

THE SOCIAL SETTING OF THE REVELATION TO JOHN:
CONFLICTS WITHIN, FEARS WITHOUT

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THE work of sociologists of religion has opened new vistas for inquiry into questions of NT introduction. The aim of this study is to explore how work in sociology of religion leads to clarification of the social dimensions of the Revelation to John, the Apocalypse. It particularly seeks to clarify the role of John with respect to the seven churches to which he addresses his work, hence his self-understanding as well, the social tensions between these church communities and the larger social communities around them, and the tensions within the church communities themselves. From this examination of John's role and the tensions expressed in Revelation, we shall attempt to understand the situation in sociological terms, and in the same terms examine John's agenda for the churches communicated through the Apocalypse. This will lead to an examination of the social function of the Apocalypse in relation to the social history of the period and finally to a reexamination of the social function of apocalyptic itself. We must ground the whole of this inquiry in as precise a historical reconstruction as possible if the social analyses are to be accurate, and so we turn first to the problem of when John wrote his Apocalypse and what historical situation occasioned it.

I. *Historical Location*

The author of Revelation clearly indicates his location and the location of the churches he addresses. He writes from the island of Patmos, which lies approximately eighty-eight miles from the southwest coast of Asia Minor, to seven churches in the western portion of the province of Asia. These churches—Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea—form a circle or a horseshoe, a fact that might indicate the nature of John's ministry as an itinerant prophet. Most lie within a day's or two days' journey of each other, that is, between twenty and forty miles. Their proximity united them under the same imperial province, and hence under the same governor, although, of course, their local situations would not necessarily be the same.

The date of the Revelation, and hence of the nature of the situation that occasioned it, is considerably more widely disputed. Scholars divide fairly evenly between placing the work in the "Year of the Four Kings," AD 68/69,

and near the end of Domitian's reign, AD 94 or 95. The only other real option suggested in the history of interpretation is some time during the reign of Trajan, although some have seen in Caligula an early possibility, however unlikely. What is at stake in the answer to this question is the historical and social situation (or crisis, in one form or another) to which and out of which the Apocalypse addresses itself.

The most weighty external evidence appears in Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, book five, where Irenaeus places the work "near the end of Domitian's reign," which would have been near the beginning of his own lifetime. Eusebius accepts this testimony as conclusive. There appears to have been no other tradition in the early church to counter it until Dorotheus in the sixth century advanced the Trajan period as the time of its writing, but this is a late development. Many scholars follow the Domitianic dating, but a great number do so based on their conviction that Christians were widely persecuted under Domitian. Mounce, Moffatt, Lilje, and most popular commentators base their interpretation of Revelation on this assumption.

The greatest problem with this view is that there appears to be no pagan historian to corroborate it. While Christian documents point to Domitian as a second Nero, there is little evidence that Domitian persecuted Christians as Christians. A great many may well have been caught up in his "dragnet," which made a name for him in Roman history as of "severest cruelty," but for some other cause than their confession of the name.¹ Such might account for the references in the *Martyrdom of Ignatius* and others to Domitian's reputation as a Christian-killer.

The connection of the crime of ἀθεότης with crimes against the emperor, as in the case of Domitilla cited by Dio Cassius,² while not implying religious persecution of a particular sect, ought to call our attention to the danger of professing a religion that excludes the Roman gods and the imperial divinity in an atmosphere where religious life and sociopolitical requirements overlap. The popular move in scholarship to exonerate Domitian overlooks the evidence that, while religious persecution was not widespread, the complex relationship of state and public Roman religious life made it a perpetual possibility. Religious positions such as those taken by the Jew or Christian would not be viewed apart from their political, and therefore punishable, ramifications, were they to be brought to official attention.

The lack of evidence for a particular persecution of Christians as Christians under Domitian leads other scholars to consider an earlier date for the document, a time of known social upheaval and religious persecution, namely, the period following Nero's reign. Scholars following this line of

¹ A. A. Bell, Jr., "The Date of John's Apocalypse," *NTS* 25 (1978) 96.

² R. H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 33.

thinking appeal unanimously to internal evidence, beginning with the argument advanced in Engels' essays on Revelation and early Christianity.³ The most advanced arguments offered in support for this early date are to be found in Robinson's and Gentry's works, which are wholly dedicated to questions of dating.⁴ Briefly, the reference to the temple in Rev 11:1-2 indicates to some that the temple is still standing, and so points to a date before AD 70.⁵ Lipinski offers the striking argument that Jerusalem rather than Patmos is in fact the true location of John, as the only time the figure of the apocalypticist moves without being transported ἐν πνεύματι, "in the Spirit," is when he moves to measure the still-standing temple in Jerusalem.⁶ The number of the beast given in Rev 13:18 is the sum of the addition of the Hebrew letters in Nero's title, whether נרון קסר, which adds up to 666, or the form without the second *nūn*, which yields the well-attested variant 616.⁷ Most decisive in their argument is the "head count" of Rev 17:10-11, whereby they arrive at Nero as the fifth (or sixth, counting from Julius Caesar as Lipinski insists that the Jewish people would)⁸ of the kings that were and Galba as the one "who is," thus giving a decisive date between June 68 and April 69.⁹

In the endless repartee, all these claims are answered from the point of view of the later date. One school adopts the idea that John used an earlier apocalypse from the time immediately before the destruction of Jerusalem.¹⁰ Another insists on the figurative understanding of the temple as the Heavenly Temple (cf. 11:19; 14:15, 17; 15:5, 6, 8; 16:1) and the figurative understanding of the beast's heads.¹¹ As Downing notes, the further explanation of these heads as the seven hills of Rome "should keep one from over-pressing the issue."¹² Those who wish to press the issue do so by omitting the three emperors Galba, Otho, and Vitellius, who together reign just short of a year. Bell argues that these are never omitted from the Roman count, and hence "to the ancient mind" such an omission is inconceivable.¹³ From Suetonius' account of the social upheaval surrounding these

³ Friedrich Engels, *On Religion* (ed. R. Niebuhr; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1964) 325-26.

