the surrounding syncretistic culture in an attempt to acquiesce to political powers were straightforward. There would be no

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<sup>116</sup>Pilgrim, *Uneasy Neighbors*, p. 149.

<sup>117</sup>Pilgrim, *Uneasy Neighbors*, p. 149.

suspicion of treason because emperor worship would be possible, and there would be no offence given to the those practising polytheism because participating in associations which involved the worship of any other god would also be possible. But the accommodation to polytheism would compromise Christian monotheistic belief.

Meat previously sacrificed to Roman and imperial gods was continually served at meetings of trade guilds and business associations as well as private receptions.<sup>118</sup> All social and economic associations of Asia Minor, including those that administered basic assistance to its members, had a religious aspect. Refusal to eat the meat at such meetings because it was previously sacrificed to the gods would have been awkward or even insulting to others in a social setting.<sup>119</sup> To further complicate matters, the Romans viewed Christianity as divorced from Judaism, and did not understand their connection between belief and action that made it impossible for Christians to accept the imperial cult.<sup>120</sup> For those who did not understand, the refusal of Christians to comply with the imperial cult aroused political and religious suspicion and was viewed as disloyalty to Rome.<sup>121</sup> This suspicion, at various times, led to revolts against them and sporadic persecution. It also ignited wicked rumours about Christians. Tertullian gives a vivid description of these rumours when he says:

We are called the most wicked of men because of the sacramental slaying of infants, the meal which is made thereof, and after the banquet the incest, which the dogs that

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<sup>118</sup>Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgement*, p. 195.

<sup>119</sup>Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*, p. 88.

<sup>120</sup>Gager, *Kingdom and Community*, p. 125.

<sup>121</sup>Pilgrim, *Uneasy Neighbors*, p. 149.

overthrow the lights - they are obviously the procurers of darkness - arrange in such a way as to protect the feelings of shame that accompany impious debauchery.<sup>122</sup>

There is evidence for sporadic persecution in the letters exchanged between Pliny, the governor of Bithynia, and the emperor Trajan (98-117 C.E.). Pliny, in his letter, said that those accused of being Christians but were not:

called upon the gods, using the words I suggested. Some, with wine and incense, worshipped your image which I had ordered to be brought in with the statues of the gods for this purpose and they cursed Christ.<sup>123</sup>

This indicates that Christians were directly confronted with polytheism in order to live. Pliny also gives evidence for the popularity of Christianity in that area and the refusal to eat sacrificed meat saying that:

the temples, which were almost completely abandoned, are once again being frequented; sacred festivals, long neglected, are being revived and fodder for sacrificial victims - for which, until recently, there were very few buyers - is again being sold.<sup>124</sup>

Trajan then replied affirming the worship of Roman gods and suggested punishment saying:

If they are accused and found guilty, they must be punished. However, if anyone of them denies being a Christian and clearly demonstrates this by offering prayers to our gods, that one is to be pardoned for the sake of repentance.<sup>125</sup>

Other accounts of martyrdoms in the first and second centuries also attest to the fact

<sup>122</sup>Albert Henrichs, "Pagan Ritual and the Alleged Crimes of the Early Christians," in *Kyriakon: Festschrift Johannes Quasten*, ed. Patrick Granfield and Josef A. Jungmann (Aschendorff: Munster Westfalen, 1970), p. 18-19.

<sup>123</sup>Agnes Cunningham, ed., *The Early Church and the State*, trans. Michael Di Maio and Agnes Cunningham (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), p. 28.

<sup>124</sup>Cunningham, *The Early Church and State*, p. 28-29.

<sup>125</sup>Cunningham, *The Early Church and State*, p. 31.

that Christians were confronted by polytheism (specifically the imperial cult) in order to save their lives. In the account of the trial of Justin and his companions in 165 C.E., the prefect Rusticus ordered the Christians to “sacrifice with one accord to the gods...or you shall be punished without mercy.”<sup>126</sup> The martyrs of Scilli in 180 C.E. were also asked to swear by the genius of the lord the emperor but refused saying that they did “not recognize the empire of this world.”<sup>127</sup>

### Conclusion

Socially, economically and religiously the Christians were at a disadvantage. Their refusal to worship Roman and imperial gods and to eat meat previously sacrificed to these gods caused them to be looked upon with suspicion. Sometimes this suspicion even resulted in persecution. Due to their precarious position in society, the Christians were forced into making a decision as to how much they should compromise their faith for the sake of sociability and economic advantage. It is this controversy which illuminates the background to the writing of Revelation and the forecasting of the doom and destruction that would ensue if Christians pursued their policy of integration with the surrounding polytheistic culture.

The social and economic climate of Asia Minor in the first century C.E. indicates that participation in the imperial cult, the worship of gods, and participation in the Roman and imperial economy were all inseparable. One had to worship Roman gods or the emperor, or

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<sup>126</sup>*Acta Sancti Iustini et Sociorum*: Text in O. von Gebhardt, *Acta Martyrum Selecta*, (Knopf-Kruger, *Ausgewahlte Martyrerakten*, ed. 3), p. 18-21.

<sup>127</sup>*Passio Sanctorum Scillitanorum*: Text in O. von Gebhardt, *Acta Martyrum Selecta*, (Knopf-Kruger, *Ausgewahlte Martyrerakten*, ed. 3), p. 22-27.

both, to participate in the Roman economy. John recognized this dilemma, and saw that the Christians were participating in the worship of other gods and the emperor when they bought, sold and actively participated in commerce. John sought to make known to the Christians this conflict of loyalties and to change the hearts of the Christians into knowing that worship of anything other than the Christian God is, in his estimation, idolatry. For this reason, in the book of Revelation John continually links the worship of any other gods and Rome to participation in the Roman imperial economy and the acts of buying and selling. This begins in the letters to the seven churches in chapters 2-3.

## *Chapter Two: The Letters to the Seven Churches in Asia Minor*

### Revelation 2-3

#### *The Problem: The Extent of Christian Participation in the Surrounding Pagan Society*

The primary concern of the book of Revelation, as much of the early Christian evidence suggests, is the extent to which Christians should participate in the polytheistic, syncretistic culture in which they lived. The book of Revelation is conservative in its approach, stating in unequivocal terms that Christians should separate themselves totally from participating in the dominant culture, even at the risk of social ostracization and economic devastation. This does not appear to be the dominant view of early Christian leaders. There is both canonical evidence and early Christian literature from the first century which demonstrate that Christians shared fully in the Greco-Roman culture. Paul is continually confronted with questions pertaining to this dilemma. In his first letter to the Corinthians he says:

Ἐγραψα ὑμῖν ἐν τῇ ἐπιστολῇ μὴ συναναμίγνυσθαι πόρνοις, οὐ πάντως τοῖς πόρνοις τοῦ κόσμου τούτου ἢ τοῖς πλεονέκταις καὶ ἄρπαξιν ἢ εἰδωλολάτραις, ἐπεὶ ὠφείλετε ἅρα ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου ἐξελεθεῖν.

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral persons - not at all meaning the immoral of this world, or the greedy and robbers, or idolaters, since you would then need to go out of the world (I Corinthians 5:9-10).

Paul understands the impossibility of separating oneself entirely from one's surroundings. In a similar fashion, other verses of the New Testament address the need for Christians to adapt and integrate themselves into the surrounding culture, and to live peacefully under the

leadership of the kings, emperor, and all in authority. The letter to Timothy, for example, urges that prayers be made for everyone including kings and all in high positions so that Christians may live quiet and peaceful lives (I Timothy 2:1-2). This same opinion that Christians should obey the authorities and give honour where honour is due is found in Paul's letter to the Romans (13:7). Likewise, I Peter, says:

Ἰπποτάγητε πάσῃ ἀνθρωπίνῃ κτίσει διὰ τὸν κύριον, εἴτε βασιλεῖ ὡς ὑπερέχοντι, εἴτε ἡλεμόσιν ὡς δι' αὐτοῦ πεμπομένοις εἰς ἐκδίκησιν κακοποιῶν ἔπαινον δὲ ἀγαθοποιῶν· ὅτι οὕτως ἐστὶν τὸ θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ ἀγαθοποιούντας φιμοῦν τὴν τῶν ἀφρόνων ἀνθρώπων ἀγνωσίαν...τὸν θεὸν φοβείσθε, τὸν βασιλέα τιμάτε.

For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish...Fear God. Honour the emperor (I Peter 2:13-15, 17b).

Outside of the New Testament, Christian leaders attest to the way of life of many Christians. Tertullian (*Apology 42*), at the end of the second century C.E., says that Christians have the same dress and requirements of living as all others and depend on the marketplace, butchers, baths, shops, factories, taverns, fairs and businesses as others do. Furthermore, Christians sailed ships, served in the army, tilled the ground, and engaged in trade.<sup>128</sup>

Despite this evidence, the idea of accommodation with Rome was not accepted by everyone. The fact that Peter and Paul addressed these issues in their letters is evidence that there was division in the early church as to the degree that Christians should compromise

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<sup>128</sup>Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*, p.129.

their faith for the sake of sociability and economic survival. There were difficulties with separating from the Greco-Roman culture, the first being the pervasiveness of the imperial cult, and the second being the selling of food previously sacrificed to Roman gods at the markets and the serving of this meat at social functions.

The majority of the meat sacrificed in Roman temples was brought to the marketplace for purchasing and was served at social occasions such as trade guild meetings. Some Christians questioned whether eating this meat, even if they did not know it was previously sacrificed, was worshipping Greco-Roman gods as this, in their estimation, was practising idolatry.<sup>129</sup> Paul's approach to this question is ambiguous. He says that Christians already know that the Roman and imperial gods do not exist, therefore eating food sacrificed to these gods will not be practising idolatry. But Paul also says that:

τινὲς δὲ τῇ συνηθείᾳ ἕως ἄρτι τοῦ εἰδώλου ὡς εἰδωλόθυτον ἐσθίουσιν, καὶ ἡ συνείδησις αὐτῶν ἀσθενῆς οὖσα μολύνεται. βρῶμα δὲ ἡμᾶς οὐ παραστήσει τῷ θεῷ· οὔτε ἐὰν μὴ φάγωμεν ὑστερούμεθα, οὔτε ἐὰν φάγωμεν περισσεύομεν. βλέπετε δὲ μή πως ἡ ἐξουσία ὑμῶν αὕτη πρόσκομμα γένηται τοῖς ἀσθενέσιν.

Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. "Food will not bring us close to God." We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak (I Corinthians 8:7b-9).

Paul's stance is that the gods of the Roman pantheon do not exist, so it is permissible to eat meat sacrificed to these gods, but, if this weighs on those who have a weaker conscience, then he/she should not partake of meat.

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<sup>129</sup>Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches*, p. 120.

The author of the book of Revelation is not as accepting of Roman religious customs, and in his writings he demands a clear distinction between Christians and those who practice polytheism. In the letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor there is a clear stance against those who advocate that eating meat sacrificed to Roman gods is acceptable. Thyatira is accused of tolerating Jezebel, a woman who, says the author of Revelation, practices fornication and teaches Christians to eat food sacrificed to idols. Pergamum is accused of the same “sins” under the persuasion of the teachings of Balaam. Likewise, Pergamum is attacked for tolerating the Nicolaitans and Ephesus is praised for rejecting the Nicolaitans, a group also accused of fornication and eating sacrificed meat. The charge of fornication (πορνείαι) should not be taken literally. In the Jewish tradition *πορνεία* represents the worship of Roman gods and, as Fiorenza says, should be understood literally and metaphorically as a reference to syncretistic tendencies.<sup>130</sup>

Besides these two charges, the churches mentioned in Revelation are also charged with a number of other violations including abandoning love, being dead, and being lukewarm. Furthermore, these letters reveal that the Christians in these communities faced the possibility of imprisonment, martyrdom, and social and economic expulsion. Although there is a multitude of problems facing these churches in Asia Minor, there is a common thread that runs throughout, that is, the need for faithfulness in a time of crisis which was the threat that comes from the “idolatrous” and hostile empire. The values of the empire

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<sup>130</sup>Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgement*, p. 116.

compete with the Christian community.<sup>131</sup> This crisis becomes personal when the Christian is forced to identify with the syncretistic society through the imperial cult and by participating in the religious aspects of guilds and social life.<sup>132</sup> John is against anything or anyone who takes away from the worship of God such as the eating of sacrificial meat and the imperial cult. Both of these were particularly inescapable for Christians, especially when it involved the need to buy and sell and participate in the Roman imperial economy in order to earn a livelihood or even to purchase basic needs.

***John's Opponents: Jezebel, the Nicolaitans, and the Followers of the Teachings of Balaam***

The opponents of John, as directly named in the letters, are primarily the prophetess Jezebel in Thyatira, the Nicolaitans in Ephesus and Pergamum, and the followers of the teachings of Balaam in Pergamum. Although John may have had contrary opinions to others in the seven churches, it is only these three that have been named and of whom there is some information.

There is little evidence about either of these opponents besides what is found in the book of Revelation itself. The Nicolaitans, however, are mentioned by early church leaders. Both Irenaeus (*Ad. Haer.* 1:26:3) and Hippolytus (*Ref.* 7:36:3) trace the Nicolaitan sect back to Nicolaus of Antioch, one of the seven mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles (6:1-6).<sup>133</sup> Acts identifies Nicolaus as a Gentile from Antioch who was a convert to Judaism. Clement

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<sup>131</sup>Pilgrim, *Uneasy Neighbors*, p. 150.

<sup>132</sup>Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches*, p. 10.

<sup>133</sup>Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, p. 149.

of Alexandria also mentions the Nicolaitans and their connection to Nicolaus (*Strom.* 2.20; 3.4). Clement defends Nicolaus against charges of sexual indulgence saying that the Nicolaitan sect is a heretical group that misunderstands the teaching of the followers of Nicolaus of Antioch.<sup>134</sup>

Speculation as to the theology of the Nicolaitans has led to various differing, yet similar, interpretations. One view is that they are gnostic. Gnosticism was generally a belief that one could possess the knowledge of the true being of God. This freed the gnostic from the world and its powers. It also assured the gnostic of final salvation. According to the church fathers, this allowed a gnostic to eat food sacrificed to Roman gods and to practice immorality. In other words, it allowed gnostics to participate in Roman society including religious ceremonies, trade guilds, and any other social function where Roman gods were worshipped and sacrificial meat was served.<sup>135</sup> Fiorenza suggests a second interpretation of the Nicolaitan theology. She states that the Nicolaitans may have had a similar theology to that of the “enthusiasts” of Corinth. In I Corinthians 8:1-9:23 and 10:23- 11:1, Paul speaks of Christian knowledge, which is the knowledge that other gods do not exist. This means that the Roman gods pose no barriers for Christian interaction with society unless a Christian of a weaker conscience is offended by such an action at which time one should refrain from the worship of other gods. Paul wanted Christian knowledge to be judged by love. It is possible that the Nicolaitans formed their theology upon these same principles and therefore could

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<sup>134</sup>Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, p. 149.

<sup>135</sup>Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgement*, p. 117.

counsel the Christians to participate in the Greco-Roman culture.<sup>136</sup> Such theological speculation about the Nicolaitans has no solid foundation but does help to understand which types of arguments may lie behind the actions of the Nicolaitans, and even the principles behind the teachings adhered to by the followers of Balaam and the followers of Jezebel.

Balaam is spoken of in the Hebrew Bible. This reference is useful in trying to assess the types of practices and teachings the followers of Balaam may have believed. The biblical references to Balaam are primarily in Numbers 25:12 and 31:16 where Balaam is responsible for the sexual relations between the Israelites and the women of Moab, which eventually resulted in the Israelites failing to reach the goal of the Exodus which was the promised land.

John may have intentionally used the name “Balaam” as a tool to shock his audience. There is evidence that the word “Balaam” was used in Jewish controversy to denote a type of false teacher. By labelling some of the people of Pergamum as “followers of the teachings of Balaam” he may have been trying to shock the members of his audience into thinking that false teachers or teachings were in their midst.<sup>137</sup>

The third opponent whom John singles out was the woman he refers to as Jezebel. She was also accused of the same vices of fornication and eating meat previously sacrificed to other gods. The term “fornication” was probably not a reference to sexual moral failings, but rather to the imperial cult. Jezebel may have argued that Christians know that the emperor is not really a god and that the emperor cult is a political and not a religious matter.

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<sup>136</sup>Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgement*, p. 119.

<sup>137</sup>Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting*, p. 90.

Therefore, Christians could participate in the imperial cult.<sup>138</sup> Likewise, the approval of eating sacrificed meat would have allowed the Christians to participate in the cultic meals, which was of extreme importance to both the poor and the wealthy. As Fiorenza says:

If well-to-do people benefited from eating sacrificed meat at ceremonial banquets and business occasions, it was even more important that poor people could do so because they rarely could afford to enrich their diet with meat.<sup>139</sup>

John supplies additional information about Jezebel. He calls her a prophetess (2:20) and says that her teachings are “the deep things of Satan”(2:24). John discusses Satan in the twelfth chapter of Revelation. In this passage Satan is described as a Dragon who, after fighting with Michael and his angels, was thrown out of heaven along with his followers. John’s reference to Jezebel as a teacher of the deep things of Satan could be a reference to the passage about Satan in chapter twelve, and a warning that those who follow the Dragon, like Jezebel, will be thrown out of Heaven (the New Jerusalem). Furthermore, the expression “her children” in 2:23, “and I will strike her children dead,” means that she was probably the head of a prophetic “school,” “circle,” or “house church.”<sup>140</sup>

The name “Jezebel” is in all probability a pseudonymous name given to her due to the connotations that this name gives rise to in the imagination of those who know the Hebrew scriptures. It is probably a reference to the Phoenician princess Jezebel found in I and II Kings because the name Jezebel was associated with worshipping other gods and with

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<sup>138</sup>Pilgrim, *Uneasy Neighbors*, p.163.

<sup>139</sup>Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, p. 133-134.

<sup>140</sup>Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgement*, p. 144.

wealth. I Kings 16:31-33 and 22:25-26 describes how Queen Jezebel encouraged the worship of other gods in Israel after her marriage to Ahab, son of Omar, who reigned over Israel in Samaria. The name may be meant to recall the wealth of John's female opponent since Queen Jezebel is said to have had 850 prophets of Baal and Asherah and had great power and influence over Israel (I Kings 16-21, II Kings 9-10).<sup>141</sup> Both Babylon and Jezebel are charged with prostitution and deceit and therefore the attack on Babylon throughout the book of Revelation may be an indirect form of attack on Jezebel.<sup>142</sup>

Regardless of their differences, the Nicolaitans, the followers of the teachings of Balaam, and Jezebel, in the face of Greco-Roman suspicion, all appear to have taken the position that Christians should not be exclusive.<sup>143</sup> Hence, they allowed the eating of previously sacrificed meat and encouraged accommodation with the emperor cult. This was of great advantage to the Christians in Asia Minor since they could now participate in religious affairs, banquets, and meals served at trade guilds and business associations. Through such accommodation, Christians could participate in the commercial, political, economic and social life of their respective cities. This accommodation seems to be derived from Christian/gnostic belief that Jesus rules only in the spiritual sphere and therefore actions in this world did not matter. The emperor cult and the sacrificed meat should not be a barrier

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<sup>141</sup>Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, p. 134.

<sup>142</sup>Barbara R. Rossing, *The Choice Between Two Cities: Whore, Bride, and Empire in the Apocalypse* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1999), p. 9.

<sup>143</sup>Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*, p. 88.

to worshipping Christ or to participating fully in society.<sup>144</sup>

***John: No Compromise!***

Robert Royalty identifies John's main concern as his authority in the churches. John sees the authority of other Christian leaders as a threat to his own authority. Royalty supports this claim by quoting various verses of Revelation. Revelation 22:15, for instance, is a threat to anyone "who loves and practices falsehood," which refers back to the "false" apostles of Revelation 2:2 and the "false" prophet in the visions found in 13:11-18, 16:13, 19:20, and 20:10. Furthermore, in Revelation 2:2 the Ephesians are praised for testing those who claim to be prophets and determining them to be false. Also, the text names the leaders with whom the author is opposed and then characterizes them negatively. This raises the question of authority within the churches.<sup>145</sup>

A thorough reading of the book of Revelation, however, indicates that John's main concern is not with the *existence* of other prophets, but rather with the *beliefs* and *practices* that these other prophets and teachers are teaching and allowing. John's main concern is with the openness to the Greco-Roman culture which is itself syncretistic, allowing the worship of various gods simultaneously. Worshipping these gods is unacceptable to John, and therefore accommodation to this syncretistic culture is also unacceptable.

Walter Pilgrim describes John's two main pieces of advice as resistance and patient endurance. Resistance is the main focus of John's advice. He admonishes his audience to

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<sup>144</sup>Pilgrim, *Uneasy Neighbors*, p. 163.

<sup>145</sup>Royalty, *The Streets of Heaven*, p. 28-30.

resist accommodation with the imperial government and “idolatry,” to resist the culture’s lure and the compromise of one’s faith, and to resist the social pressure to conform one’s ethical standards to prevailing norms.<sup>146</sup> John describes those who conform to Roman society as going through a second death:

ὁ νικῶν κληρονομήσει ταῦτα καὶ ἔσομαι αὐτῷ θεὸς καὶ αὐτὸς ἔσται μοι υἱός. τοῖς δὲ δειλοῖς καὶ ἀπίστοις καὶ ἐβδελυγμένοις καὶ φονεῦσιν καὶ πόρνοις καὶ φαρμάκοις καὶ εἰδωλολάτραις καὶ πᾶσιν τοῖς ψευδέσιν τὸ μέρος αὐτῶν ἐν τῇ λίμνῃ τῇ καιομένῃ πυρὶ καὶ θείῳ, ὃ ἔστιν ὁ θάνατος ὁ δευτέρος.

Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children. But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death (Revelation 21:7-8).

Resistance, however, does not imply violent action, but merely a resistance to the prevailing culture.<sup>147</sup> As John says:

Εἴ τις ἔχει οὖς ἀκουσάτω. εἴ τις εἰς αἰχμαλωσίαν, εἰς αἰχμαλωσίαν ὑπάγει· εἴ τις ἐν μαχαίρῃ ἀποκτανθῆναι αὐτὸν ἐν μαχαίρῃ ἀποκτανθῆναι.

Let anyone who has an ear listen: If you are to be taken captive, into captivity you go; if you kill with the sword, with the sword you must be killed (Revelation 13:9-10a).

Instead of violent retaliation, John encourages patient endurance (ὑπομονή) which is the core ethic of Revelation and John’s message.<sup>148</sup> Each of the letters to the seven churches commends patient endurance (2:2, 2:18, 2:20, 2:13, 2:25, 3:11, 3:21).

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<sup>146</sup>Pilgrim, *Uneasy Neighbors*, p. 173.

<sup>147</sup>Pilgrim, *Uneasy Neighbors*, p. 174.

<sup>148</sup>Pilgrim, *Uneasy Neighbors*, p. 166.

### *Local References in the Seven Letters*

There is a consensus today that the letters to the seven churches in Revelation were written and attached to Revelation and then circulated to the seven churches to which the letters were addressed.<sup>149</sup> It is less probable that the letters were written and sent individually to each community and only later added to the book of Revelation, especially when considering specific references in the letters such as, "Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches" (2:7, 2:11, 2:17, 2:29, 3:6, 3:13, 3:22). This is a clear indication that each church is to listen, and take into consideration, not only the specific letter addressed to them, but also to listen carefully to what is said to the other churches lest they fall into the same problems. This means that each church would have heard the "sins" of the other churches and vice versa. This introduces an important area for consideration, namely the extent to which these letters address specific local circumstances in the individual communities, and the extent to which these letters address circumstances common to all of the seven churches.

There is little doubt that there are local references in the letters. In his book, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia Minor in Their Local Setting*, Colin J. Hemer identifies numerous local references in each of the seven letters. These references allude to events in the past history of that city, topographical references of cities' structure, and aspects of the

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<sup>149</sup>Charles H. H. Scobie, "Local References in the Letters to the Seven Churches," *New Testament Studies*, vol. 39, 1993, p. 606.

contemporary life of these cities.<sup>150</sup> Furthermore, it is apparent that John comments on the contemporary dilemma of eating food sacrificed to Roman gods by criticizing those who agree to accommodation with Rome. Although there are local references specifically for each church, the fact that all of these letters were given to all seven of the churches to read suggests that the problems that John faced in each community was related on a greater scale to all of the Christian communities that John addressed in Revelation. In addition, it is clear that the remainder of the book of Revelation (chaps. 4-22) is a sweeping critique of several social, economic, and imperial aspects of the Roman empire. This critique is also a part of what these seven churches were required to read. The question here is how does one connect the local references with the sweeping critique of the Roman empire?

Revelation is a thorough-going critique of the social, economic, imperial and military dominance of the Roman empire. Present in these letters to the seven churches is John's criticism of each of these aspects as they are manifested in these cities, and specifically in these churches. The intrusive nature of Roman dominance manifests itself in the churches in the most common ways, through economic transactions and commerce which is the backbone of the Roman empire. For John, the Roman imperial economy and the worship of Roman and imperial gods go hand-in-hand, especially when economics gives rise to occasions where worshipping these gods is practised. Therefore, John goes beyond the typical apocalyptic critique of society and power to include a critique of Roman economics and commerce. He strives to show the seven churches in chapters 4-22 of Revelation that

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<sup>150</sup>Scobie, "Local References in the Letters to the Seven Cities," p. 608.

economics lay behind the manifestations of “idolatry” found amongst them. He endeavours to make known to the readers the conflict of loyalties behind participating in commercial activities which involves worshipping Greco-Roman gods directly, or indirectly through eating sacrificial meat, and the sin of “idolatry” which is giving to others what God alone merits.

### *Indications of John's Anti-Commerce Logic in the Letters to the Seven Churches*

The author of Revelation has a clear concern with the issues of eating meat previously sacrificed to gods in Roman temples, and fornication (the worship of other gods). These issues come to the forefront in these seven churches when they are confronted with the syncretistic society in which they live that champions the worship of various gods. John realizes that the pressures to conform in the Greco-Roman society of the first-century are great, and that many of the Christians in that era will fail. In Revelation 4-22, John links this worship of Roman and imperial gods with the act of engaging in commercial activity either purposefully to gain employment, or indirectly in the form of buying and selling in order to live and have ample nourishment. John sees any engagement in the Roman imperial economy as the impetus that leads to the pressure to worship Roman gods, since in order to function socially, and especially economically, one had to participate in the worship of these gods on a daily basis. John's stand against commerce, and his association of the Roman economy with the need to worship Roman gods, especially in the imperial cult, although it is more fully developed in chapters 4-22, is evident in the letters to the seven churches.

Several of these cities were actively involved in trade and commerce. Ephesus, for

example, was one of the foremost commercial and cultural centres of Asia Minor.<sup>151</sup> This, however, is not mentioned in the letter to Ephesus. But some of the letters do comment on wealth and poverty, such as the letter to Smyrna. In this letter it says, "I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you are rich. I know the slander on the part of those who say that they are Jews and are not..." (2:9). This statement could be taken metaphorically or literally, although it is most likely both. This sentence cannot be fully literal since John would be contradicting himself. Furthermore, the word used for poverty (πτωχεια) usually means destitution or a form of material poverty.<sup>152</sup> The church at Smyrna could be poor for a variety of reasons. As Paul Duff asserts, the members of the church at Smyrna may have simply come from the lower socio-economic strata of society.<sup>153</sup> Or, as Colin J Hemer suggests, many devoted Christians often reduced themselves to poverty through their patronage.<sup>154</sup> The word for poverty, coupled with the word "slander" which in this context means to speak abusively, means that the Christians of Smyrna were being abused for their poverty. Or more specifically, the Christians in Smyrna were in agreement with John and were uncompromising to their surrounding culture, making it difficult for them to make a

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<sup>151</sup>Frederick J. Murphy, *Fallen is Babylon: The Revelation to John*, (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1998), p. 112.

<sup>152</sup>Murphy, *Fallen is Babylon*, p. 120.

<sup>153</sup>Paul B. Duff, *Who Rides the Beast? Prophetic Rivalry and the Rhetoric of Crisis in the Churches of the Apocalypse*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 44.

<sup>154</sup>Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches*, p. 68.

living in the syncretistic society that surrounded them.<sup>155</sup>

In contrast to the letter to Smyrna, John writes a letter to the church in Laodicea. Laodicea was a prosperous city situated on the nexus of important trade routes that was known specifically for its black wool used for carpets, its textile industry, its banking and its medical school.<sup>156</sup> In his letter to Laodicea, John says, "So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. For you say, 'I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.' You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked" (3:16-17). Is John here speaking of the Laodiceans as relying on security of their material wealth, or on the abundance of their spiritual wealth? Laodicea was a wealthy city known for its trade. It also refused imperial help to rebuild the city in 62 C.E. when the city was destroyed due to an earthquake. As Roloff says:

It seems here that the issue is not so much material satisfaction as it is the proud boasting about an ostensible spiritual possession, for it corresponds to the manner of thinking of an enthusiasm influenced by Gnosticism.<sup>157</sup>

Yet, Duff gives three reasons why this statement in the letter to the Laodiceans is speaking about material wealth. First, John commonly arranges his images in a way that they reflect one another, so it seems reasonable that in this case John would arrange the letter to Laodicea to reflect the message to Smyrna (rich versus poor). Also, there is no evidence in the rest of the book of Revelation that John is against Gnosticism which results in spiritual wealth.

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<sup>155</sup>Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches*, p. 68.

<sup>156</sup>Murphy, *Fallen is Babylon*, p. 157.

<sup>157</sup>Jürgen Roloff, *The Revelation of John*. Continental Commentary. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), p. 65.

And finally, in the letter to Smyrna John speaks both literally and metaphorically, so it is reasonable that in the letter to the Laodiceans he also speaks literally and metaphorically.<sup>158</sup>

John speaks literally about the wealth of the Laodiceans and metaphorically when describing them as poor, wretched, pitiable and naked in their faith. There is one other reference to commerce in this letter. Laodicea, known for its industry and commerce, would have been very familiar with the language used in buying and selling. It is appropriate, therefore, that John uses such language when talking to the Laodiceans and informing them on what they have to do to improve their relationship with God. They have to “buy from me [God] gold refined by fire...white robes to clothe you...and salve to anoint your eyes” (3:18).

### Conclusion

The opponents of John, as mentioned directly in the letters to the churches in Revelation, are specifically attacked by John due to their liberal stance on eating food previously sacrificed to Roman and imperial gods. Whether Jezebel, the Nicolaitans, and the followers of the teachings of Balaam held a Christian/gnostic view that Jesus rules only in the spiritual realm, or whether they simply believed in accommodation with the surrounding Greco-Roman culture for social and economic reasons, is unclear. What is clear, however, is that John is strongly against the eating of food previously sacrificed to Roman gods and is thus strongly against the beliefs of his “opponents” in the churches. John’s main stance is that worshipping Roman and imperial gods by any means, even indirectly, is unacceptable.

The realities of the Roman empire and its dominance manifest itself in the most

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<sup>158</sup>Duff, *Who Rides the Beast?*, p. 42-43.

outward way by its economic transactions and commerce which is that backbone of the Roman empire. And the reality was that participation in the Roman economy was intricately linked to the worship of Roman gods. John's purpose throughout Revelation was to demonstrate that participation in commerce leads ultimately to the worship of these Roman gods, thus participation in commerce leads to a conflict of Christian loyalties. Participation in the Roman economy, which is accommodation to the surrounding Greco-Roman culture that includes trade guild meetings and the eating of sacrificed meat, John asseverates is contrary to Christian belief. Through his use of the apocalyptic form of writing, and through his continual fusion and condemnation of the worship of Roman gods and commerce in Revelation, John strives to make known to the Christians this conflict of loyalties and persuade the Christians to abandon participation in the Roman economy in order to completely abandon the worship of Roman gods. This fusion of the condemnation of the worship of these gods and the Roman economy begins in the letters to the seven churches in the form of a denunciation of eating sacrificed meat, and continues throughout the rest of the book of Revelation.

### ***Chapter Three: Imagery as Evidence of Historical Circumstances and John's Use of Imagery from the Hebrew Bible***

#### **The Two Beasts, the Prostitute and the Description of the Fall of Babylon**

Literature written by members of past cultures and time periods reveals to the reader not simply an account of “raw” facts, but the actual interpretations of the author with respect to the circumstances, pressures and general climate of the society in which that literature was written. This is the case with the books of the Bible, and especially the case concerning the book of Revelation. As Christopher Rowland aptly states, the book of Revelation “is an ancient Christian form of the critique of ideology.”<sup>159</sup> Revelation, as a Christian critique of the society of its time, is to be read as a commentary on the issues that are important to the writer, and indeed relevant to the readers to which it is addressed. Since Revelation is an apocalypse, and as such is saturated with imagery and esoteric language, the imagery must be read as pointing to the historical circumstances which John critiques from his Christian point of view.

Most of the images in Revelation point to historical circumstances and the general climate of first-century Asia Minor, and to the Roman empire in general. In particular, John uses three images that are very significant when discussing the historical circumstances behind Revelation. These images include the description of the two beasts in chapter

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<sup>159</sup>Rowland, *Radical Christianity*, p. 75.

thirteen, the image of the prostitute in chapter seventeen, and the subsequent description of the fall of Babylon in chapter eighteen. These images are all interrelated through the image of the prostitute. The prostitute is seen as riding on the back of the second beast, and the prostitute is portrayed in a metonymic relationship with the city of Babylon. A discussion of these three images, and their relationship to each other, demonstrates John's perception of the close ties between the worship of Roman and imperial gods and participation in the Roman imperial economy.

John's perception of a tie between the worship of Roman gods and the Roman economy is also made apparent in his use of imagery from the Hebrew scriptures. Dispersed throughout the Christian Canon of the New Testament is an array of quotations from the Hebrew Bible, especially from the prophetic books. Incorporating quotations from the Hebrew scriptures into early Christian writings was a common practice used in order to demonstrate the continuity between the Hebrew Bible and Christian literature. This was important for linking Jesus, his birth, life, death and resurrection to prophecy found in the Hebrew scriptures in order to show that Jesus was preordained to come to earth to save humankind through his death and resurrection. In other words, Jesus' death and resurrection was preordained and thus was not a figment of the apostles' imagination. For this reason, quotes from the Hebrew scriptures are found throughout the Christian Canon of the New Testament.

This is the case in the book of Revelation although, contrary to much of the rest of the New Testament, John does not quote directly from the Hebrew scriptures. Instead,

Revelation is comprised of numerous allusions to the Hebrew prophets without specific reference to any particular passage. The passages in Revelation, however, are similar enough to its Hebrew predecessors that anyone with sufficient knowledge of the Hebrew scriptures would recognize them as allusions to the Hebrew prophetic books. Because of the vast use of the Hebrew scriptures in the composition of the book of Revelation, it can be said that these allusions to the Hebrew scriptures must have some significance for John's overall purpose and message in Revelation.

### **The Two Beasts of Chapter Thirteen**

Chapter thirteen is devoted to the discussion of two beasts, the first beast arising from the sea and the second beast arising from the land. The beast from the sea is believed to represent the great political power of first century C.E. - that is, Rome. The second beast is a representative of the religious powers in the provinces, or more specifically the religious authorities in the provinces who encourage participation in the imperial cult. These two beasts are characterized as being dependent on one another since the primary purpose of the second beast is to organize and enforce the worship of the first beast. This strongly suggests that John believed the political power of Rome to be upheld by the religious authority it maintains through worship in the imperial cult.<sup>160</sup> These images are also demonstrative of John's thinking, for they explicitly link participation in the Roman economy with the imperial cult and the worship of the beast (Rome).

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<sup>160</sup>Royalty, *The Streets of Heaven*, p. 183-184.

### *The First Beast: A Blasphemous Political Power*

*Καὶ εἶδον ἐκ τῆς θαλάσσης θηρίον ἀναβαῖνον, ἔχον κέρατα δέκα καὶ κεφαλὰς ἑπτὰ καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν κεράτων αὐτοῦ δέκα διαδήματα καὶ ἐπὶ τὰς κεφαλὰς αὐτοῦ ὀνόματα] βλασφημίας καὶ τὸ θηρίον ὃ εἶδον ἦν ὁμοιον παρδάλει καὶ οἱ πόδες αὐτοῦ ὡς ἄρκου καὶ τὸ στόμα αὐτοῦ ὡς στόμα λέοντος καὶ ἔδωκεν αὐτῷ ὁ δράκων τὴν δύναμιν αὐτοῦ καὶ τὸν θρόνον αὐτοῦ καὶ ἐξουσίαν μεγάλην. καὶ μίαν ἐκ τῶν κεφαλῶν αὐτοῦ ὡς ἐσφαγμένην εἰς θάνατον, καὶ ἡ πληγὴ τοῦ θανάτου αὐτοῦ ἔθεραπεύθη. καὶ ἐθανάσθη ὅλη ἡ γῆ ὀπίσω τοῦ θηρίου καὶ προσεκύνησαν τῷ δράκοντι, ὅτι ἔδωκεν τὴν ἐξουσίαν τῷ θηρίῳ, καὶ προσεκύνησαν τῷ θηρίῳ λέγοντες, Τίς ὁμοιος τῷ θηρίῳ καὶ τίς δύναται πολεμῆσαι μετ' αὐτοῦ; Καὶ ἐδόθη αὐτῷ στόμα λαλοῦν μεγάλα καὶ βλασφημίας καὶ ἐδόθη αὐτῷ ἐξουσία ποιῆσαι μῆνας τεσσαράκοντα [καὶ] δύο. καὶ ἤνοιξεν τὸ στόμα αὐτοῦ εἰς βλασφημίας πρὸς τὸν θεὸν βλασφημῆσαι τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ καὶ τὴν σκηνὴν αὐτοῦ, τοὺς ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ σκηνούντας. καὶ ἐδόθη αὐτῷ ποιῆσαι πόλεμον μετὰ τῶν ἁγίων καὶ νικῆσαι αὐτούς, καὶ ἐδόθη αὐτῷ ἐξουσία ἐπὶ πᾶσαν φυλὴν καὶ λαὸν καὶ γλῶσσαν καὶ ἔθνος, καὶ προσκυνήσουσιν αὐτὸν πάντες οἱ κατοικοῦντες ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, οὐ οὐ γέγραπται τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ ἐν τῷ βιβλίῳ τῆς ζωῆς τοῦ ἀρνίου τοῦ ἐσφαγμένου ἀπὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου.*

And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, having ten horns and seven heads; and on its horns were ten diadems, and on its heads were blasphemous names. And the beast that I saw was like a leopard, its feet were like a bear's, and its mouth was like a lion's mouth. And the dragon [Satan] gave it his power and its throne and great authority. One of its heads seemed to have received a death blow, but its mortal wound had been healed. In amazement the whole earth followed the beast. They worshipped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshipped the beast, saying, "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?" The beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words, and it was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months. It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven. Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them. It was given authority over every tribe and people and language and nation, and all the inhabitants of the earth will worship it, everyone whose name had not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slaughtered.

Revelation 13:1-8

The description of the first beast is taken primarily from the seventh chapter of the book of Daniel in which Daniel describes his vision concerning four beasts. Daniel's first beast was like a lion with eagle's wings (7:4), the second beast resembled a bear (7:5), the

third beast was like a leopard with four wings and four heads (7:6), and the fourth beast had great iron teeth and ten horns (7:7). These beasts together represent four kingdoms (7:17). Modern scholarship has identified these four kingdoms as Babylon, Media, Persia and Greece.<sup>161</sup> In his description of the beast from the sea, John combines characteristics of all of Daniels' beasts into one. John's beast from the sea has a lion's mouth (13:2), feet like a bear (13:2), resembles a leopard (13:2), and has ten horns (13:1). By combining all of Daniel's beasts into one through common physical descriptions, John is combining all of Daniel's four kingdoms, and their characteristics, into the one empire that John is concerned with, namely, Rome.<sup>162</sup> Rome represents the military might, political powers, and commercial activities of all these four kingdoms combined. Rome is a super-power.