⁴ J. A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 221-53; K. L. Gentry, Jr., *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989).

⁵ Mounce, *Revelation*, 35.

⁶ E. Lipinski, "L'Apocalypse et le martyre de Jean à Jérusalem," *NovT* 11 (1969) 225.

⁷ Engels, *On Religion*, 341.

⁸ Lipinski, "L'Apocalypse," 226.

⁹ Engels, *On Religion*, 340.

¹⁰ E.g., J. Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation* (AB 38; New York: Doubleday, 1975) and E. Lohse, *The Formation of the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981).

¹¹ Mounce, *Revelation*, 220; J. Drane, *Early Christians* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982) 124.

¹² F. G. Downing, "Pliny's Prosecutions of Christians," *JSVT* 34 (1988) 119.

¹³ Bell, "The Date," 99.

three, however, it seems quite conceivable for "the ancient mind," at least the "apocalyptic mind," to depict the period with its three emperors as the deadly wound from which the beast recovered, and at which recovery the world marveled and worshiped, no doubt in part out of gratitude and relief for the center of the empire to be whole again. Any Roman thinking figuratively would have to agree with the interpretation of the tumultuous year. If these three are omitted, then beginning with Augustus as the first head of the beast, the count of the eight heads progresses down the series of emperors to land on Domitian.

Ulrichsen pursues the problem of the reckoning of the seven heads together with the ten horns perhaps most completely. He asserts that the counting ought to begin with Caligula, as "dieser Herrscher leitet die Zeit des neuen Äons ein," being the first emperor after Christ.¹⁴ The heads tally the major emperors; the horns mark every official regent, thus including the three interregnum emperors. In both cases, Domitian is in view as the presently reigning emperor (the sixth head and the ninth horn), leaving the count open for a coming ruler under whom the incipient situation of crisis will come to consummate tribulation. This conclusion is best supported by the external evidence, as we shall explore below.

This sort of internal evidence must remain indecisive, as it can be pressed into the service of either viewpoint. If a precise and correct date and situation is to be achieved, however, debunking some preconceptions of this situation will be a crucial first step. Bell stands as exemplary for many when he attacks the Domitianic date on the basis of lack of evidence for a Domitianic persecution of Christians, but fails to notice that the general assumption not of the date but of the circumstances—general persecution—may be what is truly misleading. Robinson strongly argues as well for the earlier date based on his conviction that Revelation was written out of an experience of intense suffering (the only other option for him being that John was psychotic!).¹⁵ Irenaeus himself does not attach the Domitianic date to any particular persecution or devastation of the church.¹⁶ There is an underlying assumption that apocalyptic is always a response to a desperate social situation, a sort of last hope of the despairing. It is often regarded as the bitter consolation of a defeated people through the envisioning of the punishment and overthrow of their enemies and promise of reward outside the boundaries of an unredeemable history.

Another assumption made by Bell is that, as there was no persecution of Christians in Rome under Domitian, so there could not be any parallel persecution of Christians in the province to which John wrote.¹⁷ The work of Ramsey and Bowersock concerning the imperial cult in Asia Minor helps

¹⁴ J. H. Ulrichsen, "Die sieben Häupter und die Zehn Hörner. Zur Datierung der Offenbarung des Johannes," *ST* 39 (1985) 15.

¹⁵ Robinson, *Redating*, 231, 233.

¹⁶ Downing, "Pliny's Prosecutions," 118.

¹⁷ Bell, "The Date," 97.

to interpret the social value placed on this institution and hence how resistance to the institution might be an invitation for the society's rejection of or even hostile action towards the nonparticipant. The likelihood for persecution of Christians as Christians thus appears greater in the province than in the capital.

Ramsey understood the province of Asia to regard the advent of Roman imperialism as the salvation of the territory.¹⁸ The ravagings of times past gave way to a new peace and order which, despite the costs of taxation and tribute, allowed the region to flourish. The imperial cult, instituted in Asia Minor at the time of Augustus, found widespread acceptance as a demonstration of gratitude. Bowersock further anchors the imperial cult in the history of Asia Minor's cults of kings and governors.¹⁹ There was already in place this system of honoring benefactors, whether that beneficence was actual or anticipated.²⁰

These cult practices were of notable political importance. They were a means of communication between the society and its leader, a ritualized expression of allegiance and petition for a favorable disposition. Participation reinforced the "public knowledge" of Roman greatness and domination, and, as Thompson rightly notes, provided at once a representation of the emperor to the people of the province and a representation of the people of the province to the emperor.²¹ The imperial cult was thus of decisive importance in the maintenance of investment in the imperial system and of the favorable disposition of the emperor towards the province.

Scherrer, following Ramsey, has returned to the thesis that the thirteenth chapter of the Apocalypse reveals the inner workings of the imperial cult.²² The image of the emperor was brought out to a place of central importance, and sacrifices, libations, and the rest were made to the *divus* of the emperor. This cultic experience was embellished with ventriloquism and the best special effects of the day to impress upon the participant the mysterious power of the divine head of the political system.²³ Hemer has asserted the practice of a participant receiving a white stone or some sort of token as a commemoration of an experience of the cultic god, which might stand behind possession of the "mark of the beast," though this inference is dubious.²⁴

¹⁸ W. Ramsey, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia* (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, 1904) 115.