There are two other features of the first beast that are intrinsically important. The first is the beast's claim of unparalleled authority. The dragon (Satan) has given the first beast absolute power and dominion over the people of the earth ("And the dragon gave it [first beast] power and his throne and great authority" 13:2b). Therefore, the first beast represents the manifestation of evil and of Satan on earth.<sup>163</sup>

The most important characteristic of the first beast is its blasphemous arrogance. It demands and is given worship (13:4, 13:8), and it bears and utters blasphemous names on its

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<sup>161</sup>Margaret Barker, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ: Which God Gave to Him to Show to His Servants What Must Soon Take Place*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), p. 231.

<sup>162</sup>Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, p. 83.

<sup>163</sup>Pilgrim, *Uneasy Neighbors*, p.151.

seven heads (13:1, 13:5, 13:6). This is an integral part of John's argument. Elsewhere in Revelation John stresses the importance of worshipping God to the exclusion of any other god or object. The first beast (the political power of Rome) not only receives worship from its followers, but demands worship and is itself blasphemous. Hence, Rome seeks worship for itself and takes it away from God. Furthermore, historically Rome did give itself what John would have considered blasphemous names. The names given to the emperors implied that the emperors were to be worshipped. For example, the emperors were called *dominus et deus* (Lord and God), *soter* (saviour), and *divus Augustus* (divine Augustus).<sup>164</sup>

The first beast is an important image in Revelation for understanding John's depiction of Rome. It creates a mental picture of Rome as an evil, blasphemous and syncretistic empire. This image is integral in our examination of the second beast who encourages the worship of this first beast (Rome) and its political power.

### ***The Second Beast: Those who Enforce and Encourage the Imperial Cult***

*Καὶ εἶδον ἄλλο θηρίον ἀναβαῖνον ἐκ τῆς γῆς, καὶ εἶχεν κέρατα δύο ὅμοια ἀρνίῳ καὶ ἐλάλει ὡς δράκων. καὶ τὴν ἐξουσίαν τοῦ πρώτου θηρίου πᾶσαν ποιεῖ ἐνώπιον αὐτοῦ, καὶ ποιεῖ τὴν γῆν καὶ τοὺς ἐν αὐτῇ κατοικοῦντας ἵνα προσκυνήσουσιν τὸ θηρίον τὸ πρῶτον, οὗ ἐθεραπεύθη ἡ πληγὴ τοῦ θανάτου αὐτοῦ καὶ ποιεῖ σημεῖα μεγάλα, ἵνα καὶ πῦρ ποιῇ ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καταβαίνειν εἰς τὴν γῆν ἐνώπιον τῶν ἀνθρώπων, καὶ πλανᾷ τοὺς κατοικοῦντας ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς διὰ τὰ σημεῖα ἃ ἐδόθη αὐτῷ ποιῆσαι ἐνώπιον τοῦ θηρίου, λέγων, τοῖς κατοικοῦσιν ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς ποιῆσαι εἰκόνα τῷ θηρίῳ, ὃς ἔχει τὴν πληγὴν τῆς μαχαίρης καὶ ἔζησεν. καὶ ἐδόθη αὐτῷ δοῦναι πνεῦμα τῇ εἰκόνι τοῦ θηρίου, ἵνα καὶ λαλήσῃ ἡ εἰκὼν τοῦ θηρίου καὶ ποιήσῃ [ἵνα] ὅσοι ἐὰν μὴ προσκυνήσωσιν τῇ εἰκόνι τοῦ θηρίου ἀποκτανθῶσιν. καὶ ποιεῖ πάντας, τοὺς μικροὺς καὶ τοὺς μεγάλους, καὶ τοὺς πλουσίους καὶ τοὺς*

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<sup>164</sup>Pilgrim, *Uneasy Neighbors*, p.152.

πτωχούς καὶ τοὺς ἐλευθέρους καὶ τοὺς δούλους, ἵνα δώσιν αὐτοῖς χάραγμα ἐπὶ τῆς χειρὸς αὐτῶν τῆς δεξιᾶς ἢ ἐπὶ τὸ μέτωπον αὐτῶν καὶ ἵνα μὴ τις δύνηται ἀγοράσαι ἢ πωλήσαι εἰ μὴ ὁ ἔχων τὸ χάραγμα τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ θηρίου ἢ τὸν ἀριθμὸν τοῦ ὀνόματος αὐτοῦ. Ὡδε ἡ σοφία ἐστίν. ὁ ἔχων νοῦν ψηφισάτω τὸν ἀριθμὸν τοῦ θηρίου, ἀριθμὸς γὰρ ἀνθρώπου ἐστίν, καὶ ὁ ἀριθμὸς αὐτοῦ ἑξακόσιοι ἐξήκοντα ἕξ.

Then I saw another beast that rose out of the earth; it had two horns like a lamb and it spoke like a dragon. It exercises all the authority of the first beast on its behalf, and it makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound had been healed. It performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in the sight of all; and by the signs that it is allowed to perform on behalf of the beast, it deceives the inhabitants of the earth, telling them to make an image for the beast that had been wounded by the sword and yet lived; and it was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast so that the image of the beast could even speak and cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be killed. Also it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, so that no one can buy or sell who does not have the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name. This calls for wisdom: let anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a person. Its number is six hundred sixty-six.

Revelation 13:11-18

The second beast arises from the earth for the purpose of exercising the authority of the first beast and to strongly encourage all the inhabitants of the earth to worship the first beast. This is an obvious reference to the act of worshipping Roman gods and the worship of political powers which was prevalent in Asia Minor's imperial cult and acts of emperor worship. For this reason, the second beast is usually seen as a representative of the local and regional officials of Rome in Asia Minor who promoted the imperial cult and other related religious practices. The beast is a representative of the local priesthood of the imperial cult who was responsible for carrying out the desires of Rome in the provinces.<sup>165</sup> As Walter Pilgrim states, John believes "every effort is being made to promote idolatry in the cities of

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<sup>165</sup>James L. Resseguie, *Revelation Unsealed: A Narrative Critical Approach to John's Apocalypse*, (Leiden: Brill, 1998), p. 127-128.

Asia Minor. And the backing of the state lies behind their attempts.”<sup>166</sup>

It is apparent that the second beast is a symbol representing the worship of Rome and participation in the imperial cult. The dragon of chapter twelve is identified as Satan who gives his power to an earthly agent, the first beast (Rome). The second beast then persuades the people to worship the earthly agent of Satan. The interesting aspect of the second beast, and indeed an indicative example of John’s attempt to display the Roman economy as the underlining cause of “idolatry,” is found in the two ways the second beast is allowed to enforce the worship of the first beast.

The first way in which the second beast persuades the people to worship the first beast is through working miracles. These miracles include making fire come down from heaven and making an image of the first beast speak. The reference to fire could be a reference to thunder and lightning which were used in cultic settings. They were symbols of Jupiter’s authority and divinity which had been appropriated by Roman rulers.<sup>167</sup> The miracle of fire could also be a reference to the story of Elijah (I Kings 18). Elijah used miracles to legitimize his activity.<sup>168</sup> He gathered all of Israel to meet at Mount Carmel along with 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah (who ate at Jezebel’s table). He then challenged the prophets of Baal to call upon their god to bring down fire from heaven to burn the offering of a bull. Elijah succeeded at this venture whereas the prophets of Baal, who

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<sup>166</sup>Pilgrim, *Uneasy Neighbors*, p.153.

<sup>167</sup>Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, p. 85.

<sup>168</sup>Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, p. 85.

pleaded and prayed to Baal throughout the whole day, did not. Like Elijah, the second beast sends down fire from heaven as a testimony to the power and strength of its god (Rome). The major difference is that the beast does this in order to deceive the people of God, whereas Elijah did it to strengthen the Israelites' belief in God.

The beast deceives the people on earth with its use of the fire from heaven, therefore the beast is a false prophet. Indeed, the second beast itself is identified as a false prophet in passages throughout Revelation:

καὶ ἐπιιάσθη τὸ θηρίον καὶ μετ' αὐτοῦ ὁ ψευδοπροφήτης ὁ ποιήσας τὰ σημεῖα ἐνώπιον αὐτοῦ, ἐν οἷς ἐπλάνησεν τοὺς λαβόντας τὸ χάραγμα τοῦ θηρίου καὶ τοὺς προσκυνούντας τῆ εἰκόνη αὐτοῦ·

And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who had performed in its presence the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshipped his image (Revelation 19:20).

This passage clarifies another passage in Revelation 16:13, "And I saw three foul spirits like frogs coming from the mouth of the Dragon, from the mouth of the beast, and from the mouth of the false prophet." The second beast, identified as the false prophet in 19:20, is seen to be in a close relationship with the Dragon (Satan) in 16:13 and again in 20:10. This classification separates him from being an agent of God as Elijah was, but instead classifies him as an agent of Satan and thus a deceiver, as Satan himself is described as a "deceiver of the whole world" in 12:9. The classification of the beast as a false prophet should alert the reader/Christian to view the beast with suspicion. Jesus himself warned against false prophets who would come preceding his second coming:

καὶ τότε ἐάν τις ὑμῖν εἴπῃ, Ἴδε ὧδε ὁ Χριστός, Ἴδε ἐκεῖ, μὴ πιστεύετε· ἐγερθήσονται γὰρ ψευδόχριστοι καὶ ψευδοπροφήται καὶ

δώσουσιν σημεῖα καὶ τέρατα πρὸς τὸ ἀποπλανᾶν, εἰ δυνατόν, τοὺς ἐκλεκτοὺς. ὑμεῖς δὲ βλέπετε· προεῖρηκα ὑμῖν πάντα.

And if anyone says to you at that time, 'Look! Here is the messiah!' or 'Look! There he is!' - do not believe it. False messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, the elect. But be alert; I have already told you everything (Mark 13:21-23).

And John himself praises those who have tested and found some apostles to be false. For example, to the Ephesians he writes, "you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them to be false" (2:2b). Likewise, John warns against Jezebel whom he refers to as a prophet. He, however, classifies her teachings as the "deep things of Satan," and that she is "beguiling." These descriptions insist that Jezebel is a false prophet because she deceives and associates with Satan, just as the beast from the land does. The classification of the beast (who is a clear representative of the Roman imperial priesthood) as a false prophet alerts the reader to be suspicious of the beast and thus suspicious of Rome that deceives its people.

The other miracle that the second beast uses to encourage the worship of the first beast is making the image of the first beast speak. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza describes the animation of the images of gods as a common practice in antiquity. Indeed, rather sophisticated technology was available in the first century that allowed the image of the god to appear as if it could "speak, sweat, move, and prophesy," and for making devices that could simulate thunder and lightning.<sup>169</sup> Jewish apocryphal writings such as *Bel and the Dragon* humorously describe such techniques, especially the act of making images of the

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<sup>169</sup>Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, p. 85.

gods release smoke and speak.<sup>170</sup> In *Alexander the False Prophet*, Lucian describes Alexander's use of liturgical technology:

As he wished to astonish the crowd still more, he promised to produce the God talking - delivering oracles in person without a prophet. It was no difficult matter for him to fashion crane's wind pipes together and pass them through the head, which he had so fashioned as to be life-like. Then he answered the question through someone else, who spoke into the tube from the outside, so that the voice issued from his canvas Asclepius.<sup>171</sup>

This second miracle describes the second beast as actively seeking, encouraging and persuading people to worship the first beast. This was a blatant promotion of the worship of Roman and imperial gods, which John considered "idolatry." Furthermore, the first beast welcomed and sought such worship by employing the second beast to do this, and by uttering blasphemous words itself.

### *The Second Beast and Commerce*

The second beast went beyond mere persuasion to encourage the worship of the first beast. John portrays the second beast as taking his persuasion to another level by threatening people with the loss of their livelihoods if they did not worship the image of the first beast. It is here that John directly links worshipping Roman gods with participation in the Roman imperial economy. Fiorenza identifies the second way that the beast urges the people to worship the first beast as the economic ultimatum of the "mark."<sup>172</sup> Economic exploitation and retaliation was the beast's most powerful weapon of persuading people to participate in

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<sup>170</sup>Pilgrim, *Uneasy Neighbors*, p. 153.

<sup>171</sup>Lucian, *Alexander the False Prophet*, 26.

<sup>172</sup>Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, p. 86.

the imperial cult.<sup>173</sup> Without the “mark of the beast” inscribed on the right hand or the forehead one could not buy or sell. This has implications both on a small and large scale. On one hand, it interferes with the purchase of the basic necessities of life. On the other hand, it interferes with those who are involved with commerce on a large scale such as the merchants and sailors. The “mark” is a threat to anyone’s lives and livelihoods. This “mark” is also an attack on membership in local trade guilds which encourage buying and selling in a social setting. The “mark” also results in social and economic isolation for anyone who does not have it, for those people could not participate in social engagements such as banquets, meetings of trade guilds, and business associations.<sup>174</sup>

But what exactly is this “mark?” Some say that this mark refers to the mark upon imperial coins that were branded with images of the divine emperor and the goddess Roma. Coins were necessary for all economic transactions. Merchants could not enter into the international marketplace without handling these coins.<sup>175</sup> The one impediment to this theory is that people did not literally carry coins on their foreheads. Similarly, the “mark” may have also referred to business documents and shipping bills with imperial or cult emblems on them, but, once again, these documents were not carried on the forehead.<sup>176</sup>

John, in his description of the “mark,” may have also been referring to the literal

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<sup>173</sup>Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, p. 100.

<sup>174</sup>Pilgrim, *Uneasy Neighbors*, p. 153.

<sup>175</sup>J. Nelson Kraybill, *Imperial Cult and Commerce in John's Apocalypse*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), p. 138.

<sup>176</sup>Kraybill, *Imperial Cult and Commerce in John's Apocalypse*, p. 139.

tattooing on the forehead or right hand of all members of a cult.<sup>177</sup> John may have had experiences similar to what later happened to the Hellenistic Egyptian Jews in mind who were ordered to be branded with a mark signifying their participation in a pagan cult:

None of those who did not sacrifice shall enter their sanctuaries, and all Jews shall be subjected to a registration involving poll tax and to the status of slaves. Those who object to this are to be taken by force and put to death; those who are registered are also to be branded on their bodies by fire with the ivy-leaf symbol of Dionysus, and they shall be reduced to their former limited status (3 Maccabees 2:28-29).

Like those Jews who had to pay to keep in good economic and social standing, the Christians of John's time had to participate in the imperial cult in order to ease their way into citizenship and to profit in the marketplace.<sup>178</sup>

It is more plausible, however, that John may have been thinking metaphorically when referring to the "mark," saying that those who wear the mark are those who give their allegiance to the imperial regime and its syncretistic values through participation in the imperial economy.<sup>179</sup> The exact nature of John's "mark" is unclear. More importantly, one must recognize that the "mark of the beast" has its counterpart in Revelation's "seal of the redeemed." The "redeemed" are those who bear the name of God and the Lamb on their foreheads (14:1, 7:2-4). The "mark" or "seal" in both images are symbols of religious loyalty.<sup>180</sup> Moreover, the condition for receiving either mark is economic. A choice must

<sup>177</sup>Pilgrim, *Uneasy Neighbors*, p.153.

<sup>178</sup>Kraybill, *Imperial Cult and Commerce in John's Apocalypse*, p.136-137.

<sup>179</sup>Pilgrim, *Uneasy Neighbors*, p.154.

<sup>180</sup>Royalty, *The Streets of Heaven*, p. 185.

be made, either one “buys and sells” and therefore has the mark of the beast automatically, or one refuses to buy and sell and thereby is eligible to receive the “seal of the redeemed.” This is a serious choice brought before the Christians that demands a serious devotion or rejection of God based on their choice to participate or reject commerce in their day-to-day lives.

The two beasts together portray an image of a syncretistic state that bestows worship upon itself and forces others to worship it. This is in direct opposition to John’s absolute belief that God alone should be worshipped and glorified. Therefore, Rome is in opposition to the values of Christian living. Christians would naturally have found it difficult to refuse worshipping the beast due to the economic sanctions that the beast placed on all people. They had to buy and sell in order to live peaceable lives within the empire. John sees the actions of buying and selling, and the worship of the beast (Rome), as creating a conflict of loyalties for Christians. John describes the beast (Rome) as encouraging the worship of the first beast through deception, or “miracles,” and commerce. Participating in the Roman economy is a means of worshipping the beast. Thus, John encourages the readers to reject the mark of the beast (reject commerce) and to stop worshipping Rome in order to be eligible to receive the seal of the redeemed and to worship God.

### **The Prostitute and the Fall of Babylon: Commerce and Corruption**

#### *The Beast and the Prostitute*

The image of the beast is intimately related to chapter seventeen describing the prostitute, and through her to the description of the fall of Babylon. These images together

reveal John's interpretation of the historical circumstances of his time. In chapter seventeen, the prostitute is a representative of the city Rome and she is riding on the back of the second beast. This symbolizes that the city Rome is upheld by the imperial religion and its propaganda. Here the connection between the Roman economy and the worship of Roman gods is taken to another level and reinforced by the imagery of the prostitute and the economic exploitation and trade condemned in chapter 18.

### *The Prostitute and the Fall of Babylon*

The passages describing the prostitute and the fall of Babylon are indicative of John's perception of the city Rome and its empire. As the beast from the sea and the beast from the land are wholly dependent on one another for interpretation, so too are the descriptions of the prostitute and the description of the fall of Babylon. Both images are in a metonymic relationship in which the attributes of the prostitute are the attributes of Babylon. The description of the prostitute is a description of the city Rome. Both descriptions are linked explicitly in 17:18 where it says, "the woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth." The prostitute and her characteristics, as explained in chapter seventeen, are the characteristics of Babylon/Rome, and therefore go hand in hand with the subsequent fall of Babylon/Rome in chapter eighteen. Several other features in these two chapters link the description of the prostitute with the description of Babylon.

First, the image of the "golden cup" of the prostitute (17:4) echoes the cup in 18:6 in which God mixes a double draught for her (the prostitute) in the cup she mixed. Likewise,

the list of cargo in 18:12-13 recalls the clothing of the prostitute in 17:4.<sup>181</sup> They list similar articles such as purple, scarlet, gold, jewels and pearls, which all appear at the beginning of the cargo list. Then, in 19:2, after the judgement of Babylon has been completed, the seer responds by saying that “he has judged the great whore who corrupted the earth with her fornication,” again linking the prostitute with the judgement of Babylon.

John’s purpose of connecting Babylon with the image of the prostitute is an area of great speculation and concern, specifically in relation to John’s apparent misogynist attitude. Barbara Rossing insists that John uses the image of the prostitute, and later the image of the bride, to set-up an ethical contrast with the purpose of inciting the reader to make an ethical choice, and not misogynist.<sup>182</sup> Once the ethical dilemma is established, Rossing says that the

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<sup>181</sup>Murphy, *Fallen is Babylon*, p. 374.

<sup>182</sup>The image of the prostitute exploiting her clients is a religiously constructed view that is expressed freely and frequently in the Hebrew Bible and in the Book of Revelation. There is general agreement that the Book of Revelation is misogynist and scholars have dealt with this issue in differing ways. Barbara Rossing, in her book *The Choice Between Two Cities*, while sensitive to the criticism of Revelation as misogynist, says that we must focus on the moral and ethical dilemmas which the contrasting images of the prostitute and the bride evoke in the readers of Revelation. The contrast between two ethically different women was a common means of presenting ethical dilemmas in ancient writings. In Revelation, once the two women have succeeded in presenting the ethical dilemma, they are replaced by cities which evoke that same ethical choice. While this explains John’s choice of language in Revelation, it does little to excuse John’s constant degradation of women. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza also comments on the misogyny of Revelation in her book *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (p. 131). She is much more critical than is Rossing in her analysis of John’s use of the traditional contrast between the prostitute and the bride. She says that this dualism does not draw the reader’s into the decision about Rome’s political oppression, but rather focuses on moralistic terms and “gender sexuality.” Therefore, the worlds which John describe perpetuate sexist prejudice instead of instilling a “hunger” and “thirst” for a just world. Therefore,

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images of the women reside into the background and the aspects of the cities of Babylon and the New Jerusalem come to the forefront.<sup>183</sup> Images of women were commonly used in ancient patriarchal societies to set up ethical dilemmas. This is frequently the case in many books of the Hebrew Bible, especially the prophetic books. Rossing argues that the images of the prostitute and the subsequent description of the city Babylon are intricately related so the prostitute is a representative of Babylon. Cross-references in the text demonstrate that the prostitute and Babylon are indeed linked and God's judgement of Babylon is God's judgement of the prostitute and vice versa.

***The Great Prostitute: John's Symbol for Idolatry***

*Καὶ ἦλθεν εἰς ἐκ τῶν ἐπτὰ ἀγγέλων τῶν ἐχόντων τὰς ἐπτὰ φιάλας καὶ ἐλάλησεν μετ' ἐμοῦ λέγων, Δεῦρο, δεῖξω σοι τὸ κρίμα τῆς πόρνῆς τῆς μεγάλης τῆς καθήμενης ἐπὶ ὑδάτων πολλῶν, μεθ' ἧς ἐπόρνευσαν οἱ βασιλεῖς τῆς γῆς καὶ ἐμεθύσθησαν οἱ κατοικοῦντες τὴν γῆν ἐκ τοῦ οἴνου τῆς πορνείας αὐτῆς καὶ ἀπήνεγκέν με εἰς ἔρημον ἐν πνεύματι. καὶ εἶδον γυναῖκα καθήμενην ἐπὶ θηρίον κόκκινον, γέμον[τα] ὀνόματα βλασφημίας, ἔχων κεφαλὰς ἐπτὰ καὶ κέρατα δέκα. καὶ ἡ γυνὴ ἦν περιβεβλημένη πορφυροῦν καὶ κόκκινον καὶ κεχρυσωμένη χρυσίῳ καὶ λίθῳ τιμίῳ καὶ μαργαρίταις, ἔχουσα ποτήριον χρυσοῦν ἐν τῇ χειρὶ αὐτῆς γέμον βδελυγμάτων καὶ τὰ ἀκάθαρτα τῆς πορνείας αὐτῆς καὶ ἐπὶ τὸ μέτωπον αὐτῆς ὄνομα γεγραμμένον, μυστήριον, βαβυλῶν ἡ μεγάλη, ἡ μήτηρ τῶν πορνῶν καὶ τῶν βδελυγμάτων τῆς γῆς. καὶ εἶδον*

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<sup>182</sup>(...continued)

Revelation's language opens a door for a depoliticized reading making not political, but moral and sexual behaviour, a criterion for faithful Christian practice. A full discussion of John's misogynist language for interpreters today would take us beyond the scope of this thesis. Suffice it to say that the image of the prostitute being the exploiter and not the exploited is a religiously constructed view which John takes over from several texts from the Hebrew Bible (Ezekiel 16:15-17, 16:26-28, Hosea 9:1, 4:10-13, Nahum 3:4, etc.). It is offensive to modern sensibilities and certainly is not my own view.

<sup>183</sup>Rossing, *The Choice Between Two Cities*, p. 82.

τὴν γυναῖκα μεθύουσαν ἐκ τοῦ αἵματος τῶν ἁγίων καὶ ἐκ τοῦ αἵματος τῶν μαρτύρων Ἰησοῦ.

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the judgement of the great whore who is seated on many waters, with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and with the wine of whose fornication the inhabitants of the earth have become drunk. So he carried me away in the spirit into the wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns. The woman was clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication; and on her forehead was written a name, a mystery: "Babylon, the great, mother of whores and of earth's abominations." And I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus.

Revelation 17:1-6a

Several of the prophetic books use the image of a prostitute as a means of describing the relationship between God and his people, or the relationship between God's chosen people and other nations. Usually these relationships deal with the extent of faithfulness of the Hebrew people to their God, and the occasions when the Hebrews apostatized and become unfaithful to God. The Hebrews then worshipped the gods of other nations, described by the prophets as "playing the whore" with other gods and committing "idolatry." The "sin" of "idolatry" is denounced by the prophets as "fornication," the same charge brought against both the prostitute of chapter seventeen and Jezebel of Thyatira in the book of Revelation.<sup>184</sup> Thus, committing fornication is worshipping other gods (idolatry). This is especially the case in Jeremiah 3:

The Lord said to me in the days of King Josiah: Have you seen what she did, that faithless one, Israel, how she went up on every high hill and under every green tree, and played the whore there? And I thought, "After she has done all this she will return to me"; but she did not return, and her false sister Judah saw it. She saw that for all the adulteries of that faithless one, Israel, I had sent her away with a decree of divorce; yet her false sister Judah did not fear, but she too went and played the whore.

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<sup>184</sup>Pilgrim, *Uneasy Neighbors*, p. 155.

Because she took her whoredom so lightly, she polluted the land, committing adultery with stone and tree. Yet for all this her false sister Judah did not return to me with her whole heart, but only in pretense, says the Lord (Jeremiah 3:6-10).

This passage from Jeremiah is a clear example of the connection between worshipping other gods and prostitution in the Hebrew prophets. Both Israel and Judah are described as those who “played the whore.” They abandoned God and thus God issued a decree of divorce. The people were supposed to be married to God and thus faithful to him. The Hebrews’ unfaithfulness created a division between God’s people and God himself that ends in divorce. When the people stray from God and worship other gods they are committing adultery and “playing the whore.” Thus, prostitution and the worship of other gods are closely linked in the Hebrew prophets.

Richard Bauckham sees an explicit association between prostitution and the worship of Roman and imperial gods in the description of the prostitute’s cup of “abominations and the impurities of her fornication” in 17:4. This sentence is a reference to the Hebrew prophets association between prostitution and the worship of these other gods. In the cup there is religious corruption (similar to the corruption in the prophetic books due to the people of God worshipping other gods), which, in John’s social setting, is caused by the lure of the *Pax Romana*. Because Roman power secured the *Pax Romana*, people responded by acknowledging this power through worship of the emperor as divine saviour.<sup>185</sup> The “fornication” of 17:4 is the act of turning from God to worship other gods, and the impurities and abominations is the corruption that results from worshipping these other gods. The one

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<sup>185</sup>Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, p. 348.

committing these acts is the prostitute (Rome and its followers), just as the prostitutes were Judah and Israel in the prophetic books.

The connection between the prostitute and the worship of other gods is also evident in Ezekiel 23. In this passage Jerusalem's unfaithfulness is portrayed slightly different. Israel and Judah are both depicted as prostitutes for being unfaithful to God in their foreign alliances. In this passage Oholibah (Jerusalem) is portrayed as a prostitute who continually "plays the harlot" (associates) with other nations. The consequence of this simple association with other nations is that Jerusalem commits the "sin" of "idolatry" by worshipping the gods of other nations and neglecting their own God. This "sin" of worshipping these other gods is continually reinforced throughout the passage:

"She defiled herself with all the idols." (23:7)

You "polluted yourself with their idols." (23:30)

"With their idols they have committed adultery." (23:37)

"They had slaughtered their own children for their idols." (23:39)

This passage clearly links the image of a prostitute to the abandoning of Yahweh for the worship of gods of foreign nations.

The tradition of connecting a prostitute with the act of worshipping gods of other nations was also common in the first century. Any mention of a prostitute in religious propaganda would have brought to mind the betrayal of the Hebrew people when they abandoned Yahweh to worship other gods. John's portrayal of Rome as a prostitute would have procured in the minds of the readers of Revelation an image of a syncretistic nation that

worships various gods.

To ensure that the connection between the prostitute and the worship of gods of other nations is explicit, John uses much of the same terminology to describe the appearance of the prostitute as did the Hebrew prophets. For example, the passage previously mentioned in Ezekiel 23 describes the prostitute as follows:

Mortal, there are two women, the daughters of one mother; they played the whore in Egypt; they played the whore in their youth...As for their names, Oholah is Samaria, and Oholibah is Jerusalem...she (Oholah) lusted after her lovers the Assyrians...she defiled herself with all the idols of everyone for whom she lusted...the Assyrians...uncovered her nakedness; they seized her sons and her daughters; and they killed her with the sword...Her sister Oholibah saw this...she saw male figures carved on the wall, images of the Chaldeans portrayed in vermilion...I will rouse against you your lovers...They shall cut off your nose and your ears...they shall also strip you of your clothes...and leave you naked and bare...your lewdness and your whorings have brought this upon you, because you played the whore with the nations, and polluted yourself with their idols...they have committed adultery, and blood is on their hands; with their idols they have committed adultery; and they have even offered up to them for food the children whom they had borne to me...they have defiled my sanctuary...and profaned my Sabbaths...they had slaughtered their children for their idols...for them you bathed yourself, painted your eyes, and decked yourself with ornaments...you shall bear the penalty for your sinful idolatry.

The description of the prostitute in this passage is similar to the description of the prostitute in the seventeenth chapter of the book of Revelation. Especially in terms of her lavish attire, her state of drunkenness with blood, her nakedness, her mutilation, and her fornication (idolatry). There are numerous parallels between Revelation and Ezekiel in terms of the prostitute.<sup>186</sup>

In Ezekiel's description of the prostitute, from which John formulates his description

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<sup>186</sup>Murphy, *Fallen is Babylon*, p. 364.

of the prostitute, she is judged for her involvement with other nations and worshipping the gods of these other nations. This is described as “idolatry.” In formulating his description of the prostitute, it is noteworthy that John uses similar means to describe his rendition of the prostitute, linking his prostitute with the prostitute of Ezekiel. Ezekiel’s prostitute is linked to the act of worshipping the gods of other nations and, by the use of similar characteristics, John’s prostitute is also connected to the worship of gods other than the Christian God.

The image of the prostitute is also connected to the worship of Roman gods through the terms “fornication” and “abomination”. The term “abomination” is a common term in biblical texts to refer to anything that God abhors, or that should be kept away from God’s cultic presence.<sup>187</sup> Examples of this are as follows:

The King defiled the high places that were east of Jerusalem, to the south of the mount of Destruction, which King Solomon of Israel had built for Astarte the abomination of the Sidonians, for Chemosh the abomination of Moab, and for Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites (II Kings 23:13).

No one considers, nor is their knowledge or discernment to say, “Half of it I burned in the fire; I also baked bread on its coals, I roasted meat and have eaten. Now shall I make the rest of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?” (Isaiah 33:19)

Both of these examples connect an abomination with the worship of gods other than Yahweh, therefore associating “abomination” with the worship of other gods. The “abominations and impurities” in 17:3 of Revelation are thus the practice of worshipping other gods of which

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<sup>187</sup> Murphy, *Fallen is Babylon*, p.355.

the prostitute (Rome) partakes.<sup>188</sup>

Likewise, the word “prostitution” itself was a common term used by the Hebrew prophets against Israel to denote the worshipping of gods other than Yahweh.<sup>189</sup> The majority of the πορν – words occur in the section about the prostitute and Babylon in 17:1 - 19:10, with the exception of when John speaks of his opponents in chapters 2-3.<sup>190</sup> Moreover, “fornication” is linked to the worship of Roman gods in the Apostolic Decree found in the Acts of the Apostles, especially in 15:20, 15:29 and 21:25 where Gentile Christians were asked only to “abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication” (21:25).<sup>191</sup>

Besides the obvious links, John uses indirect techniques of associating the prostitute (Rome) with blasphemy and its own assertion that it (Rome) should be worshipped. This is especially true in the terms such as “the one seated,” (17:1) or “I rule as queen,” (18:7) in which Rome is depicted as the one sitting on the throne and as the one who reigns. This is in direct contradiction to John’s belief that God is the only one who should be enthroned. John’s opinion is shown in verses such as Revelation 4-5, 16:17 and 21:5.<sup>192</sup> The worship

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<sup>188</sup>John M. Court, *Myth and History in the Book of Revelation*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979), p.146.

<sup>189</sup>Rossing, *The Choice Between Two Cities*, p.69.

<sup>190</sup>Royalty, *The Streets of Heaven*, p.190.

<sup>191</sup>Court, *Myth and History in the Book of Revelation*, p.140.

<sup>192</sup>“To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne (3:21),”  
 “The twenty-four elders fall before the one who is seated on the throne and worship the  
 (continued...)

of Rome/the prostitute who sits on the beast is a threat to God who Himself sits on the throne. The worship of Rome creates a threat to the worship of God.<sup>193</sup> Because of this, the prostitute/Rome should not be worshipped unless a contradiction in loyalties is maintained, which, in John's view, is unacceptable.

Finally, the prostitute is linked to the worship of Roman gods, and more specifically to the imperial cult, through her position as sitting on the beast which, in previous sections, was described as a symbol of the institution of emperor worship. In this symbolism, the prostitute (the corrupting influence) is upheld by the imperial cult (the beast/Roman religious officials) which ensures the continuation of the worship of the empire/city and the continuation of the imperial cult.

While sexual imagery may be an atypical way of describing an evil empire, city or state in the modern day, it was not so in the ancient world. It was a common way of describing ethical contrasts and dilemmas. John uses sexual imagery to speak about the loyalties of the human heart to God or to the state. Fidelity is essential for a successful marriage, thus, it is also essential for a successful relationship with God.<sup>194</sup>

### *The Prostitute and the Roman Imperial Economy*

Although the portion of the harlot/Babylon section concerning commercial activity

<sup>192</sup>(...continued)

one who lives forever and ever (4:10),” “To the one seated on the throne and the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might forever and ever (5:13b).”

<sup>193</sup>Rossing, *The Choice Between Two Cities*, p.68.

<sup>194</sup> Resseigue, *Revelation Unsealed*, p.136-137.

is found primarily in chapter 18, the prostitute herself is linked to the Roman economy through her association with the portrayals of prostitution in the Hebrew Bible. Any readers of Revelation with knowledge of the Hebrew scriptures would probably have connected the images throughout Revelation to their counterparts in the Hebrew Bible. The prostitute, as already mentioned, is an ancient symbol of the worship of the gods of other nations. It was used to describe the people of Israel when they denied the Lord and worshipped (played the harlot) with other gods besides Yahweh. The prostitute in the Hebrew scriptures is also connected to the economy. This is made most explicit in Isaiah 23:15-18:

From that day Tyre will be forgotten for seventy years, the lifetime of one king. At the end of seventy years, it will happen to Tyre as in the song about the prostitute: Take a harp, go about the city, you forgotten prostitute! Make sweet melody, sing many songs, that you may be remembered. At the end of the seventy years, the Lord will visit Tyre, as she will return to her trade, and will prostitute herself with all the kingdoms of the world on the face of the earth. Her merchandise and her wages will be dedicated to the Lord; her profits will not be stored or hoarded, but her merchandise will supply abundant food and fine clothing for those who live in the presence of the Lord.

The prostitute is not purely a representative of apostasy and the worship of the gods of other nations in the Hebrew scriptures, she is also a symbol of commerce and trade, especially when the economic giant of the Hebrew scriptures, Tyre, is described by the prophets as a prostitute. As K. G. Kuhn says, in the comment about “harlotry” in Isaiah 23:15ff and Nahum 3:4, “harlotry” does not mean idolatry as it normally does in descriptions of the prostitute in the prophets, but instead it refers to the trading activity of the city.<sup>195</sup> In the above example the image of the prostitute is applied not to those ancient “idolatrous”

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<sup>195</sup>Kuhn, *TWNT*, 1.515, n. 11.

states such as Babylon, but instead to the economic giant of the ancient world, Tyre. Hence, the “author of Revelation extends connotations of fornication with the great prostitute” Babylon to include not only “idolatry” but participation in commerce as well.<sup>196</sup> It is indeed probable that John’s audience would have understood the references to the prostitute as both a reference to the worship of the gods of other nations and a commercial allusion to these visions from the prophets in the Hebrew Bible.

The above description of a prostitute as a symbol of participation in the economy, such as occurs in passages such as Isaiah 23:15ff, does not describe the people of God as “playing the whore” but instead understands the international commerce and wealth of the city, Tyre, as the “hire” paid to the prostitute.<sup>197</sup> Revelation’s labelling of Babylon/Rome as a prostitute is indicative of John’s message when considering John’s sources in the Hebrew scriptures. It serves to label Rome not simply as an “idolatrous” nation, but also as a critique of Rome as an economically exploitative empire, gaining profit through commerce.

The image of the prostitute is also linked to participation in the Roman economy in Revelation 17:1:

Καὶ ἦλθεν εἰς ἐκ τῶν ἑπτὰ ἀγγέλων τῶν ἐχόντων τὰς ἑπτὰ φιάλας καὶ ἐλάλησεν μετ’ ἐμοῦ λέγων, Δεῦρο, δείξω σοι τὸ κρίμα τῆς πόρνῆς τῆς μεγάλης τῆς καθημένης ἐπὶ ὑδάτων πολλῶν.

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, “Come I will show you the judgement of the great whore who is seated on many waters.”

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<sup>196</sup>Royalty, *The Streets of Heaven*, p. 191.

<sup>197</sup>Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, p. 96.

The term “many waters” characterizes Rome as an international city. This allusion to the “many waters” coupled with the prostitute as a representative of the economic giant Tyre who dealt in economic trade, displays Rome as the centre of international commerce and wealth. Therefore, the international commerce and wealth of Tyre/Rome is the “hire” paid to the prostitute.<sup>198</sup>

It is reasonable to presume that some of John’s Christians, especially those who were not converts from Judaism, would not have understood John’s allusions to prostitution as being connected to the Hebrew Bible. For those people a more straightforward connection would be needed. John does not let his audience down. The description of the prostitute and her gilded attire in Revelation 17:4 would have directly connected the prostitute with those wealthy women of Rome in the first-century C.E. who, like the prostitute, clothed themselves with jewels, purple and scarlet cloth, and with other outlandish means of displaying the items bought from the merchants who frequented the city of Rome. Not only were they symbols of wealth, however, they were also symbols of power. Purple, for example, was highly prized by the Romans and it became a symbol of power and luxury to the point that robes dyed in this colour became the insignia of office. Likewise, the purple *paludementum* of the emperor as commander-in-chief became a token of imperial power.<sup>199</sup> These symbols of wealth that the wealthy women of Rome purchased is connected to trade through the list of cargo in the merchants lament of 18:11-17. This cargo list belonging to the merchants is a list of articles

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<sup>198</sup>Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, p.96.

<sup>199</sup>Court, *Myth and History in the Book of Revelation*, p.147.

that the merchants traded with Rome, including these esteemed cloths and colours, jewels and pearls which the prostitute and the wealthy women enjoyed wearing.