¹⁹ G. W. Bowersock, "The Imperial Cult," in *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition* (ed. E. P. Sanders and B. Meyer; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 171.

²⁰ Bowersock, "The Imperial Cult," 171.

²¹ L. L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) 158.

²² S. J. Scherrer, "Revelation 13 as an Historical Source for the Imperial Cult under Domitian," *HTR* 74 (1981) 406.

²³ Ramsey, *Letters*, 98.

²⁴ C. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches in their Local Setting* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986) 104.

Such reconstructions have, of course, met with serious criticism. One criticism that appears to be untenable, however, is that of L. Thompson. Appealing to the manner in which the imperial cult blended in with the local pagan festivities and rituals, and particularly the way in which the imperial deity's *imago* took its place alongside the *simulacra* of the other gods (a terminological distinction maintained by Pliny Secundus), Thompson argues that it is unlikely that the imperial cult would have stood out in Christian consciousness as a particular evil over against all the other cults. Rather, he suggests that the greater issue "revolves around Christians' relations to adherents of traditional religious cults rather than their relation to the cult of the emperor."²⁵

Thompson's point would be well made, if he simply offered a caveat not to assume that Christians at the end of the first century regarded the situation as a battle of Christ vs. Caesar, as Ramsey concludes. As one considers the more immediate social pressure and economic peril revolving around participation in the trade guilds, with their patron deities and idolatrous ceremonies, this caveat is strengthened. It remains noteworthy, however, that the response of the alleged Christian to the imperial cult became a decisive test in Asia Minor under Pliny. While Pliny includes the images of the gods, it is the representation of the emperor which remains in the foreground of his thought. The explanation of Revelation 13 as a situation of trial where the crucial issue is worshipping or not worshipping the beast, who by all accounts represents the emperor, in a cultic setting at the demand of the imperial representative appears to force the conclusion that the imperial cult provided the decisive criterion for political amnesty or a martyr's testimony in blood.

The question remains, however, to what extent the imperial cult was the issue at the time John wrote the Apocalypse. Suetonius informs us that Domitian claimed for himself the title *Dominus Deus*, "Lord God," in regular written correspondence and conversation, and referred to his taking back of Domitilla, his wife, as a "recall to my divine bed" (*Domitian* 13). The troops apparently felt strongly enough towards Domitian to speak feelingly of "Domitian the God" after his assassination, even though the politicians expressed delight at the emperor's demise (*ibid.*, 23). There is, however, no mention of a persecution of Christians *as* Christians—a thing for which Suetonius actually lauds Nero. Suetonius does, however, treat in some detail a situation regarding the tax levied on Jews throughout the empire as a sort of price for religious tolerance, and speaks of investigations of cases where people hid their Jewish origins to avoid the tax, or lived like Jews without being Jews (*ibid.*, 12). The distinction appears to have been unimportant in terms of religion, but of interest economically, that is, for tax purposes.

²⁵ Thompson, *Revelation*, 164.

Those who "lived like Jews without professing Judaism" may well indicate those Christians who claimed exemption from the civic and political rites surrounding the emperor-cult on the basis of their affiliation with Judaism. Hemer sketched in the details of such a scenario:

The situation placed the Jewish communities in a position of peculiar power. By disowning a Christian and informing against him, they might deprive him of his possible recourse to toleration at a price, and render him liable to the emperor-cult. . . . Individual Jews may have informed against individual Christians, or the synagogue may have provided on occasion lists of bona fide members of their congregations. The authorities, primarily concerned with tax avoidance, may thus have had forced on their attention a powerful movement which appeared to defy the emperor under the guise of a Judaism which the official Jews repudiated. A systematic investigation would naturally follow.²⁶

This scenario may well account for the references to the "synagogue of Satan," the threat of imprisonment and tribulation, and the martyrdom of Antipas found in the seven letters of Revelation 2 and 3. It is, however, only an early stage in a larger process at work, a process that looks forward to the total separation of synagogue and church, the resulting political and economic vulnerability of the Christian communities, and the challenge to resist the drives (both external and internal) toward accommodation to the demands of the imperial world. The attention of the imperial officials is still on the tax; the distinction between synagogue and church is just beginning to dawn on all parties concerned. The imperial cult looms thus close to the surface, but it cannot be said that it reaches its fullest significance for the churches in Asia under Domitian. At most, John sees this as only the "beginning of troubles."

Pliny's letter to Trajan affords us the first pagan reference to the trial of Christians as Christians.²⁷ Here documented for the first time is the moment of decision between Caesar and Christ, one choice leading to pardon, the other to execution. Here also appears for the first time the sort of situation for which the author of the Apocalypse might be preparing. Nero's persecution cannot provide a true clue to the date of Revelation. Limited to Rome, it was "the bloody explosion of the bad humor of a degenerate emperor."²⁸ There was no call for steadfastness, for not denying the name, for deciding for the community. In Pliny's report we have outlined the sort of situation where the word of Revelation actually becomes pertinent. We will return to this situation under the examination of the social function of the Apocalypse.

Pliny's letter provides much information about the proceedings against Christians in the next province of Bithynia near the end of the first decade of the second century. The procedure is straightforward:

²⁶ Hemer, *Letters*, 8-10.

²⁷ Downing, "Pliny's Prosecutions," 105.

²⁸ H. Lilje, *L'Apocalypse* (Paris: Payot, 1959) 40.

I ask them if they are Christians. If they admit it, I repeat the question a second and third time, threatening capital punishment; if they persist I sentence them to death. For I do not doubt that, whatever kind of crime it may be to which they have confessed, their pertinacity and inflexible obstinacy should certainly be punished. . . . All who denied that they were or had been Christians I considered discharged, because they called upon the gods at my dictation and did reverence, with incense and wine, to your image which I had ordered to be brought forward for this very purpose, together with the statues of the deities; and especially because they cursed Christ, a thing which, it is said, genuine Christians cannot be induced to do.