**The Fall of Babylon: The Evil of an Empire Built on Trade and Commerce**

Μετὰ ταῦτα εἶδον ἄλλον ἄγγελον καταβαίνοντα ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ἔχοντα ἐξουσίαν μεγάλην, καὶ ἡ γῆ ἐφωτίσθη ἐκ τῆς δόξης αὐτοῦ καὶ ἔκραζεν ἐν ἰσχυρᾷ φωνῇ λέγων, Ἔπεσεν ἔπεσεν βαβυλῶν ἡ μεγάλη, καὶ ἐγένετο κατοικητήριον δαιμονίων καὶ φυλακὴ παντὸς πνεύματος ἀκαθάρτου καὶ φυλακὴ παντὸς ὀρνέου ἀκαθάρτου [καὶ φυλακὴ παντὸς θηρίου ἀκαθάρτου] καὶ μεμισομένου, ὅτι ἐκ τοῦ οἴνου τοῦ θυμοῦ τῆς πορνείας αὐτῆς πέπωκαν πάντα τὰ ἔθνη καὶ οἱ βασιλεῖς τῆς γῆς μετ' αὐτῆς ἐπόρνευσαν καὶ οἱ ἔμποροι τῆς γῆς ἐκ τῆς δυνάμεως τοῦ στρηνοῦς αὐτῆς ἐπλούτησαν. Καὶ ἤκουσα ἄλλην φωνὴν ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ λέγουσαν, Ἐξέλθατε ὁ λαός μου ἐξ αὐτῆς ἵνα μὴ συγκοινωνήσητε ταῖς ἁμαρτίαις αὐτῆς, καὶ ἐκ τῶν πληγῶν αὐτῆς ἵνα μὴ λάβητε, ὅτι ἐκολλήθησαν αὐτῆς αἱ ἁμαρτίαι ἄχρι τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καὶ ἐμνημόνευσεν ὁ θεὸς τὰ ἀδικήματα αὐτῆς, ἀπόδοτε αὐτῇ ὡς καὶ αὐτὴ ἀπέδωκεν καὶ διπλώσατε τὰ διπλά κατὰ τὰ ἔργα αὐτῆς, ἐν τῷ ποτηρίῳ ᾧ ἐκέρασεν κεράσατε αὐτῇ διπλοῦν, ὅσα ἐδόξασεν αὐτὴν καὶ ἐστρηνίασεν, τοσοῦτον δότε αὐτῇ βασανισμὸν καὶ πένθος, ὅτι ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ αὐτῆς λέγει ὅτι Κάθημαι βασιλίσσα καὶ χήρα οὐκ εἰμι καὶ πένθος οὐ μὴ ἴδω, διὰ τοῦτο ἐν μιᾷ ἡμέρᾳ ἤξουσιν αἱ πληγαὶ αὐτῆς, θάνατος καὶ πένθος καὶ λιμός, καὶ ἐν πυρὶ κατακαυθήσεται, ὅτι ἰσχυρὸς κύριος ὁ θεὸς ὁ κρίνας αὐτήν. Καὶ κλαύσουσιν καὶ κόψονται ἐπ' αὐτήν οἱ βασιλεῖς τῆς γῆς οἱ μετ' αὐτῆς πορνεύσαντες καὶ στρηνιάσαντες, ὅταν βλέπωσιν τὸν καπνὸν τῆς πυρώσεως αὐτῆς, ἀπὸ μακρόθεν ἐστηκότες διὰ τὸν φόβον τοῦ βασανισμοῦ αὐτῆς λέγοντες, Οὐαὶ οὐαὶ, ἡ πόλις ἡ μεγάλη, Βαβυλῶν ἡ πόλις ἡ ἰσχυρά, ὅτι μιᾷ ὥρᾳ ἦλθεν ἡ κρίσις σου. Καὶ οἱ ἔμποροι τῆς γῆς κλαίουσιν καὶ πενθοῦσιν ἐπ' αὐτήν, ὅτι τὸν γόμον αὐτῶν οὐδεὶς ἀγοράζει οὐκέτι γόμον χρυσοῦ καὶ ἀργύρου καὶ λίθου τιμίου καὶ μαργαριτῶν καὶ βυσσίνου καὶ πορφύρας καὶ σιρικοῦ καὶ κοκκίνου, καὶ πᾶν ξύλον θιυνοῦ καὶ πᾶν σκεῦος ἐλεφάντινον καὶ πᾶν σκεῦος ἐκ ξύλου τιμιωτάτου καὶ χαλκοῦ καὶ σιδήρου καὶ μαρμάρου, καὶ κιννάμωμον καὶ ἄμωμον καὶ θυμιάματα καὶ μύρον καὶ λίβανον καὶ οἶνον καὶ ἔλαιον καὶ σερμίδαλιν καὶ σίτον καὶ κτήνη καὶ πρόβατα, καὶ ἵππων καὶ ῥεδῶν καὶ σωμαίων, καὶ ψυχᾶς ἀνθρώπων. καὶ ἡ ὄπώρα σου τῆς ἐπιθυμίας τῆς ψυχῆς ἀπῆλθεν ἀπὸ σοῦ, καὶ πάντα τὰ λιπαρὰ καὶ τὰ λαμπρὰ ἀπώλετο ἀπὸ σοῦ καὶ οὐκέτι οὐ μὴ αὐτὰ κερήσουσιν οἱ ἔμποροι τούτων οἱ πλουτήσαντες ἀπ' αὐτῆς ἀπὸ μακρόθεν στηθόνται διὰ τὸν φόβον τοῦ βασανισμοῦ αὐτῆς κλαίοντες

καὶ πενθοῦντες λέγοντες, Οὐαὶ οὐαὶ ἡ πόλις ἡ μεγάλη, ἡ περιβεβλημένη βύσσινον καὶ πορφυροῦν καὶ κόκκινον καὶ κεχρυσωμένη [ἐν] χρυσίῳ καὶ λίθῳ τιμίῳ καὶ μαργαρίτῃ, ὅτι μιᾷ ὥρᾳ ἠρημώθη ὁ τοσοῦτος πλοῦτος. Καὶ πᾶς κυβερνήτης καὶ πᾶς ὁ ἐπὶ τόπον πλέων καὶ ναῦται καὶ ὅσοι τὴν θάλασσαν ἐργάζονται, ἀπὸ μακρόθεν ἔστησαν καὶ ἔκραζον βλέποντες τὸν καπνὸν τῆς πυρώσεως αὐτῆς λέγοντες, Τίς ὁμοία τῇ πόλει τῇ μεγάλῃ; καὶ ἔβαλον χοῦν ἐπὶ τὰς κεφαλὰς αὐτῶν καὶ ἔκραζον κλαίοντες καὶ πενθοῦντες λέγοντες, Οὐαὶ οὐαὶ, ἡ πόλις ἡ μεγάλη, ἐν ἣ ἔπλούτησαν πάντες οἱ ἔχοντες τὰ πλοῖα ἐν τῇ θαλάσῃ ἐκ τῆς τιμιότητος αὐτῆς, ὅτι μιᾷ ὥρᾳ ἠρημώθη. Εὐφραίνου ἐπ' αὐτῇ οὐρανὲ καὶ οἱ ἄνιοι καὶ οἱ ἀπόστολοι καὶ οἱ προφῆται, ὅτι ἔκρινεν ὁ θεὸς τὸ κρίμα ὡμῶν ἐξ αὐτῆς. Καὶ ἦρεν εἰς ἄγγελος ἰσχυρὸς λίθον ὡς ὕλινον μέγαν καὶ ἔβαλεν εἰς τὴν θάλασσαν λέγων, Οὕτως ὀρμηματι βληθήσεται Βαβυλὼν ἡ μεγάλη πόλις καὶ οὐ μὴ κείρεσθαι ἔτι, καὶ φωνὴ κιθαρωδῶν καὶ μουσικῶν καὶ αὐλητῶν καὶ σαλπιστῶν οὐ μὴ ἀκουσθῆ ἐν σοὶ ἔτι, καὶ πᾶς τεχνίτης πάσης τέχνης οὐ μὴ εὐρεθῆ ἐν σοὶ ἔτι, καὶ φωνὴ μύλου οὐ ἀκουσθῆ ἐν σοὶ ἔτι, καὶ φῶς λύχνου οὐ μὴ φάνη ἐν σοὶ ἔτι, καὶ φωνὴ νυμφίου καὶ νύμφης οὐ μὴ ἀκουσθῆ ἐν σοὶ ἔτι. ὅτι οἱ ἔμποροὶ σου ἦσαν οἱ μεγιστάνες τῆς γῆς, ὅτι ἐν τῇ φαρμακείᾳ σου ἐπλανήθησαν πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, καὶ ἐν αὐτῇ αἷμα προφητῶν καὶ ἀγίων εὐρέθη καὶ πάντων τῶν ἐφαγμένων ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς.

After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority; and the earth was made bright with its splendour. He called out with a mighty voice, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! It has become a dwelling place of demons, a haunt of every foul spirit, a haunt of every foul bird, a haunt of every foul and hateful beast. For all the nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath of her fornication, and the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth have grown rich from the power of her luxury." Then I heard another voice from heaven saying, "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; for her sins are heaped high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities. Render to her as she herself has rendered, and repay her double for her deeds; mix a double draught for her in the cup mixed. As she glorified herself and lived luxuriously, so give her a measure of torment and grief. Since in her heart she says, 'I rule as queen; I am no widow, and I will never see grief,' therefore her plagues will come in a single day - pestilence and mourning and famine - and she will be burned with fire; for mighty is the Lord God who judges her." And the kings of the earth, who committed fornication and lived in luxury with her, will weep and wail over her when they see the smoke of her burning; they will stand far off, in fear of her torment, and say, "Alas, alas, the great city, Babylon, the mighty city! For in one hour your judgement has come." And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for her, since no one buys her cargo anymore, cargo of gold, silver, jewels, and pearls, fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet, all kinds of scented wood, all articles of ivory, all articles of costly wood, bronze, iron, and marble, cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, olive oil, choice flour and wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, slaves - and human lives. "The fruit for which your soul longed has gone from you, and all your dainties and your splendour are lost to you, never to be found again!" The merchants of these wares, who gained wealth from her, will stand far off, in fear of her torment, weeping and mourning aloud. "Alas, alas, the great city, clothed in fine linen, in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold, with jewels, and with pearls! For in one hour all this

wealth has been laid waste! And all shipmasters and seafarers, sailors and all whose trade is on the sea, stood far off and cried out as they saw the smoke of her burning. "What city was like the great city?" And they threw dust on their heads, and they wept and mourned, crying out, "Alas, alas, the great city, where all who had ships at sea grew rich by her wealth! For in one hour she had been laid waste." Rejoice over her, O heaven, you saints and apostles and prophets! For God has given judgement for you against her. Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, "With such vengeance Babylon the great city will be thrown down, and will be found no more; and the sound of the harpists and minstrels and of flutists and trumpeters will be heard in you no more; and an artisan of any trade will be found in you no more; and the sound of the millstone will be heard in you no more; and the light of a lamp will shine in you no more; and the voice of bridegroom and bride will be heard in you no more; for your merchants were the magnates of the earth, and all nations were deceived by your sorcery. And in you was found the blood of prophets and of saints, and of all who have been slaughtered on earth.

Revelation 18: 1-24

The accusations against the prostitute/Babylon found in 18:2b-3 condemns Babylon as a dwelling place of demons, foul spirits, foul birds, and foul and hateful beasts, in which all of the nations have become drunk with her fornication, and from whom the merchants have grown rich. This condemnation highlights John's main concern. The repetition of the word "fornication" indicates that the worship of Roman and imperial gods was intolerable to John. In addition to this charge, is a condemnation of the merchants and those who participated in the Roman imperial economy. The condemnation of participation in economic transactions is reinforced in 18:23c where the merchants are described as the magnates of the earth. Therefore, in this image, the sharing of the "sin" of worshipping Roman gods and the "sin" of participation in the Roman economy are associated.

### *Babylon: The Epitome of an Ungodly City*

It is significant that John chose the name "Babylon" as a synonym for the Roman empire that dominated in the first-century. "Babylon" was also used to describe Rome in various other texts including 4 Ezra 3-14, 2 Baruch, and the fifth book of the *Sibylline*

*Oracles*.<sup>200</sup> The reasons for the use of this synonym become apparent with knowledge of the offences that Babylon was accused of by the Hebrew prophets since, in John's description of Babylon/Rome, he equates Rome with many of these same offences. As Kuhn says:

The historic city and empire of Babylon were always depicted by the prophets as the ungodly power par excellence. Thus, even after the fall of Babylon, Babel, as they saw it, represented for later Jewish readers of scripture, and also for early Christians, the very epitome and type of an ungodly and domineering city.<sup>201</sup>

John mentions "Babylon" in several passages throughout Revelation starting in 14:8 and continuing in 16:19, 17:5, and throughout chapter eighteen. Revelation 14:8 describes Babylon/Rome's offences when it says:

Καὶ ἄλλος ἄγγελος δεύτερος ἠκολούθησεν λέγων, Ἔπεσεν ἔπεσεν Βαβυλῶν ἡ μεγάλη ἣ ἐκ τοῦ οἴνου τοῦ θυμοῦ τῆς πορνείας αὐτῆς πεπότικεν πάντα τὰ ἔθνη.

Then another angel, a second, followed, saying, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! She has made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication."

By giving the name of "Babylon" to Rome, John is displaying a rejection of that which the Hebrew prophets opposed in Babylon including its claim to universal domination.<sup>202</sup> Likewise, John is rejecting Rome's claim to self-deification in the imperial cult that stems from its claim to universal domination, and the worship of a variety of gods.

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<sup>200</sup>A. J. P. Garrow, *Revelation*, (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 75.

<sup>201</sup>Kuhn, *TWNT*, 1.515.

<sup>202</sup>Kraybill, *Imperial Cult and Commerce in John's Apocalypse*, p. 165.

*Babylon: A Symbol of Power and Commerce*

Although Babylon is well-known in the Hebrew scriptures for its syncretistic practices and polytheism, it is also known as an empire/city that had acquired great wealth from its liaisons with other nations. Jeremiah 51:13 speaks of Babylon as follows:

You who live by many waters, rich in treasures, your end has come, the thread of your life is cut.

The prostitute in Revelation 17:1b, and in extension Babylon/Rome, is described as seated upon “many waters.” Likewise, Jeremiah describes Babylon as an empire who lived by “many waters.” The term “many waters” is a reference to wealth gained by association with other places, the water representing the main mode of transporting goods throughout the empire. Thus, John’s allusion to the passage in Jeremiah is his way of describing Rome as an empire rich in wealth due to its international status upheld by trade on the sea.

*Commerce or Wealth: Which is John’s Main Concern?*

The discussion of wealth terminology and references to commerce is a contested one in the book of Revelation. One view is that wealth terminology displays John’s concern with the discrepancies between the wealth of some and poverty of most of the inhabitants of the Roman provinces. Fiorenza makes this comment:

Only the provincial elite and the Italian immigrants, however, especially the shipowners and merchants, were reaping the wealth of the empire’s prosperity in Asia Minor, whereas a heavy burden of taxation impoverished the great majority of the provincial population. Thus a relatively small minority of the Asian cities benefited

from the international commerce of the Roman Empire while the masses of the urban population mostly lived in dire poverty and slavery.<sup>203</sup>

Fiorenza's comment raises a good question. Is John concerned with commerce because he believes that commerce in itself is evil, or is he against the kind of commerce which causes the majority of the provincial population to become impoverished? While it is true that John appears to rail against the rich at some points in Revelation, it is not necessarily true that John is against wealth in general. It is more probable that he is against the activity of trade and participation in the Roman economy. Several of the verses in Revelation used to demonstrate that John is against "wealth" actually point to commerce and trade and not the general acquisition of wealth. Moreover, there are generally not any places in Revelation where the poor are shown partiality. For instance, in Revelation 6:12-17, the rich and powerful hid in caves when, during the sixth seal, there came a great earthquake:

Καὶ εἶδον ὅτε ἤνοιξεν τὴν σφραγίδα τὴν ἕκτην, καὶ σεισμός μέγας ἐγένετο καὶ ὁ ἥλιος ἐγένετο μέλας ὡς σάκκος τρίχινος καὶ ἡ σελήνη ὅλη ἐγένετο ὡς αἷμα καὶ οἱ ἀστέρες τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ἔπεσαν εἰς τὴν γῆν, ὡς συκὴ βαλλεῖ τοὺς ὀλύνθους αὐτῆς ὑπὸ ἀνέμου μεγάλου σειομένη, καὶ ὁ οὐρανὸς ἀπεχωρίσθη ὡς βιβλίον ἐλισσόμενον καὶ πᾶν ὄρος καὶ νῆσος ἐκ τῶν τόπων αὐτῶν ἐκινήθησαν. καὶ οἱ βασιλεῖς τῆς γῆς καὶ οἱ μεγιστάνες καὶ οἱ χιλιάρχοι καὶ οἱ πλούσιοι καὶ οἱ ἰσχυροὶ καὶ πᾶς δοῦλος καὶ ἐλεύθερος ἔκρυψαν ἑαυτοὺς εἰς τὰ σπήλαια καὶ εἰς τὰς πέτρας τῶν ὄρεων καὶ λέγουσιν τοῖς ὄρεσιν καὶ ταῖς πέτραις, Πέσετε ἐφ' ἐπὶ τοῦ θρόνου καὶ ἀπὸ τῆς ὀργῆς τοῦ ἀρνίου, ὅτι ἦλθεν ἡ ἡμέρα ἡ μεγάλη τῆς ὀργῆς αὐτῶν, καὶ τίς δύναται σταθῆναι.

When he opened the sixth seal, I looked, and there came a great earthquake; the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth as the fig tree drops its winter fruit when shaken by a gale. The sky vanished like a scroll rolling itself up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. The kings of the earth and the magnates and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone,

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<sup>203</sup>Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, p. 100.

slave and free, hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of the one seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand."

In this passage everyone, rich and powerful, poor and slave hid in the caves to escape the wrath of God. God has shown no partiality to the poor in his destruction of the world's evil forces. Another notable passage occurs in 13:16-17 where the "mark of the beast" is bestowed on the rich and powerful as well as the free, the poor and the slaves. Once again John shows little partiality to the poor in his description of God's divine justice. Passages such as these display that John is not overtly concerned with helping the poor against the rich, but is more so concerned with God's divine justice against all who deserve it.

It is more conceivable that John is resisting the act of participating in the Roman economy in general, and not so much against the hoarding and ostentatious display of wealth in the empire that impoverishes so many. Passages such as Revelation 18:9-19 clearly displays a dislike for the act of trade and commerce, with a particular emphasis on trade by sea. This passage, with its three laments by the kings, merchants, and those who gain a livelihood from trade on the sea, is a solid indication that John does have a concern with commerce specifically. While this may appear that John is concerned with both commerce and the accumulation of wealth, a close look at John's use of wealth language denies this assertion. John *uses wealth terminology* such as "gold" and "jewels," not only to describe Babylon, but also *to describe the wealth of heaven and the New Jerusalem*. For instance, in 17:4 the prostitute is described in extravagant terms that brings to mind the wealthy women of Rome and the manner in which they adorned themselves with purple cloth and jewels.

Although John often uses terms of extravagance to describe the wealth of Babylon and the prostitute, he also uses such terms to describe Jesus, the bride, and anything in the heavenly kingdom. It is more likely that John is setting up a comparison between the worldly and heavenly empires in an effort to show that the heavenly empire is greater, and more powerful. As Robert Royalty suggests, the “replication of wealth imagery in both descriptions of heaven and Babylon highlights the implied author’s problem - how to distinguish the ‘good wealth’ of God from the ‘bad wealth’ of Babylon/Rome - and the rhetorical solution, the association of Babylon with commerce.”<sup>204</sup> The wealth of Babylon is derived from the act of participating in the imperial economy throughout the empire, whereas the wealth of heaven is an inherited wealth that comes from God. Inherited wealth was a respectable form of income in the Roman empire, whereas those who gained their wealth through trade could rarely gain a higher social status. John uses these stereotypes in his portrayal of wealth in Revelation. Babylon is founded on wealth gained by trade and therefore is inferior to the wealth of heaven which has not been tainted by trade and is thus inherited wealth for those who conquer.<sup>205</sup> That is why there is an absence of commerce in the visions of the New Jerusalem, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

### ***The Laments of 18:9-19***

The descriptions of the prostitute/Babylon imagery is most explicit in bringing together the act of worshipping the imperial gods of Rome and participation in the Roman

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<sup>204</sup>Royalty, *The Streets of Heaven*, p. 206.

<sup>205</sup>Royalty, *The Streets of Heaven*, p.21-23, 244-246.

economy in the laments found in 18:9-19. The first lament of 18:9-10 concerns the kings. The description of the kings of the earth describe the “sins” of the kings as the acts of committing fornication and living in luxury with Rome, and therefore they mourn the passing of the great city. The kings are condemned for sharing in the corrupt rule of Rome, thus committing fornication and worshipping other gods. They are also condemned for living in luxury, which could be a reference to John’s negative stance on commercial gain. This is probable given the concentration on commerce in subsequent laments.

The second lament is the longest. In this lament the merchants mourn the passing of Rome because no one will buy their cargo anymore. This is a direct reference to the removal of commerce from the empire as a part of God’s divine judgement of Babylon/Rome. The first-century was a time of unprecedented growth in trade, and thus prosperity for some in the merchant class. The cargo lists, found in this lament, describe all of the luxury items that were of any importance to Rome in this era. But the list also describes those items that were basic necessities needed to feed and maintain the great empire, and more specifically, the city of Rome.<sup>206</sup> Particular attention must be placed on the lament against the merchants for two reasons. First, it is the longest of the three laments and placed in the centre. This shows that a notable importance should be placed on it.