Here was the beast "from the earth," that is, from the same land as the recipients,²⁹ acting as the agent of the emperor against the faith of Christians. The statues of the other gods recede behind the one figure who was perceived to be behind this procedure, namely, the emperor.

The letter also reveals that once Pliny had begun to entertain these cases, their number multiplied as many denunciations came, some even in the form of an anonymous pamphlet full of names. Pliny gives the impression in the peroration of his letter that the proceedings have had, besides the effect of an alarming number of executions, the effect of an increased ardor for associating with the imperial cult and temples of the Roman deities. Pliny sees in this result the "setting right" of so many "given the chance at recantation," indicating that he had some success in turning Christians around, so to speak, back towards a sociopolitically acceptable religion.

In terms of our original question of date and historical situation, Downing has truly broken ground by suggesting that the Apocalypse was written during the reign of Trajan, noting bravely that there is just no earlier period that affords the evidence of the sort of persecution that the Apocalypse might seek to address.³⁰ Of particular importance to his argument is the observation that Pliny has no recourse to precedents of trials and decisions made with regard to Christians. After an exhaustive survey of Pliny's extensive, even pedantic, use of precedents in his letters to Trajan, or Trajan's use of them in his responses to Pliny's inquiries, Downing concludes that "if Pliny had had precedents, formal or informal, he would have used them, . . . even if he also asked for confirmation of his use or innovation from Trajan."³¹

He concludes on this basis that Revelation (as well as 1 Peter) was occasioned by this new procedure of Pliny and Trajan.³² This is again, however, to work from the presupposition that the Apocalypse must react to such an experience of suffering, rooted deeper again in the fundamental understanding of apocalyptic as the desperate hope of the defeated, positing a

²⁹ Ramsey, *Letters*, 104.

³⁰ Downing, "Pliny's Prosecutions," 105.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 106.

³² *Ibid.*, 113.

future reversal of presently experienced oppression. It denies to Revelation the possibility of being exactly what its author claims it to be. Its words are "the words of this *prophecy*." It also denies a use of apocalyptic as an organ for effecting social decision and action. It might be, as is the thesis of this study, that our Apocalypse is not the theodicy of the already suffering and defeated, but the posited "counter-definitions" that enable the *communitas* to consolidate its own identity and to decide for its own preservation over against the *societas*, even at ultimate cost. We will, of course, need to define some of these terms as they are intended here when we turn to describe the social location of the seven churches within the larger social groups.

While Downing may err with respect to the date, he calls attention to the significant fact that such official persecution and such criteria as we find envisioned in the Revelation first take place in this province of Bithynia under Pliny Secundus. If one accepts this as the most likely situation addressed or considered in Revelation, but also divorces oneself from the assumption that an apocalypse is always born out of such a situation, then one may reconsider the date attributed to the work by Irenaeus without contest in the early church. Revelation would retain a date of AD 95 or 96, "near the end of the reign of Domitian," but we would not therefore attach the document to a particular official persecution of Christians as Christians under Domitian, nor posit such a persecution on the basis of Revelation's contents.

While this construal of the situation would answer the correct criticism of Bell and others of like mind, namely, that we have no pagan source indicating a persecution under Domitian, it does not rule out the best externally supported option due to the oft-noted presupposition regarding apocalyptic. The evidence leads us to consider seriously the Apocalypse as *prophecy* for the situation of the seven churches and as a call for the response God would have them make. John has perceptively read the signs of his times and, as an astute social analyst, has understood where the relationship of the Christian communities and the political and social forces around them were heading.³³ On this basis he is able to look at present conditions, foresee the likely future conditions, and deliver a word from the Lord that seeks both to bolster the communities' counter-definitions of the cosmic order and to outline a program for the survival of the *communitas* in the face of the *societas* (which poses a threat to *communitas* on the double basis of extermination and assimilation). The analysis of the social conditions represented in the so-called "seven letters" of Revelation 2 and 3 will supplement the sketchy reconstruction of the historical situation presented thus far.

³³ It is striking that even Robinson (*Redating*, 231, 251-53) does not allow John the possibility of prophetic insight, such that the contents of the visions of chaps. 4-20 may refer to conditions that are yet to challenge the churches, and for which John seeks to prepare the believers through these visions. For him, these visions must refer to events and experiences in the 60s, before the actual composition of the Apocalypse.

II. *The Author's Relationship to the Communities*

The identity of the author is another of the pressing questions of NT introduction, but for social scientific purposes it is less important to identify a name than to clarify the function served by that person. In light of this recognition, it should be noted that the following discussion seeks to clarify this second feature rather than answer the seemingly insoluble question of authorship. It may well be that the figure who behaves more characteristically as a *prophet* rather than an *apostle* (from a sociology-of-religion standpoint) may in fact be the apostle John who knew Jesus "according to the flesh." The discussion would then simply show that not all apostles relied on their apostolic office in order to deliver the Lord's word to a congregation in crisis (as did Paul so vehemently in Galatians) and that apostles could employ the modes of prophecy and apocalyptic language freely in order to deliver that word from the Lord.

Mounce, along with a few conservative scholars, still favors the apostle John as the most likely candidate.³⁴ There is much external evidence for this view, as many of the early fathers affirm that John the apostle did indeed write this book. Indeed, we are probably indebted to this affirmation for the inclusion of the book in the NT canon.³⁵ In the middle of the third century, however, Dionysius of Alexandria is already questioning Johannine authorship on the grounds of stylistic and lexical differences between the Revelation and the Gospel and Epistles of John.

By the time Eusebius writes his *History of the Church*, one source of confusion with respect to the identity of the Johannine documents has already been identified as the result of the presence of two prominent persons named "John" in Ephesus during the late first century. Eusebius notes the listing of prominent leaders by Papias, in which John the apostle appears to be clearly distinguished from a presbyter named John. He cites also the report of two tombs in Ephesus, each bearing the name "John" (*Hist. eccl.* 3.39). On this basis, several scholars attribute the Revelation to one John and the Gospel and Epistles to the other John.³⁶ Gundry has carefully demonstrated, however, that Eusebius' sources, namely, Papias and Dionysius of Halicarnassus, do not support this. It is only with Eusebius himself that the distinction between John the Apostle and John the Presbyter originates, due mainly to Eusebius' own *Tendenz*.³⁷ Only Lipinski appears to favor a theory that this apocalypse follows the practice of pseudonymous authorship characteristic of most other apocalypses, claiming that the

³⁴ Mounce, *Revelation*, 31.

³⁵ Lohse, *Formation*, 229.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 230.

³⁷ R. H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 616.

apocalypticist links his work to John the apostle and that this John was in fact martyred in Jerusalem under Nero.³⁸

Some scholars, such as Drane, cite internal evidence as more persuasive criteria for deciding the issue. The manner in which John portrays himself simply as a "brother" (Rev 1:9) and fellow-sharer in "tribulation, the kingdom, and patient endurance," together with the self-description of John as a "slave" in the preface (1:1), appears to deny any qualitative distinction between John and the recipients of the letter such as would cling to the office of "apostle" or "presbyter." Paul the apostle and John the presbyter, at least, seem willing if not eager to uphold this distinction. Furthermore, the apostles are presented in the vision of the temple in New Jerusalem (21:14) as a closed group upon which John the Seer looks from the outside.³⁹

Perhaps even more suggestive that this John was no bearer of a charisma of office is the choice of genre itself. No canonical apostolic writing, genuine or pseudonymous, speaks its message as the Revelation of John the Seer. Paul, John the presbyter, and the authors of 1-2 Peter, James, and Jude all find it sufficient that their message is supported by their name—and seek to offer no other sort of legitimation save where that name's "charisma of office" is called into question, as in Galatians 1 or 2 Corinthians 10-13. Those whose office is sufficiently legitimated in itself, as apostle or presbyter, need no other sort of legitimation.

Our author, on the other hand, appears to base his appeal—his claim to the right both to offer the counter-definitions and to define salvific action—solely upon charismatic legitimation throughout the work. Mounce asserts that there is an "implicit assumption of apostolicity in the authority of the Seer's voice,"⁴⁰ but then why would the emphasis rest on the charismatic experience, the visionary and oracular nature of the work? One finds in the Apocalypse not an assumption of authority, but rather the attempt (successful, one might add) of a prophet to legitimate his message in the ultimate, and therefore unquestionable, realm.

The book opens with the formulaic identification of the author and the addressees, salutation, and benediction, in which is found articulated the hope forming the common pillar between the author and the churches, namely, the confession of the second coming. Immediately, however, what is being reported is no longer the words of John, but the very words of Jesus the risen Lord who speaks through the prophet, revealing his Word. John is simply "in the Spirit on the Lord's Day," commissioned as so many prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures were. Where a vision and call of God were involved in Isaiah 6 and Jeremiah 1, here it is the Risen Lord who

³⁸ Lipinski, "L'Apocalypse," 227.

³⁹ Drane, *Early Christians*, 124.

⁴⁰ Mounce, *Revelation*, 28.

appears and commissions the prophet to speak his words to the body of the faithful (Rev 1:11, repeated in 1:19). It is thus Jesus who gives the counter-definitions and outlines and calls for the faithful response. John passes on the charismatic experience as a faithful prophet passing on the oracles of the Lord, גאם־יהוה.

The author keeps the reader/hearer conscious of the oracular and visionary nature of the revelation throughout the book. Every "and I saw" serves to anchor the validity of the thing seen in the One who sends visions to the prophets to warn and exhort the faithful of God. The risen Lord who is coming soon is called upon at the end of the book (22:20) as the witness of "these things," presumably referring to 22:18-19, the only warnings set down by the author in his own voice. Again, no apostle would consider it needful to invoke the Lord's witness to a blessing or curse, as the "name of an apostle" would suffice, even when that name was under attack (again, see Gal 1:8-9).

The arrangement of the seven churches to whom the author addresses the vision returns here as an important observation. A fair number of commentators regard these seven churches as representative churches, although certainly not all use these representative churches as keys to seven ages in the history of the church. This affirmation, based on the notion that everything in the Apocalypse must conform to traditional apocalyptic numerology, whereby "seven" indicates perfection or fullness, may actually obscure a more adequate and substantiated explanation. These seven churches were those particularly associated with John's "ministry" or calling as an itinerant prophet.

Such itinerant prophets, who mostly relied upon charismatic legitimation, are a well-attested phenomenon in early Christianity. Paul's troubles in the Corinthian church, particularly the later stages as attested in 2 Corinthians 10-13, were most likely occasioned by itinerant preachers. That these built themselves up on charismatic legitimation is not left to guesswork by Paul, who notes their opinion of their oratorical skill as greater than Paul's, as also their physical presence as more appealing and ecstatic experiences as more numerous and significant. These itinerants boast in such characteristics and slight Paul as not measuring up precisely in terms of charismatic legitimation, whereas Paul claims that an apostle rests on a wholly other and superior sort of legitimation than these charismatic preachers.