More importantly however, as Rossing suggests, the book of Revelation is placed firmly in the biblical tradition of the Hebrew Bible. John makes a specific effort to derive his images from the traditional Jewish texts although he does piece them together to suit his

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<sup>206</sup>Pilgrim, *Uneasy Neighbors*, p.158-159.

own means. Most of Revelation's economic critique comes from accounts of the judgement of cities, especially Tyre and Babylon, in the Hebrew prophets. The contents of Revelation 18 is almost entirely modelled on biblical passages, especially Jeremiah 50-51 and Isaiah 47. These passages describe siege oracles and city laments against Babylon. Because Revelation 18 is steeped in biblical tradition, it is most illuminating when John departs from his biblical sources and adds his own material.<sup>207</sup> The most notable differences between the biblical accounts that John uses for his sources and his own account in Revelation 18 is that the biblical accounts do not have a critique of merchants, they have only the critique of princes and seafarers. John, however, adds an anti-merchant critique demonstrating that the merchants are of prime concern to him, and shows the extent to which John abhors a commercial activity that detracts from the worship of God.<sup>208</sup> This departure indicates the importance of the merchants' critique to John and demonstrates that the economic critique of the Roman economy, as practised by the merchants, is very important to the author's own agenda.<sup>209</sup> This is not so hard to believe when considering the great importance of sea trade in the first-century. As Aristides comments,

The arrival and departures of the ships never stop, so that one would express admiration not only for the harbour, but even for the sea. Hesiod said about the limits of the Ocean that it is a place where everything has been channeled into one beginning and end. So everything comes together here, trade, seafaring, farming, the scourings of the mines, all the crafts that exist or have existed, all that is produced or grown. Whatever one does not see here, is not a thing which has existed or exists, so

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<sup>207</sup>Rossing, *The Choice Between Two Cities*, p. 100.

<sup>208</sup>Rossing, *The Choice Between Two Cities*, p. 114.

<sup>209</sup>Rossing, *The Choice Between Two Cities*, p.114.

that it is not easy to decide which had the greater superiority, the city in regard to the present day cities, or the empire in regard to the empires which have gone before.<sup>210</sup>

The author's agenda is to combat "idolatry" and to reiterate the urgency of worshipping God always and forever to the utmost of one's abilities.

The third lament is obviously a connection to trade; it is the lament by the seafarers and shipmasters, and anyone who gains a livelihood from the sea. They lament over the loss of their livelihoods once Rome is destroyed, and the loss of the Roman economy which was possible through travel on the sea which was the main source of commerce and shipment of goods in the Roman empire - anyone who owned a ship in those days could be wealthy.

The laments in 18:9-19 are related to the worship of other gods directly through the charge levelled against the kings of committing "fornication" with Rome. But more importantly, the laments show a condemnation of all those who gained their wealth through participation in the economy within the Roman empire by providing primarily luxury items to the city Rome. Thus the action of commerce and trading is condemned.

### **Tyre in the Hebrew Scriptures**

#### *Tyre: The Economic Giant of the Hebrew Scriptures*

Commerce and trade are condemned by John through his use of imagery from the Hebrew scriptures. There are numerous descriptions of the ancient city of Tyre throughout the Hebrew prophets that describe, most often, Tyre's notoriety for its participation in commerce. Although John does not specifically apply the name of Tyre to Rome, he does

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<sup>210</sup>Aelius Aristides, *Orationes*, 26:13

use many allusions from in the Hebrew scriptures about Tyre to compose his material concerning Babylon/Rome in Revelation. This application of the Tyre material to Babylon/Rome was an original idea, never before done.<sup>211</sup> The main objective behind the Tyre material in the Hebrew scriptures was to demonstrate how the accumulation of Tyre's wealth led to pride and self-deification which, in turn, led to forgetting God. Thus, wealth made through commercial activity led Tyre to worship a variety of gods and itself.

Although Babylon/Rome is not given the name of "Tyre" there are many similarities between the material concerning Tyre in the Hebrew scriptures and the description of Babylon/Rome in Revelation, especially with the material found in the description of Tyre in Ezekiel. For example, there are laments found in both passages. The laments found in the description of the fall of Babylon/Rome in chapter eighteen of Revelation are taken from the description of the fall of Tyre in Ezekiel 27:29b-33. Ezekiel 27:29b-33 is as follows:

The mariners and all the pilots of the sea stand on the shore and wail aloud over you, and cry bitterly. They throw dust on their heads and wallow in ashes; they make themselves bald for you, and put on sackcloth, and they weep over you in bitterness of soul, with bitter mourning. In their wailing they raise a lamentation for you, and lament over you: "Who was ever destroyed like Tyre in the midst of the sea? When your wares came from the seas, you satisfied many peoples; with your abundant wealth and merchandise you enriched the kings of the earth.

Likewise, the cargo lists in both Revelation and Ezekiel are similar. Tyre's goods are described in Ezekiel 27:12-24:

...silver, iron, tin...human beings and vessels of bronze...horses, war horses, and mules...ivory tusks and ebony...turquoise, purple, embroidered work, fine linen, coral, and rubies...wheat...millet, honey, oil, and balm...wine...white wool...wrought iron,

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<sup>211</sup>Rossing, *The Choice Between Two Cities*, p. 130.

cassia, and sweet cane...saddlecloths...lambs, rams, and goats...the best of all kinds of spices, and all precious stones, and gold...choice garments, in clothes of blue and embroidered work, and in carpets of colored material, bound with cords and made secure...

The cargo lists in Revelation and in Ezekiel do not consist of the exact same items, but there are many commonalities. Both lists include gold, silver, iron, bronze, human beings, horses, ivory, purple, fine linen, jewels, wheat, oil, wine, and spices. Besides these items, the cargo lists include items specific to each city and generation. For example, pearls, marble, silk, incense and fine grade flour were all specifically important to Rome.<sup>212</sup> The Ezekiel and Revelation passages are also linked through similar expressions found in Revelation 18:18 (“What city was like the great city?”) and Ezekiel 27:32 (“Who was ever destroyed like Tyre?”). Furthermore, both Revelation 18:19 and Ezekiel 27:30 use the statements “They threw (throw) dust on their heads.” Likewise, those who mourn over both Tyre and Babylon/Rome had a political and economic dependence on these cities by depending on the revenue generated from the need these cities had for luxury.<sup>213</sup>

Through John’s association of Babylon/Rome with Tyre one of John’s concerns is made apparent. Tyre was a city built and maintained by trade and commercial activity with other nations. It was aligned with numerous countries and cities (Tarshish, Javan, Tubal, Meshech, Beth-togarmah, Rhode, Edom, Judah, Israel, Minnith, Damascus, Helbon, Vedan, Javan, Dedan, Arabia, Sheba, Raamah, Haran, Canneh, Eden, Asshur Chilmad) in its

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<sup>212</sup>Kraybill, *Imperial Cult and Commerce in John’s Apocalypse*, p. 157.

<sup>213</sup>Murphy, *Fallen is Babylon*, p. 374-375.

business transactions. Likewise, Rome associated with its provinces and many other countries for its business transactions. Rome, like Tyre, existed and maintained itself through trade. This was the realization that John wished to portray to its audience.

***Tyre: Association with Other Cities Leads to Syncretistic Practices and Self-Deification***

John's association of Babylon/Rome with Tyre goes beyond merely demonstrating Rome's dependence on its economy. It is the reason that Tyre was brought to justice that is illuminating to John's reasons for equating Rome and Tyre. Tyre's misdoings are discussed in Ezekiel 28:2-9:

Mortal, say to the prince of Tyre, Thus says the Lord God: Because your heart is proud and you have said, "I am a god; I sit in the seat of the gods, in the heart of the seas," yet you are but a mortal, and no god, though you compare your mind with the mind of a god. You are indeed wiser than Daniel; no secret is hidden from you; by your wisdom and your understanding you have amassed wealth for yourself, and have gathered gold and silver into your treasuries. By your great wisdom in trade you have increased your wealth, and your heart has become proud in its wealth. Therefore thus says the Lord God: Because you compare your mind with the mind of a god, therefore, I will bring strangers against you, the most terrible of the nations; they shall draw their swords against the beauty of your wisdom and defile your splendour. They shall thrust you down to the Pit, and you shall die a violent death in the heart of the seas. Will you still say, "I am a god," in the presence of those who kill you, though you are but a mortal, and no god, in the hands of those who wound you?

The accusations brought against Tyre are that of self-deification. Tyre refers to itself as a god and is accused of believing it has the mind of a god. Tyre's self-assurance comes from the great wealth it had amassed through its empire built on trade. The power of Tyre led to pride which led to self-deification. The economic success of Tyre, along with its pride, brought

Tyre to judgement.<sup>214</sup>

John's association of Tyre with Babylon/Rome through his use of material from the Hebrew prophets descriptions of the fall of Tyre links Tyre to Rome. Tyre profited from its empire built on trade. This led to wealth and eventually self-deification. Likewise Rome, a city on "many waters" and an international city, maintains its empire and luxury through its network of trading activities, leading to the self-glorification of Rome. As Revelation 18:7 says, "As she [Rome] glorified (ἐδοξάσεν) herself and lived luxuriously." Like Tyre, Rome's luxury and wealth was gained from trade and led to Rome's pride and thus self-deification. In John's Christian opinion, this was "idolatry" and thus wrong. John is saying that commerce leads to wealth, which eventually leads to pride and self-deification.

### Conclusion

John used imagery to describe how he perceived the world in which he lived from his Christian perspective. This world, as seen in the images of the beasts, the prostitute and the city of Babylon, was wrought with syncretistic values, Roman gods, and the imperial cult. All of these institutions and beliefs were well-entrenched in the psyche of the ancient mind and culture and thus were practically inescapable unless one wanted to risk social ostracism. But the problem, as John saw it, was much graver. Not only were Christians threatened socially, they were also threatened economically. In order to participate in economic transactions, even simply the buying and selling of basic necessities, one was confronted with "idol" worship. A simple trip to the meat market could produce a meal previously sacrificed

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<sup>214</sup>Kraybill, *Imperial Cult and Commerce in John's Apocalypse*, p. 158.

to a god in a temple. This constant economic pressure, and the willingness of Christians to participate in the Roman economy, is John's perceived problem. He sees participation in the Roman economy as being in conflict with Christian values such as the refusal to worship any Roman or imperial god. To make this conflict of loyalties apparent to the readers of Revelation, he incorporates in his imagery a constant and recurring connection between the worship of Roman and imperial gods, which he condemns, and participation in the Roman imperial economy. By making this conflict in Christian values known to the readers through striking and evocative imagery, he strives to change their hearts and thus change their actions.

The extensive use of allusions from the Hebrew scriptures throughout Revelation solidify the author's point of view. He is describing the nature of the Roman empire using imagery gathered from Jewish texts. His allusions are only noticeable to those who would have had sufficient knowledge of the Hebrew scriptures, but this does not stifle his deliberative analysis. John's method, however, consists of far more than a mere insertion of one source into another. His connection of Rome to the empire of "Babylon" through a synonymous name links Rome to both the "idolatry" of the ancient city of Babylon, and to the wealth and pride associated with this domineering city. His link between Rome and Tyre is more subtle and occurs through a series of very similar passages and imagery. Through the use of such imagery John links Rome not only to Tyre's notoriety, but also to the reasons for God's judgement against Tyre's self-glorification that came from its wealth gained from trade and subsequent pride. And the description of Rome as a prostitute links Rome to the two interpretations of a prostitute in the Hebrew scriptures. The prostitute was the city of

Tyre and its economic endeavours, and the prostitute was the people of God when they committed "idolatry" by worshipping other gods. Through his use of allusions to the Hebrew scriptures, John continually links the worship of Roman gods to participation in the Roman economy, the root that led to Rome's self-deification and thus to "idolatry."

## **Chapter Four: The New Jerusalem: “For the First Things Have Passed Away”**

### **The New Jerusalem**

Καὶ εἶδον οὐρανὸν καινὸν καὶ γῆν καινὴν. ὁ γὰρ πρῶτος οὐρανὸς καὶ ἡ πρώτη γῆ ἀπῆλθαν καὶ ἡ θάλασσα οὐκ ἔστιν ἔτι. καὶ τὴν πόλιν τὴν ἁγίαν Ἱερουσαλὴμ καινὴν εἶδον καταβαίνουσαν ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ἀπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ ἡτοιμασμένην ὡς νύμφην κεκοσμημένην τῷ ἀνδρὶ αὐτῆς, καὶ ἤκουσα φωνῆς μεγάλης ἐκ τοῦ θρόνου λεγουσῆς, Ἴδου ἡ σκηνὴ τοῦ θεοῦ μετὰ τῶν ἀνθρώπων, καὶ σκηνώσει μετ' αὐτῶν, καὶ αὐτοὶ λαοὶ αὐτοῦ ἔσονται, καὶ αὐτὸς ὁ θεὸς μετ' αὐτῶν ἔσται [αὐτῶν θεός], καὶ ἐξαλείψει πᾶν δάκρυον ἐκ τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν αὐτῶν, καὶ ὁ θάνατος οὐκ ἔσται ἔτι οὔτε πένθος οὔτε κραυγὴ οὔτε πόνος οὐκ ἔσται ἔτι, [ὅτι] τὰ πρῶτα ἀπῆλθαν. Καὶ εἶπεν ὁ καθήμενος ἐπὶ τῷ θρόνῳ, Ἴδου καινὰ ποιῶ πάντα, καὶ λέγει, Γράψον, ὅτι οὗτοι οἱ λόγοι πιστοὶ καὶ ἀληθινοὶ εἰσιν, καὶ εἰπὲν μοι, Γέγοναν. ἐγὼ [εἶμι] τὸ Ἄλφα καὶ τὸ Ὠμέγα ἡ ἀρχὴ καὶ τὸ τέλος. ἐγὼ τῷ διψῶντι δώσω ἐκ τῆς πηγῆς τοῦ ὕδατος τῆς ζωῆς δωρεάν. ὁ νικῶν κληρονομήσει ταῦτα καὶ ἔσομαι αὐτῷ θεὸς καὶ αὐτὸς ἔσται μοι υἱός. τοῖς δὲ δειλοῖς καὶ ἀπίστοις καὶ ἐβδελυγμένοις καὶ φονεῦσιν καὶ πόρνοις καὶ φαρμάκοις καὶ εἰδωλολάτραις καὶ πᾶσιν τοῖς ψευδέσιν τὸ μέρος αὐτῶν ἐν τῇ λίμνῃ τῇ καιομένῃ πυρὶ καὶ θείῳ, ὃ ἔστιν ὁ θάνατος ὁ δεύτερος... καὶ περιπατήσουσιν τὰ ἔθνη διὰ τοῦ φωτὸς αὐτῆς, καὶ οἱ βασιλεῖς τῆς γῆς φέρουσιν τὴν δόξαν αὐτῶν εἰς αὐτήν, καὶ οἱ πυλῶνες αὐτῆς οὐ μὴ κλεισθῶσιν ἡμέρας, νύξ γὰρ οὐκ ἔσται ἐκεῖ, καὶ οἴσουσιν τὴν δόξαν καὶ τὴν τιμὴν τῶν ἐθνῶν εἰς αὐτήν. καὶ οὐ μὴ εἰσέλθῃ εἰς αὐτήν πᾶν κοινὸν καὶ [ὁ] ποιῶν βδέλυγμα καὶ ψεῦδος εἰ μὴ οἱ γεγραμμένοι ἐν τῷ βιβλίῳ τῆς ζωῆς τοῦ ἀρνίου. Καὶ ἔδειξέν μοι ποταμὸν ὕδατος ζωῆς λαμπρὸν ὡς κρύσταλλον, ἐκπορευόμενον ἐκ τοῦ θρόνου τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἀρνίου ἐν μέσῳ τῆς πλατείας αὐτῆς καὶ τοῦ ποταμοῦ ἐντεῦθεν καὶ ἐκεῖθεν ξύλον ζωῆς ποιοῦν καρποὺς δώδεκα, κατὰ μῆνα ἕκαστον ἀποδίδουν τὸν καρπὸν αὐτοῦ, καὶ τὰ φύλλα τοῦ ξύλου εἰς θεραπείαν τῶν ἐθνῶν. καὶ πᾶν κατάθεμα οὐκ ἔσται ἔτι. καὶ ὁ θρόνος τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἀρνίου ἐν αὐτῇ ἔσται, καὶ οἱ δούλοι αὐτοῦ λατρεύσουσιν αὐτῷ καὶ ὄψονται τὸ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ, καὶ τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ τῶν μετώπων αὐτῶν.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

"See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more, for the first things have passed away." And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." And he said, "write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children. But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death."... the nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day - and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and the honour of the nations. But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life. Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him, they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.

Revelation 21:1-8, 24-27; 22:1-4

The previous chapters investigated the letters to the seven churches, and the descriptions of the beasts, prostitute, Babylon and Tyre, in order to discern John's interpretation of the historical circumstances of his time. In contrast to these passages, the twenty-first chapter of Revelation does not offer an account of the historical circumstances of the first-century C.E. It does, however, portray a perfect setting in which all the "evil" that went before in the earthly kingdoms has passed away. This perfect setting is John's account of the heavenly kingdom of God which comes down from heaven to earth as a replacement of the corrupt earthly kingdom of Rome. The description of this new creation offers the reader an opportunity to decipher the differences between it and the Roman empire. Through these differences, John is able to advise his audience of his understanding of the proper Christian beliefs and actions. The description of the New Jerusalem acts as an ultimatum which informs the readers as to who will enter the New Jerusalem and who will

not. The description also informs the readers of their own duty as Christians, and of the necessary beliefs and actions required for entry into the New Jerusalem. The description of the New Jerusalem brings to the forefront the differences between the earthly kingdom of Rome and the heavenly kingdom, and it is through these differences, and the omissions of several things in the New Jerusalem that previously existed, that John's argument becomes apparent. Therefore, a comparison of the New Jerusalem with the evidence of historical circumstances throughout the rest of the book of Revelation, along with a discussion of the general omissions of the harmful aspects of the Roman empire, effectively locates John's viewpoint from among the imagery and esoteric language present in Revelation.

### **The New Jerusalem and the Absence of Commerce**

The New Jerusalem is presented as the embodiment of all that is good and the rejection of all that is evil. As God says, "I am making all things new" (21:4b). The absence of the previous "evil" elements that John identified in the Roman empire informs the reader of the ideas, beliefs and actions that John is against. It is noteworthy that at the beginning of the discussion about the New Jerusalem, it says "for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and *the sea was no more*" (ἡ θάλασσα οὐκ ἔστιν ἔτι) (21:1b). This statement concerning the sea appears at the beginning of the New Jerusalem passage and thus is quite significant, for the sea is the first element from the previous earth that is identified as being absent in the new world. Without the presence of a sea, the shipping industry mourned over by the kings, merchants and sailors, and which caused many to receive the "mark" of the beast, is no more. The shipping economy, which was shown particular

attention in chapter eighteen is eliminated. The absence of the sea signifies the end of maritime economics.<sup>215</sup> Furthermore, reference is also made to the merchants and sailors in 21:4 when it says “mourning and crying and pain will be no more.” This refers to the mourning, crying and pain of the merchants, sailors, and kings in chapter eighteen. This mourning and crying will be wiped away in the New Jerusalem because the shipping industry, which had caused them to mourn in previous chapters, will be eliminated.

It is noteworthy that in the New Jerusalem there is no need for “buying and selling”. All of life’s essentials such as water (21:6), and food (22:2) are given freely by God as a gift to those who conquer in this life.<sup>216</sup> This point is stressed in 22:4 where there is a description of the servant of God as having “his [God’s] name...on their foreheads.” The “mark,” as previously discussed, is in contrast to the “seal of the redeemed” and both are mutually exclusive. Those who have the mark are those who “buy and sell,” and those who have the seal do not buy and sell. Therefore, the reference in 22:4 to the name written on the foreheads of God’s followers refers to chapters 13-14 of Revelation and acts as a reminder that those who have the seal of God are those who do not buy and sell. Thus, those in the New Jerusalem, those with the name of God on their foreheads, are those who refused to buy and sell with the beast (Rome), which indicates that there is an absence of commercial activity in the New Jerusalem.

Another reference to the absence of the Roman economy in the New Jerusalem is

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<sup>215</sup>Rossing, *The Choice Between Two Cities*, p. 145-146.