The *Didache* as well bears witness to a body of prophets within the larger church communities. These must have been a familiar experience to command the space and attention of so brief a manual of church order and teaching. The practice of itinerant charismatics was to move from church to church, receive up to three days' provisions, and move on. If such a one were to stay longer, that one was to be regarded as a fraud (a parasite like Engels' Peregrinus). While there were several tests prescribed for these itinerant charismatics to determine whether they were true or false, there

was considerable *carte blanche* given to them while speaking "in a trance." As long as they asked for neither food nor money while in the Spirit, the community was "on no account to subject such a one to any tests or verifications," for "every sin shall be forgiven, but this sin shall not be forgiven" (*Did.* 11).

The license of the prophet, as well as his or her authority to speak, was, at least according to this teaching, guarded by the very threat of the sin against the Holy Spirit, in which Spirit the charismatic prophet was presumed to speak. It appears all the more likely that John the Seer would have belonged to this group of prophets. He understood his ministry to be to the seven churches cited in Rev 1:11, which were conveniently enough arranged for an itinerant mission. Given the spacing, one might suspect it was more a horseshoe circuit than a full circle (the hundred miles between Ephesus and Laodicea would have been an exceedingly great distance) along which the prophet went back and forth, encouraging the churches to keep a pure faith and pure walk in that faith, as he defined pure. There were rival preachers who gained a hearing in these same churches, and John's words to Ephesus, Pergamum, and Thyatira must be understood in this context.

Just how John found himself on Patmos and separated from his circuit remains a matter of dispute. The traditional view, cited in Eusebius, is that John was exiled to Patmos during the reign of Domitian as a result of his activity in the churches, but later returned and continued on in his work into Trajan's reign (*Hist. eccl.* 2.20). This view has been recently challenged by Thompson, who is so completely convinced that *no* persecution of Christians as Christians occurred under Domitian that to conceive of an exiled prophet is impossible. We are grateful to his debunking of the familiar picture of Patmos as a small rock inhabited by the scum of the empire, for he notes that there is no record of a penal colony on Patmos, but rather evidence for an Artemis cult and two *gymnasia*.⁴¹ Here the work of Saffrey is also helpful. Meticulously piecing together evidence from inscriptions, he concludes that Patmos was a *phrourion* of Miletus, a military fortification on the frontier of the Milesian territory.⁴² Hemer has also noted that the traditional assignation of the sentence to Domitian by Tertullian is unlikely (although not impossible, as Domitian is said to have passed through Asia Minor on the way to Rome).⁴³

Nevertheless, Thompson's argument loses force on both a grammatical and judicial consideration. Thompson presses hard to explain John's presence on Patmos in terms of John's missionary intentions there. He stretches *ἔγενόμην* to mean "I arrived," and argues that the preposition *διὰ* is purposive here, not causal, thus "I arrived on Patmos for the purpose of the

⁴¹ Thompson, *Revelation*, 173.

⁴² H. D. Saffrey, "Relire l'Apocalypse à Patmos," *RB* 82 (1975) 386-90.

⁴³ Hemer, *Letters*, 29.

Word of God and the testimony of Jesus.”⁴⁴ It is difficult to see how the verb may be stretched in this way, even though γίνομαι is a most flexible verb. While the meaning “to have arrived” is allowed in BAGD when used with the preposition ἐπί, the verb appears in Rev 1:9 with the preposition ἐν. With regard to the preposition διά, Yarbro Collins notes that it is always causative, never purposive.⁴⁵ Thus John was on Patmos because of prior activity connected with the Word of God and testimony of Jesus.

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

Que cette nouveauté ait provoqué de l’agitation dans les milieux juifs de la ville [de Milet], comme partout ailleurs dans les cités grecques de l’Asie, et que l’agitateur ait été éloigné de la cité et gardé en résidence surveillée dans un lieu commode pour cela, une île minuscule où l’on n’avait rien à redouter de son zèle intempestif, rien de plus naturel.⁴⁶

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

III. *Social Tensions in the Seven Oracles*

We turn now to an examination of Revelation 2 and 3, the so-called “seven letters” to the seven churches. Mounce notes that these seven

⁴⁴ Thompson, *Revelation*, 173.

⁴⁵ A. Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984) 55.

⁴⁶ Saffrey, “Relire,” 391.

“letters” resemble oracles from the prophets of Hebrew Scripture more than NT epistles,⁴⁷ which accords well with the identification of John as a prophet. These oracles are highly formalized, consisting of all or most of the following sections: address, Jesus’ self-identification, commendation, rebuke, exhortation, warning, and promise. Scholars such as Hemer, Charles, and Massyngberde Ford draw much from each section of each letter to contribute to their reconstruction of the social setting of each church. Even the choice of attribute given to Jesus and content of each promise may thus reflect some social reality, whether architectural, institutional, or cultural. This present study will not compete with these commentators for comprehensiveness. Rather, it will focus chiefly on those sections of Revelation informing our understanding of the social dimensions and particular conflicts at work: conflicts within the churches, conflicts between them and other subgroups within the culture, and conflicts with the larger cultural surroundings. The focus will thus be on the commendations, rebukes, and exhortations, as these are the most revealing not only of these social forces but also of the prophet’s agenda for the churches. Architectural and cultural-historical echoes are therefore often passed over.

Adela Yarbro Collins has done the best work in terms of identifying the different strands and areas of social tension in the churches addressed by the Apocalypse. She uncovers four sources: (1) the relations between church and synagogue, (2) the relations between Christians and pagan society, (3) hostility towards Rome, and (4) tensions between rich and poor.⁴⁸ The seven oracles present a picture, however, which first asks the interpreter to consider the factors slightly differently. We would propose the following: (1) the hostility of the synagogue, (2) the external demand for conformity, (3) the internal threat of accommodation, and (4) the internal threat of distortion of the counter-definitions that define *communitas*. This division may represent more John’s analysis of the social situation, and so provide a closer key to the text itself, although Collins’ argument is certainly not disparaged here as an assessment of the larger situation. Each of these four sources of tension will be examined in turn with regard to the content of the oracles. We consider here only the shape of things as they exist as the church’s contemporary conditions at the time of writing or receiving the Apocalypse, and not yet the shape of things to come and the faithful response to them as contained in the author’s analysis.