<sup>216</sup>Rossing, *The Choice Between Two Cities*, p. 144.

made through the allusion to the kings and the nations in 21:24-27. In this passage the nations come to God. Unlike the kings of 18:9-10 who lived with Babylon in its fornication and luxury, the nations at the time of the New Jerusalem bring only homage to God, not their wealth.<sup>217</sup> The goods and services that the kings previously brought to Babylon/Rome are not accepted in the New Jerusalem. For nothing unclean, such as wealth gained by the kings through fornication with Rome, is permitted to enter the city.

The New Jerusalem represents the absence of all of the things that previously went before in the earthly kingdoms, especially Babylon/Rome. In particular, the Roman economy and commerce is depicted as eliminated from Jerusalem through the absence of the sea, through the absence of the mourning and crying of the merchants and sailors, and through the absence of goods, services and wealth from the kings. The concentration of statements about the absence of the Roman economy in the New Jerusalem points to an area of concern for John. Participation in the commercial activity of the Rome stands in contrast to participating in the Christian beliefs and actions authorized by John. The New Jerusalem is devoted to the worship of God, not to the array of other gods that exist in the Roman empire. Thus, anything that leads to the worship of Roman gods necessarily must be absent in the New Jerusalem. Participation in the Roman imperial economy leads to the worship of Roman and imperial gods and so is eliminated in the New Jerusalem.

### **The New Jerusalem and the Letters to the Churches: Promises Fulfilled**

John's portrayal of the New Jerusalem acts as a contrasting set of beliefs and practices

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<sup>217</sup>Murphy, *Fallen is Babylon*, p. 425.

to the issues raised in the letters to the seven churches. The contrast between what is wrong in the churches and what is right in the New Jerusalem indicates to the members of the seven churches what they must change in order to be eligible to enter the New Jerusalem. These two selections are meant to be contrasting due to the similarities of the issues raised in both, and specifically, by the common language they share. The first language commonality occurs in the promise to those who will conquer (ὁ νικῶν). Each of the letters to the seven churches end with the promise to those who conquer (2:7,11,17,28; 3:5,12,21). This same verb is then used in the passage concerning the New Jerusalem. The New Jerusalem is the reward for those who heeded John's warnings in the letters and conquered. The verb "to conquer" is used in chapter twenty-one in statements such as 21:7, "Those who conquer will inherit these things..."

When John speaks of those who "conquer" he is speaking specifically of those people who resisted certain beliefs and actions which he deemed unchristian or contrary to the worship of God. This leads to the second literary link between the letters and the New Jerusalem which occurs in the vice list of 21:7-8 where it is said that the cowardly, faithless, polluted, murderers, fornicators, sorcerers, idolaters, and liars will not inherit the New Jerusalem but instead will die in the second death. These "vices" are similar to many of the vices which John warns his readers about in the letters. For example "the fornicators" (πορνοί, πορνεία, πορνεύω) occurs in the letters to Pergamum (2:14) and Thyatira (2:20) in which John attacks those opponents (the followers of the teachings of Balaam, Jezebel, and the Nicolaitans) for practising fornication (idolatry). Another common

charge in the letters and in the vice list is against the “idolaters” who eat food sacrificed to idols (εἰδωλόθουτα) (2:14, 2:20). John also commends the people of the church in Ephesus (2:2) for finding certain “apostles” to be false, thus finding out who are “liars”(οἱ ψευδεῖς). The “vice” list contains an account of the people who will not inherit the New Jerusalem. Thus, those accused of such vices in the letters to the churches must repent of their ways. John reinforces the necessity for the people to repent and change their ways by repeating the “vice” list a second time in 22:14-15.<sup>218</sup>

The letters to the churches and the New Jerusalem texts are also linked through the fulfilled promises to the churches which take place for those who conquer and enter the New Jerusalem. This is seen in the letter to the Ephesians whereby those who conquer will be given “permission to eat from the tree of life (2:7b).” A promise fulfilled in 22:2 with the existence of the “tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month.” (22:2b). Similarly, the church in Philadelphia was promised the arrival of the New Jerusalem. “If you conquer, I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God; you will never go out of it. I will write on you the name of my God, and the name the city of my God, the New Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven” (3:12). Chapter 28 is devoted to the description of the coming of the New Jerusalem.<sup>219</sup>

Likewise, other general promises made to the churches are fulfilled in the description of the New Jerusalem. Such promises include the wearing of the crown of life to the people

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<sup>218</sup>Royalty, *The Streets of Heaven*, p. 224.

<sup>219</sup>Court, *Myth and History in the Book of Revelation*, p. 156.

of Smyrna (2:10), the promise to wear white robes to the people of Sardis (3:5), the promise to banquet (3:30) and the promise to sit on the throne with God and Jesus (3:20-21) made to the people of Laodicea, and the promise to rule over nations to Thyatira (2:26-28), are all fulfilled for those who conquer and enter the New Jerusalem.<sup>220</sup>

The speech by God in 21:5-8, and especially the vice list, comprise the core of John's message. Entry into the New Jerusalem is the ultimate goal for Christians. To be denied entry into the New Jerusalem is to be denied entering life with God. Therefore, all those who fit the description of those in the vice list should change their ways if they prefer to enter the New Jerusalem. Those who follow Jezebel, the Nicolaitans, or the teachings of Balaam who are labelled "fornicators" and "idolaters" must repent of their ways. Thus, resisting the Romans, John's opponents, and all that they stand for, is at the heart of the churches' relationship with God.<sup>221</sup>

The links between the New Jerusalem and the seven churches of Asia focus primarily around the verb "to conquer" and the specific beliefs and actions necessary to conquer. This involves a list of promises and warnings that are fulfilled in the New Jerusalem according to the actions and beliefs of the people in their daily struggles with the pressures of living in the Roman empire. The pressure to practice fornication and to eat food sacrificed to Roman gods are all brought about through the pressure of living in a society that encourages such behaviour. Those who "conquer" must resist the culture in which they live which is typified

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<sup>220</sup>Rossing, *The Choice Between Two Cities*, p. 158.

<sup>221</sup>Royalty, *The Streets of Heaven*, p. 220.

in Revelation in the images of the beasts, the prostitute and the city of Babylon/Rome. The presence of a contrast between the letters to the churches and the New Jerusalem identifies the problem areas in the churches at that time, specifically giving worship to other gods what God alone merits (idolatry). The contrast between the images representing Rome (beasts, prostitute, Babylon) and the New Jerusalem identifies the underlining causes of these problems, specifically participation in commerce. The New Jerusalem is a place where the absence of all the “evils” of the Roman empire, including the worship of Roman gods, the imperial cult, and the Roman imperial economy, is absent.

### **The New Jerusalem/Bride and the Prostitute**

The prostitute is connected to the New Jerusalem through common vocabulary and contrasting imagery. The prostitute is the representative of all that was corrupt in Rome, including the worship of Roman gods and the Roman economy. The New Jerusalem represents the absence of all that was evil as represented in the image of the prostitute, and all that was an abomination (idolatry and giving to others what God alone merits). The purpose of the image of the prostitute, as described earlier, was used to create an image of immorality and to elaborate on the harmful affects of commerce.

The image of the prostitute, as the representative of all that was immoral in Rome, creates the perception of an ethical stereotype. This perception of the prostitute as the ethical stereotype is reinforced when compared and contrasted with the bride of the New Jerusalem. As previously noted, Babylon is described as a prostitute in such a way that the corrupting influence of the prostitute is the corrupting influence of Babylon/Rome. In a similar

metonymic way, the New Jerusalem is described as a bride. The image of a bride invokes a different type of ethical standard for she is pure, without defilement and faithful. The purpose of these two contrasting presentations of women is to put forth an ethical dilemma in which the readers of Revelation are encouraged to make an ethical choice between being unfaithful (the prostitute) or faithful (the bride) to God.<sup>222</sup> The contrast of feminine figures was a common way of setting up ethical dilemmas in ancient times where patriarchal cultures and world views dominated.<sup>223</sup>

Each female figure creates a contrast between good and pure, faithful and unfaithful, and commerce and its absence. A comparison of the characteristics of each female figure brings to light these differences. James L. Resseguie summarizes the comparison between the characteristics of the bride and the prostitute as follows:<sup>224</sup>

<i>Bride</i>	<i>Prostitute</i>
1. Dressed in white fine linen, bright and pure (19:8)	1. Dressed in purple and scarlet (17:4)
2. Sits on high mountain (21:10)	2. Sits on beast = seven mountains (17:3, 9)
3. Dwelling in new heaven/earth (21:2, 10)	3. Dwelling in desert (17:3)
4. River of the water of Life (22:1)	4. Cup of abominations (17:4)
5. Everything unclean banned (21:27)	5. Haunt of every unclean thing (18:2)
6. Adornment eternal	6. Adornment ephemeral (17:4; 18:16, 17)

The bride stands for all that is pure and complete. Her attire of white fine linen shows her

<sup>222</sup>Rossing, *The Choice Between Two Cities*, p. 14.

<sup>223</sup>Murphy, *Fallen is Babylon*, p. 417. See n.175 above.

<sup>224</sup>Resseguie, *Revelation Unsealed*, p. 142.

connection to God and to heaven that is itself clothed in white (i.e. 1:14, 3:5, 4:4, etc.).<sup>225</sup> The prostitute, in contrast, clothes herself in the colours of purple and scarlet that symbolized Rome's claim to sovereignty and decadence, a threat to the sovereignty of God. The bride sits atop the high mountain, but the prostitute sits on the seven mountains that is Rome. To this comparison should also be added that the prostitute sits atop the beast. This beast is the beast from the land, the one whose purpose it is to enforce the worship of the beast from the sea. The prostitute (the city Rome) sitting atop the beast means that she is upheld by the beast (the religious authorities of the provinces who enforce the imperial cult). Thus, she (Rome) is upheld by the tactics of the beast which, as identified in the thirteenth chapter of Revelation, include miracles, and the economic ultimatum of the "mark." The prostitute is upheld by economic transactions within the Roman empire which leads to the worship of Roman and imperial gods.

The prostitute also entices the people to drink from her cup of abominations whereas those of the New Jerusalem/bride are allowed to drink freely from the river of the water of life (22:1). The prostitute encourages uncleanness and is a haunt of every unclean thing. On the other hand, nothing is allowed to enter the New Jerusalem/bride unless it is clean.

Everything that the bride symbolizes is heavenly and points to the worship of God, and everything that the prostitute symbolizes is unclean and points to the worship of Rome and its claim to sovereignty which is blasphemous and encourages the worship of a variety

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<sup>225</sup>His [the Lamb] head and his hair was white as white wool, white as snow" (1:14), "If you conquer, you will be clothed like them in white robes" (3:5), "And seated on the thrones are twenty-four elders, dressed in white robes" (4:4).

of gods. Furthermore, the prostitute is seated on the beast and on “many waters.” The “many waters” classifies the prostitute as an international city, and her place atop the beast links her to the economic ultimatum of the “mark” of the beast. The prostitute is an international city upheld by trade that strongly encourages buying and selling as a means of showing support and worshipping Rome. The bride represents the opposite of this. The absence of the sea (21:1) in the New Jerusalem/bride characterizes her as a city *without trade*, without the need to buy and sell, thus the absence of the ultimatum of the “mark” of the beast. Nothing unclean from the beast (Rome) enters the New Jerusalem.

### **The New Jerusalem and Babylon (Rome)**

The bride is intimately connected to the New Jerusalem in a metonymic relationship. So too are the prostitute and Babylon/Rome. Therefore, Babylon and the New Jerusalem, as the prostitute and the bride, are compared and contrasted in a way that sets up an ethical dilemma and encourages the reader to formulate a choice. The terminology describing the New Jerusalem and Babylon is used in contrasting ways. The New Jerusalem is defined as not having certain things that existed in Babylon. For instance, in the laments of 18:9-19 several classes of people “mourn” over the destruction of the city Rome. The kings “will weep and wail” (κλαύσουσιν και κόψονταί)(18:9), the merchants “weep and mourned” (κλαίουσιν και πενθούσιν)(18:11), the merchants stand far off “weeping and mourning” (κλαίοντες και πενθούντες)(18:15), and in 18:19 they “wept and mourned.” There is a repeated use of the verbs “to weep” and “to mourn.” Whereas Babylon is classified as a place where people weep and mourn, the New Jerusalem is specifically stated as the place

where there is an absence of tears:

καὶ ἐξαλείψει πᾶν δάκρυον ἐκ τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν αὐτῶν, καὶ ὁ θάνατος οὐκ ἔσται ἔτι οὔτε πένθος οὔτε κραυγὴ οὔτε πόνος οὐκ ἔσται ἔτι.

He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more. (Revelation 21:4a)

The absence of mourning and weeping and related items, coupled with the statement in 21:5, “See, I am making all things new,” demonstrates that in the New Jerusalem all will be changed and nothing of the worldly kingdom will remain.

Paul B. Duff says that “any suggestion that the author did not intend the reader to consider the passages [concerning the New Jerusalem and the fall of Babylon] in conjunction would be difficult to accept.”<sup>226</sup> His reasons for this are the similarities between the passages of Babylon and the New Jerusalem. For instance, the introduction to both sections are quite similar: “Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls... came and said to me, ‘Come, I will show you....’ so he carried me...in the spirit”(17:1,3; 21:9-10). The introductions are even more obvious in the Greek text when the specific references to the prostitute and the bride are removed:<sup>227</sup>

Και ἦλθεν εἰς ἐκ τῶν ἑπτὰ ἀγγέλων τῶν ἐχόντων τὰς ἑπτὰ φιάλας καὶ ἐλάλησεν μετ’ ἐμοῦ λέγων, Δεῦρο, δεῖξω σοι... ἀπήνεγκέν με εἰς ἔρημον ἐν πνεύματι... (17:1a,3a)

Και ἦλθεν εἰς ἐκ τῶν ἑπτὰ ἀγγέλων τῶν ἐχόντων τὰς ἑπτὰ φιάλας...καὶ ἐλάλησεν μετ’ ἐμοῦ λέγων, Δεῦρο, δεῖξω σοι... ἀπήνεγκέν με ἐν πνεύματι...(21:9-10a)

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<sup>226</sup>Duff, *Who Rides the Beast?*, p. 87.

<sup>227</sup>Duff, *Who Rides the Beast?*, p.87 and n. 7 p. 159.

Similarly, the conclusions to each passage are similar, both ending with an assertion that each passage is true and trustworthy (19:9, 22:6). Moreover, the descriptions of the bride and the prostitute are in opposition to each other in a variety of ways. Duff lists them in the following comparison:<sup>228</sup>

<i>Babylon</i>	<i>Jerusalem</i>
Opening passage: virtually the same as 21:1-6	Opening passage: virtually the same as 17:1-3
Woman takes the name of the city "Babylon," the paradigmatic, historical enemy of Israel	Woman takes name of the city "Jerusalem," the historical capital and spiritual center of Israel
Woman is depicted as a whore	Woman is depicted as a bride
Woman adorned in gold, precious stones, and pearls (17:4)	"Jerusalem" adorned with gold, precious stones, and pearls (21:18-21)
Name "Babylon" written on woman's forehead	Name of Twelve Tribes written on the gates of the city (21:12); names of the Twelve Apostles on the foundations of the walls (21:14)
Woman sits on (καθήμενη) beast (17:3)	Deity sits on (καθήμενη) throne (21:5, 22:1)
Woman sits over "many waters" (17:1)	Deity sits over "water of life," which pours forth from beneath the throne
"Kings of the earth" come to woman for illicit sex (17:2), an act that brings shame (implied)	"Kings of the earth" come to the "bride" to bring the glory and honor of the nations to her (21:24-26)
Vision end with angelic statement that the words of the vision are true	Vision ends with angelic statement that the words of the vision are true

Duff's comparison brings to the forefront a number of interesting points that help the reader focus on John's purpose, for it is the *differences* between the Babylon/Roman and God's empire that point to John's perception of what Christians must do in order to conquer and inherit the New Jerusalem. The similarity in the openings and conclusions of both passages

<sup>228</sup>Duff, *Who Rides the Beast?*, p.88.

indicates that the two passages are meant to be compared and contrasted, and the differences between Babylon and the New Jerusalem in the body of both passages point to John's argument.

The fact that John gives the empire of Rome the name of "Babylon," and that the new world of God the name of "Jerusalem," is indicative of John's point. The ancient empire of Babylon was a symbol of the ultimate "idolatrous" and domineering city in the Jewish scripture. Mention of Babylon would have automatically brought to mind the worshipping of a variety of gods simultaneously. The name Jerusalem, on the other hand, brings to mind the pure city of God on earth which is the heritage of God's chosen people. This New Jerusalem would have brought to mind images of purity and the worship of the one true God.

Duff's third point is that one city is described as a prostitute, and the other as a bride. This, as Rossing has noted, is for the purpose of forming an ethical stereotype in which the readers must choose.<sup>229</sup> But what is their choice exactly? The names "Babylon" and "Jerusalem" give the reader a choice between worshipping a variety of gods or worshipping the one true God. But the choice does not stop here. Duff's fourth point is indicative of what the choice is. Duff notes that both the bride and the prostitute are adorned in gold, precious stones and pearls (17:4, 21:18-21). To this must be added the rest of the description of the prostitute. The prostitute also wears scarlet and purple (17:4). Scarlet and purple were colours that marked power and rank in Rome. The prostitute/Rome is therefore powerful. On the other hand, the bride wears white, the sign of purity in heaven and the New Jerusalem.

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<sup>229</sup>Rossing, *The Choice Between Two Cities*, p.14.

The next three comparisons that Duff notes point to commerce as the dividing factor between the New Jerusalem and Babylon/Rome. The prostitute has the name "Babylon" written on her forehead. This should bring to mind the reference to other "marks" written on foreheads in preceding passages, most noticeably the "mark of the beast" and the "seal of the redeemed." To which mark/seal should the name "Babylon" be ascribed? Since Babylon cannot be likened to the seal of the redeemed for obvious reasons, the name Babylon must be likened to the mark of the beast, a symbol of commerce. Furthermore, the prostitute sits not on a throne, as the bride does, but instead on the beast. This beast, from the description, is the beast from the sea of chapter 13. This beast forced the worship of the first beast through trickery and through commerce, forcing those who wish to live to engage in buying and selling. Thirdly, the classification of the prostitute/Babylon as sitting on "many waters" describes Babylon as an international empire, reaping its wealth from its association through trade on the sea with its provinces. The bride, however, sits over the waters of life which is not associated with commerce, but instead is life nurturing. Finally, the kings are symbols of fornication (idolatry) in Babylon/Rome, whereas they are instruments that bring glory to God in the New Jerusalem.

The most important aspect of the New Jerusalem and Babylon comparison is the absence in the New Jerusalem of all those things that were evil, idolatrous, painful, unfaithful and unclean in Babylon/Rome. This is described by the repeated use of terms such as "no more" (οὐ μῆ ἔπι), "never" (οὐ μῆ), "not" (οὐκ), and "nothing" (οὐ μῆ πᾶν) in the text describing the New Jerusalem. There will be no more sea, mourning, crying, pain, nothing

cursed and no night. In the New Jerusalem nothing evil remains including worship of other gods and engagement in commerce.<sup>230</sup>

### Conclusion

The New Jerusalem is representative of a new creation (21:5) that is characterized by the absence of all that is evil in the previous creation. The commodities that Babylon/Rome strived for: idolatry, self-deification, trade with kings and merchants, luxury items, insatiable greed, and human lives have all passed away.<sup>231</sup> This New Jerusalem is a place wholly centered on the worship and praise of God, a theme constantly referred to throughout Revelation, and something that John encourages the reader to do at all times and places in order to inherit the New Jerusalem and avoid the destruction of Babylon. That is why the passage describing the New Jerusalem constantly refers to the things that are absent in the New Jerusalem, in order to emphasize the absence of all the negative aspects of the earthly kingdom of Rome. There will be no more faithless, murderers, fornicators, sorcerers, idolaters, liars, mourning, crying, pain, anything unclean, abominations, and falsehood. All these things and the people who caused pain and subtracted from the worship of the one true God will be no more. And there is the presence of the necessities of life that caused pain by their absence or their scarcity in Babylon such as water and food, and the absence of the Roman economy which led to the worship of Roman gods.

The New Jerusalem is indicative of the perfect world which is the inheritance of those

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<sup>230</sup>Resseguie, *Revelation Unsealed*, p. 75.

<sup>231</sup>Resseguie, *Revelation Unsealed*, p. 77.

who “conquer.” Conquering involves the refusal to associate with the Roman empire which is, in its nature, contrary to the worship of God. As the comparison between the characteristics of the New Jerusalem and the characteristics of Rome (beasts, prostitute and Babylon) suggests, the issue of contention between them is that of worship. Rome demands worship as the images of the beast demonstrates, and it sets itself up to be worshipped by sitting on its own throne as a queen. On the other hand, John believes that only God is to receive worship and sit on the throne as he does in the New Jerusalem. As the comparison between the New Jerusalem and Rome also suggests however, it is not simply a matter of worship, but it also involves the reasons behind the decisions of the people to worship. Once again, John links the worship of the Roman and imperial gods to the Roman imperial economy through his repeated acknowledgment that commerce, the sea, and those things associated with commerce are absent in the New Jerusalem. Furthermore, John repeatedly sets up the New Jerusalem as a place where there is the absence of all that went before. This includes the things which John discussed in the images of the beasts, prostitute and Babylon, of which one of the primary concern was commerce. The New Jerusalem represents an absence of the worship of Roman and imperial gods and its impetus, participation in the Roman imperial economy.

## *Conclusion*

### *Summary: The Roman Imperial Economy and the Worship of Roman and Imperial Gods*

In *The Streets of Heaven* Robert Royalty describes the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2-3 as the “strongest anchor for a social-historical reading of the visions in chapters 4-22.”<sup>232</sup> While this statement is true, the opposite is also true, for an analysis of the letters would be impossible without an understanding of chapters 4-22 of Revelation. Each of the seven letters of Revelation describe, in specific details, the problems John sees occurring in each church. But chapters 4-22 describe the central message of John, which was his concern with the rampant worship of Greco-Roman gods among Christians. This message overrides the specific obstacles in the seven churches by showing that the worshipping of these other gods is the driving force behind the “sins” committed in these churches. Instead of writing one letter to each church highlighting that church’s problems, John writes *one book addressing what he perceives as the overall problem in all of the churches*. By identifying the overall problem, the specific obstacles facing each church may be overcome.

The difficulties which John perceives in these seven churches may not have been felt by all Christians in Asia Minor at that time, indeed it may have been apparent only to John and a few others. However, as Collins suggests, through the use of his symbols, plots and the genre of apocalyptic writings, John made feelings which were vague, complex and

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<sup>232</sup>Royalty, *The Streets of Heaven*, p. 151.

ambiguous to be explicit, conscious and simple.<sup>233</sup> The problem John makes explicit, the problem that underlines all of the smaller problems found in the seven churches, is the problem of polytheistic worship and participation in the Roman syncretistic culture which makes this worship imperative. Furthermore, John highlights the major impetus behind this polytheism as participation in the Roman economy. While the critique of the Roman imperial economy and commerce in the book of Revelation has been pointed out and addressed by Richard Bauckham, it has not been an area of focus for many scholars and its relevance and importance for interpreting the content of the book of Revelation, especially in relation to John's stance against polytheistic worship, has been left largely undiscovered.

John is specifically aware of certain groups of teachers in the seven churches whom he believes are leading the people astray in their Christian practices. These so-called "opponents" of John are the Nicolaitans (2:6, 15), the followers of the teachings of Balaam (2:14), and Jezebel (2:20-23). Their teachings allow the Christians to eat food previously sacrificed to a variety of other gods. This allowance was important to Christians living in Asia Minor since, in the ancient Mediterranean, eating food in a social setting was perhaps one of the most assured ways of creating a sacred bond between individuals.<sup>234</sup> A refusal to eat in a social setting could lead to social ostracism and posed a threat to the livelihoods of Christians. The book of Revelation is a response to this social situation advocating a stance

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<sup>233</sup>Adela Yarbro Collins, "The Power of Apocalyptic Rhetoric - Catharsis," in *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988), p. 93.

<sup>234</sup>Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, p. 192.

against eating food sacrificed to these other gods because John considers eating food sacrificed to these other gods as "idolatry" and therefore against Christian belief and practice. Chapters 4-22 of Revelation emphasizes John's concern with "idolatry" and describes what the individual Christians must do to overcome the lure of eating sacrificed meat in order to remain in good social and economic standing.

Revelation 4-22 is a carefully organized piece of literature, meant to condemn all forms of worshipping Greco-Roman gods (idolatry) and any impetus that encourages this act. John sees Rome as the impetus behind the worship of these other gods, specifically Rome's encouragement of its inhabitants to participate in its economy. There is strong historical evidence outside of the book of Revelation that suggests a prominent tie between participation in commerce (locally and internationally, privately and publically) and the worship of Roman and imperial gods.

John's purpose in the book of Revelation is to make this connection between the worship of Greco-Roman gods and participation in the Roman economy known to his readers in an effort to persuade them to avoid economic transactions leading to "idolatry." He does this by connecting the worshipping of these other gods to commerce on various levels throughout the text. On a surface level, in chapters 13, 17 and 18 concerning the beasts, the prostitute and the fall of Babylon/Rome, John links commerce to the worship of gods in the Roman empire using this imagery. In chapters 21-22 John describes the New Jerusalem and links participation in the Roman economy and the worship of Greco-Roman gods through his rejection of these elements in the New Jerusalem. This is the reward for all Christians who

reject commerce and the act of worshipping these other gods in this world. John, moreover, links commerce and the worship of Greco-Roman gods through his use of carefully selected texts from the Hebrew scriptures that links both of these elements. Through these connections it is clear that John wishes to make known to his readers a connection between the worship of Greco-Roman gods and participation in the Roman economy, in an effort to condemn commerce as the impetus to "idolatry."

The connection and condemnation of both the Roman imperial economy and the worship of Roman and imperial gods is significant in our understanding of the letters to the seven churches and specifically, in understanding John's condemnation of eating sacrificial meat. Meat previously sacrificed to Greco-Roman gods was often sent from the various temples to the meat market to be sold to individual buyers. This meat was then served at banquets and social gatherings that occurred in the form of trade guild and business association meetings which were prevalent throughout Asia Minor. The "opponents" of John advocated that eating this meat at meetings did not necessarily mean one was worshipping the god to whom it was dedicated and sacrificed. John did not share this view and saw commerce as the purpose for having these trade guild and business association meetings, and thus as the impetus behind the eating of sacrificial meat by Christians at these meetings. Therefore, participation in the Roman economy caused Christians to commit "idolatry" by worshipping gods other than their own.

Although the letters to the seven churches in chapters 2-3 of Revelation locates the book of Revelation in history and describes the historical situation in the churches of Asia

Minor at the end of the first century C.E., it would be impossible to fully understand them without knowledge of chapter 4-22 of Revelation. Revelation 4-22 is a body of apocalyptic literature that, through its overall message, is connected to the letters to the seven churches. The book of Revelation as a whole reveals to the readers a unified message which is instructive. In John's Christian interpretation, Christians must avoid the worship of any other gods at all costs, even if it affects their livelihoods, by shunning those things which lead to worshipping in this polytheistic setting. Above all, John sees trade guilds and business associations that advocate trade and commerce as the major impetus to "idolatry." To fully abandon worshipping any other god, John advocates a complete abandoning of commerce and trade on all levels. As John says, either one buys and sells and therefore receives the "mark" of the beast, or one refuses to buy and sell and one is eligible to attain the "seal" of the redeemed. The worship of wealth which was attained primarily by trade in the Roman empire, leads little or no room for the worship of God. Therefore, John dedicates the book of Revelation to refuting the worship of Greco-Roman gods through his condemnation of commerce in the Roman empire.

***The Extent of John's Message: Does John Advocate a Total Refusal of Participation in Economic Transactions?***

Due to the controversial nature of John's message as it is elaborated in this thesis, and the implications it could have for the readers of Revelation, it is important to understand the extent to which John advocates a withdrawal from the economic realm. John's message is transmitted to the reader in the guise of an apocalypse which, due to its esoteric and futuristic language, sometimes leaves the exact extent of what he is saying to the interpretation of the

reader. What is clear is that John is advocating ideas and opinions about trade and commerce, and culture and society, that are, in all probability, contrary to the opinions of his readers. Leonard Thompson states this when he says that Revelation is:

a minority report on how Christians relate to the larger Roman society. The seer is apparently advocating attitudes and styles of life not compatible with how most Christians were living in the cities of Asia.<sup>235</sup>

The book of Revelation therefore highlights a discrepancy between how the world and Christians live and believe in that world. This discrepancy becomes apparent in two themes found throughout Revelation. The first theme, as Robert Royalty suggests, is the theme of “endurance in the face of suffering.” On various occasions the book of Revelation suggests that Christians are not truly opening themselves up to the trials of Christian living. This is emphasized through John’s continual insistence that Christians must endure in the face of suffering by “conquering” and therefore being eligible to enter the New Jerusalem (Revelation 1:9; 2:2, 10, 19; 3:1-5, 15-18).<sup>236</sup> The second theme is described by Walter Pilgrim. He identifies one of John’s themes as “resistance’ against the prevailing culture. This is evident in 21:7-8 when it says that the cowardly, the faithless and the polluted, since they do not resist evil, compromise their faith.<sup>237</sup>

The dilemma that remains is not whether John is advocating a withdrawal from the world and culture that surrounds Christians, as this is made clear in the text of Revelation.

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<sup>235</sup>Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*, 132.

<sup>236</sup>Royalty, *The Streets of Heaven*, p. 28.

<sup>237</sup>Pilgrim, *Uneasy Neighbors*, p. 173.

Rather, the extent to which John wants Christians to forego any commercial activity is in question. Is all buying and selling within society wrong, or merely trade on a grand scale? What does John mean when he condemns buying and selling?

A close examination of the key texts associated with John's condemnation of participation in the economy reveals the answer. In chapter 13 of Revelation John makes his strongest case against commerce when he says:

it [beast from land] causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, so that no one can buy or sell who does not have the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name (Revelation 13:16-17).

This passage, on the surface, suggests that all Christians are subject to a ban on participation in the economy, including individuals who buy and sell for the sake of purchasing daily necessities.

The other outright condemnation of commerce in Revelation occurs in chapter 18 where, in the laments of the merchants and seafarers, commerce is condemned as those who gain a livelihood from the sea mourn over the fall of Babylon/Rome. This passage suggests that it is only those who gain a livelihood from the sea that is condemned. How do we make any sense from this conflict?

The key to understanding John's purpose is not to inquire as to the extent to which Christians are allowed to buy and sell, but rather to focus on with whom Christians were allowed to buy and sell. Revelation is a minority report on how Christians live in the cities of Asia. It advocates endurance in the face of suffering imposed by the larger society, resistance of the culture in general, and was written to Christians living in cities where

Roman culture and authority dominated. All these characteristics of Revelation point to whom John wishes the Christians to avoid in their daily practices such as participation in economic transactions.

John is foremost against association with the Roman empire and the ideals and beliefs that it exhibits. The beast of chapter thirteen is a representative of Rome and its powers, and is a strong indicator in understanding what John meant by “buying and selling.” It was the act of buying and selling *with Rome* (the beast) and *within the Roman imperial economy* (the merchants and seafarers) that was prohibited and caused people to be marked with the mark of the beast. Those who did not associate with the beast (Rome) have conquered, so those who do not buy and sell within the Roman economy may attain the seal of the redeemed. Likewise, in chapter 18, the merchants and seafarers gain a livelihood from the sea by participating in the Roman imperial economy, and thus are condemned.

This being said, there are few economic transactions that could be made outside the Roman imperial economy, for most of the economy was controlled by the Roman imperial government, especially in the cities. For this reason the eating of sacrificial meat, “idolatry,” and commerce are all encompassing issues in Revelation. Some people in the cities realized that it would be almost impossible not to participate in the imperial Roman economy, whereas those outside the cities such as John, on the island of Patmos, would have found disassociation with the cities and their economies easier. The opponents of John recognized this dilemma and allowed people to interact with Rome, whereas John did not allow interaction with imperial Rome and therefore did not allow trade and commerce within the

Roman imperial economy. It was John's concern with Rome and the imperial economy that infiltrates the book of Revelation, and not the act of buying and selling in particular. This does not lessen, however, John's resolve that economic transactions with the mighty imperial and polytheistic Roman empire was impermissible. John's message was particularly hard for Christians living in the cities where the imperial economy was practically inescapable.

***John's Message in the Context of Other New Testament Authors and Christian History***

It is of great importance to realize that not all early Christians agreed with John, and indeed that there was great diversity of opinions about the extent of Christian accommodation with Rome. This point is elaborated in Walter Pilgrim's book *Uneasy Neighbors: Church and State in the New Testament* where he describes in detail the opinions of the authors of the New Testament concerning accommodation with Rome and with authority. By highlighting the core of John's message, this thesis adds to studies such as Pilgrim's in demonstrating the extent of discontent and variety of differing opinions that existed in early Christianity, and still exists today due to the incorporation of these differing opinions into the canon of the New Testament.

John's message in the book of Revelation highlights an area of early Christianity where diversity and wide ranging interpretations existed. For example, Paul dealt with questions concerning sacrificed meat. Also, Paul and "John," the author of the epistles and the fourth gospel, and other New Testament writers, dealt with questions concerning the extent of withdrawal from the world that was proper for Christians. The various interpretations of this dilemma highlights the contention that surrounded it in the first

century.

On one side of the controversy was a gnostic and spiritual interpretation. A gnostic believed that one could possess knowledge of the true being of God. The Christian interpretation of this gnostic view saw Jesus as having power only in the spiritual sphere of life which results in a belief that what one does outwardly has no relevance to spirituality and the spiritual realm.<sup>238</sup> The participation in everyday life would therefore be permissible for any “spirit-filled” Christian with gnostic tendencies.<sup>239</sup> This form of interpretation was advantageous to Christians for it allowed them to fully participate in the surrounding culture. The “enthusiasts” of Corinth may have held this view as well as the “opponents” of John in Revelation.

An extension of this gnostic view leads to a belief that actions such as emperor worship were merely “constitutional fiction” used to promote civil unity and nothing more.<sup>240</sup> Paul himself in Romans 13:7 admonishes the Christians not to resist civil authority. I Peter also allows Christians to be subject to human institutions (I Peter 2:13f, 17). These views are in stark contrast to Revelation’s ethic of resistance prevalent throughout the text. Revelation admonishes the people to resist oppressive political structures and the prevailing culture. It pleads with Christians to resist accommodation with the imperial government and to “idolatry,” to resist the culture’s lures to compromise one’s faith and values, and to resist

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<sup>238</sup>Pilgrim, *Uneasy Neighbors*, p. 163.

<sup>239</sup>Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, p. 134.

<sup>240</sup>Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, p. 133.

social pressure to conform one's ethical standards to prevailing norms.<sup>241</sup> Moreover, it expresses in detail that Christians are to resist participation in the Roman imperial economy.

John, however, is not alone in the New Testament canon in his resistance to accommodate on any level. There is a similar theme of resistance to accommodation in the first epistle of John along with a belief that the present world is passing away. This belief is shown in passages such as this:

Μὴ ἀγαπάτε τὸν κόσμον μηδὲ τὰ ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ. ἐάν τις ἀγαπᾷ τὸν κόσμον, οὐκ ἔστιν ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ πατρὸς ἐν αὐτῷ· ὅτι πᾶν τὸ ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ, ἡ ἐπιθυμία τῆς σαρκὸς καὶ ἡ ἐπιθυμία τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν καὶ ἡ ἀλαζονεία τοῦ βίου, οὐκ ἔστιν ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς ἀλλ' ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου ἐστίν. καὶ ὁ κόσμος παράγεται καὶ ἡ ἐπιθυμία αὐτοῦ, ὁ δὲ ποιῶν τὸ θέλημα τοῦ θεοῦ μένει εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα.

Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world; for all that is in the world - the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches - comes not from the Father but from the world. And the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever (I John 2:15-17).

This is a strikingly different view from many other New Testament authors. Unlike the author of I Peter and Paul who advocate an accommodation with the world and its authorities, the author of the first epistle of John is advocating a refusal of the things of this world because those who live in the world cannot love the Father. This is strikingly similar to the mark of the beast and the seal of the redeemed in Revelation in which those who buy and sell (in the world) have the mark of the beast (Rome) and refuse God, and those who do not accommodate with the prevailing culture walk in the way of the Father and could receive the

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<sup>241</sup>Pilgrim, *Uneasy Neighbors*, p. 173.

seal of the redeemed. But one could not have both the mark of the beast and the seal of the redeemed, just as one could not have love of the Father and a love of the world.

*Implications of this Thesis for New Testament Studies and Christianity*

The importance of John's message as elaborated in this thesis lies in its insistence that John refuses all forms of accommodation with Rome, so that even commerce and economic activity is to be shunned because it implicates one in the Roman economic and social system. But more importantly than this, it identifies and isolates an area of society in early Christianity that caused contention among early Christians and which produced a wide variety of interpretations that were largely included into the canon of the New Testament.

Participation in economic transactions within the Roman imperial economy was unavoidable for early Christians, especially for those Christians that lived in the cities where direct trading of goods for services was less common and imperial coins were the main mode of purchasing. John's identification of this Roman imperial economy as an impetus to "idolatry" highlights for the reader of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the sensitivity to the question of accommodation with the culture that early Christians felt, a sensitivity which many do not feel today and of which many Christians may be largely unaware. Furthermore, John's message of abandonment of participation in the Roman imperial economy and society highlights the legitimacy of the several groups produced in Christian history that appears to have radical messages.

While the message of the book of Revelation has been largely marginalised over the years, its inclusion into the canon is key to maintaining the existence and continual

occurrence of radical Christian groups concerned with end-time prophecies, and avoidance of the prevailing culture, and right Christian living. Revelation and its interpretation of history offered other Christians throughout Christian history an opportunity to develop their own interpretations about culture and the end times. For example, from John's radical message, Joachim of Fiore developed a theology that saw the history of salvation divided into three ages corresponding to the three members of the Trinity.<sup>242</sup> Other interpretations of Christianity derived from the apocalyptic message include those of Gerrard Winstanley whose life and writings display a desire for inner and outer renewal to achieve right Christian living leading to radical change in society.<sup>243</sup>

John's message, in its intricate and elaborate nature, shows the reader both ancient and modern, a complete refusal of accommodation with Rome which, through economic transactions within the Roman imperial economy, leads Christians to worship Greco-Roman and imperial gods. The radical nature of this message is integral for demonstrating the importance that the question of accommodation was for early Christians and the diversity found in early Christianity as to the response to this question. The extent that John is willing to go to avoid accommodation that included abandoning any economic transactions within the Roman economic system is striking and displays a dedication to Christianity far beyond the dedication demanded of Christians by some other New Testament authors. Most importantly, however, knowledge of John's message, and its complete rejection of any

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<sup>242</sup>Rowland, *Radical Christianity*, p. 84.

<sup>243</sup>Rowland, *Radical Christianity*, p. 114.

polytheistic and corruptive culture, opens up and legitimizes an area of interpretation of scripture for Christians that is both radical and diverse. Knowledge of this diversity of opinion, as it is intricately made known in the message of the book of Revelation, is integral in the academic pursuit of a greater understanding of early Christianity and the rich history that has developed from the pioneers of early Christian theology and practice.

## Appendix One

Here is a list of additional passages in the Hebrew scriptures that are similar to passages in the book of Revelation. This is not a complete list, it is merely meant for comparison.

### Tyre:

Ezekiel 26-28

Isaiah 23

Joel 3:5-8

Zechariah 9:3-4

### Cup of Wrath:

Psalms 75:8

Jeremiah 51:7-8a

Isaiah 51:17-23

### New Jerusalem:

Ezekiel 37-48

Isaiah 54:11-17; 61; 62

### Prostitute:

Ezekiel 23

Isaiah 23:15-18

Nahum 3:4

Micah 1:5, 7

Ezekiel 16:15-63

Isaiah 1:21

### Babylon:

Isaiah 21:9

Isaiah 47

Jeremiah 50-51

### Beasts:

Daniel 7

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