1. *Hostility of the Synagogue*

The oracles to Smyrna and Philadelphia embody the prophet’s polemic against the Jewish synagogue and the record of the synagogue’s hostility towards the Christian churches. The συναγωγή is clearly represented as a separate social entity from the ἐκκλησία, even lexically. We enter here

⁴⁷ Mounce, *Revelation*, 84.

⁴⁸ Collins, *Crisis*, 4-7.

upon the problem of the need of Judaism during this period to consolidate its identity over against sectarian movements and the claim of the nascent church upon the title "True Israel," the body of those who were "Jews inwardly," in Pauline terms, and thus the true chosen assembly. The relationship between the church and the synagogue was thus especially strained as *both* groups were struggling with questions of preserving their identity over against the larger society, and the two groups had competing ideological claims which, under the circumstances, made these two groups hostile towards one another.

The break between Christianity and Judaism, as Cohen notes, was not an event so much as a process.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, there were periods within that process where the distinctions became more acute. Cohen argues that the *birkat ha-minim*, the so-called "benediction" inserted into the synagogue liturgy which cursed all heretics and sectarians, was not an assault directed at Christians, particularly Jewish-Christians within the synagogue, in order to drive them out. It was, rather, an expression of the renewal of Jewish identity and unity and a denunciation of any sectarian movement which would threaten that solidarity.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, such an inclusion into the liturgy may well reflect an attitude towards "sectarian" groups which might move the synagogues to act in a hostile manner and, one might say, in a cathartical manner against these groups.

The general denunciation of sectarianism must necessarily include, reflect, and encourage the particular incarnations of this attitude in particular denunciations of particular sectarians. The sect of Jesus, the crucified Messiah, would be an appropriate recipient of this hostility, all the more as the members of this sect laid an exclusive claim to the name of "Jew." When John says that the members of the synagogue "who say they are Jews but are not, but are lying," it is clear that in his mind the identification "Jew" is reserved, at least spiritually, for the followers of Jesus.

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

⁴⁹ S. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah* (Library of Early Christianity 7; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987) 228.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 227.

namely, images of the emperor being imported for the purposes of extending the imperial cult as the vehicle of assuring allegiance. Throughout the empire, Jewish citizens were free from such obligations and free to pursue their own religious devotions.

Where the aegis of Judaism is removed from the Christian movement, however, so is the status of *religio licita* and the relative safety of the new religion with respect to official intervention. In their fervor, therefore, to absorb sectarians within the synagogue or remove the recalcitrant ones, it is highly likely that Jewish propaganda made it clear what constituted Jewishness. The rabbis' thoughtful proceedings were claimed by the popular contingent in the sort of energetic self-definition and consolidation, the sort of powerful investment in a given set of boundaries, which often includes denunciation of those outside the boundaries. Identity is often most basically expressed in terms of "we are not they, they are not us." While this served the necessity of the times for Judaism, finally providing a solution to the turmoil following the fall of Jerusalem and destruction of the very *axis mundi* of the religion, the temple, it could easily have been regarded as "slander" by the author of Revelation—dangerous slander at that, as it brought with it for the first time the attention of local authorities towards a potential newly illicit religion.

The particularly forceful and venomous language employed in Revelation, not far different from that in the Gospel of John but a very far cry from Paul's earnest desire for his fellow-Jews, seems to indicate that, in this province at least, the break is at last decisive and its full implications beginning to be felt. The denunciation of the synagogue and the promise given to the church at Philadelphia assuring them of the Lord's love for them and guarantee to make that love manifest to the synagogue both speak to a fresh and final sense of rejection and self-doubt.

2. *External Demands to Conform*

The external demands are less accessible through the oracles, as John's concern is not to delineate these so much as attack the internal components that advocate giving in to these pressures, even affirming that such would remain a faithful response. Two such external pressures are clearly in mind in Revelation, however, based on chap. 13 and what is generally known about business in pagan society. The first is, of course, the imperial cult, and the second, more immediate, is the ever-present economic pressure of the trade guilds.

Enough had been said with regard to the imperial cult. There is no evidence to suggest that this has already become a widespread problem at any point in the first century, especially as the Romans have hitherto been vague about the relationship of Jews and Christians. The two groups tend to be grouped together, most notably in the accounts of the riot among

"Jews" over some leader named "Chrestus" (read, Christus), resulting in the expulsion of all ethnic Jews from Rome under Claudius.

The former amnesty that had been provided through Roman laxness with regard to theological distinctions between Jewish sectarian movements and, of course, to determining for themselves when a sect ceased to be Jewish appears to have evaporated, however. The synagogue has taken up this task and the Christian assemblies clearly stand outside the walls of Judaism, however obstinately they cling to the title "Jew." Once the distinction was made and publicized in some form by the "slander of those who say that they are Jews," the danger of being exposed to the demands of the imperial cult was near, and conflict would be inevitable.

Pliny noted well that Christians "could not be induced" to "curse Christ." Paul had said more than fifty years before to the Corinthians that "no one can say by the Spirit of God, ἀνάθεμα Ἰησοῦς." Moffatt had noted insightfully that the imperial cults presented the problem of conflicting claims, κύριος Καίσαρ and κύριος Ἰησοῦς. Here, perhaps for the first time, the church would face the challenge of making the ancient confession in the face of the consequence of being judged guilty of a political, criminal offense and pay for it with one's life. This would certainly lift up the imperial cult in John's concern far above the other pagan cults.

Before the break with Judaism was finalized, neither the pagan cultic life nor the imperial cult would be forced on the Christian. Now that there was every indication that Roman confusion with regard to the distinction between Jew and Christian would be quickly resolved, it was the political cult, the cult with the power of life and death because administered by the local governor, which stood out as the place of a decisive standoff. When would it happen? These things would "shortly come to pass," according to John, and the astute social analyst was quite correct. Within fifteen years, confessing or cursing Christ, offering or not offering incense to the image of the emperor "as to a god," would become a life and death issue, a conscientious and rigorous trial, almost inquisition, for the Christian communities in Bithynia.

While Revelation 13 looks forward to an inevitable clash of confessions, made a possibility by the recent consolidation of Judaism over against sectarianism, the present situation presupposed by Revelation 2 and 3 concerns the trade guilds and the question of Christian involvement with the guilds' ceremonies, which revolved around the cultic sacrifice to the patron deity (and no doubt to the emperor) and partaking in the sacrifice, and thus the "god," in a common meal. While the former issue is political, the latter issue is economic and social. This presupposition is based on an identification of the internal tensions reflected by Balaamites, Nicolaitans, and Jezebel, and on what is known generally about economic life in Hellenistic cities.

The question appears much earlier in the history of the Christian movement within Paul's Gentile mission. In Corinth the issue comes into sharpest

focus as the question of whether or not to eat food sacrificed to idols, evoking one answer from a prominent party within the congregation that "an idol is nothing," and so partaking of such food can carry no spiritual value, beneficial or detrimental. Paul divides the issue into several parts, the first concerning whether or not to eat at the tables in the idol's temple, the second concerning buying food on the open market, and the third concerning eating what is set before one as an invited guest at someone's residence.⁵¹ It is the question reflecting the social considerations which interests us here.

The practice of eating of the food sacrificed to the idol at tables within the temple does not simply reflect cultic activity. "In the Corinth of Paul's time, such meals were still the regular practice both at state festivals and private celebrations of various kinds."⁵² Such common meals were an important aspect of the life of the trade guilds of a particular city. It was a social occasion gathered around the guild's symbol of their patron deity, religious only insofar as the individual's commitment to the guild and the solidarity of the guild were expressed and reenacted in religious form. Modern labor and trade unions have found another language, but represent a similar social body.

Membership in one or another guild was very important for economic survival, all the more so as we recall the widely held view that early Christianity was comprised largely of artisans and craftspersons. The issue, of course, was how far one could compromise one's dedication to Christ as Lord for the sake of economic survival. Christians did not live in ghettos, but among the pagan society.⁵³ As they could not form an effective commune, they had to come to terms with how to live at peace with their environment while remaining faithful.

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

⁵¹ Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 360.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 361.

⁵³ J. Moffatt, "Revelation," in *The Expositor's Greek Testament* (5 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 5.357.

3. *Internal Tension—the Gospel of Accommodation*

The oracles to Ephesus, Pergamum, and Thyatira address the response of the congregations to “false teachers” in one form or another. John delineates false apostles, Nicolaitans, disciples of Balaam, and followers of Jezebel. Exactly where the distinction between heterodox teaching and unworthy practice is to be made is not at once clear. The oracles to Sardis and Laodicea reveal a different level and type of accommodation. There, it appears, it is not being preached and debated—it is simply being lived. John’s attitude towards the other five churches is one of sympathy, commending their patient endurance through laboring and tribulation, presumably results of their attempts to follow a faithful response within their environment. Sardis and Laodicea alone are viewed unsympathetically, with no opening word of commendation for any attempt made to remain faithful to “the testimony of Jesus” in the face of social pressure.

John commends the church at Ephesus for testing “those who call themselves apostles but are not,” for the church has “found them to be false” (Rev 2:2). The community has effectively defended what it regards as the “gospel” against the perversion of that message through “another gospel” (Gal 1:6). Here John exhibits his first concern with regard to keeping the internal boundaries clear and the counter-definitions of the *communitas* fixed. The internal definitions cannot bear attack and change at such a crucial time of external social pressure.

“False apostles” appear not to be the greatest internal threat, however. These appear once, and as effectively blocked and excluded. The attention given to the Nicolaitans, and the attitude taken towards them, indicates that here we have a present and persuasive threat to the boundaries and definitions of the communities. These, along with those “who hold to the teaching of Balaam” and the followers of “Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess,” are all depicted as morally deficient—they “eat food sacrificed to idols and commit fornication” (Rev 2:14; 2:20). In light of the situation described concerning the economic pressures of trade guilds, and in light of the fact that “teaching” (διδασχῆ) is used with regard to the activities of the Nicolaitans and Balaam, these groups must also represent a doctrinal affront to the communities, or at least to John. Indeed, Yarbrow Collins insightfully declares that these represent another group of itinerant prophets who present an alternative interpretation of the gospel and therefore an alternative response to the social order vying with John’s for “canonization” as the “faithful” response.⁵⁴

Drane and others have viewed the Nicolaitans as a Gnostic group.⁵⁵ No doubt this position derives from the two references to Nicolaitans in Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria. Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.* 1.26.3) only says

⁵⁴ Collins, *Crisis*, 88.

⁵⁵ Drane, *Early Christians*, 128.

that this group lives "a life of unrestrained indulgence," specifically eating food sacrificed to idols and practicing sexual immorality, "for which the Word speaks of them as hated." It seems quite conceivable from this portrait, however, that Irenaeus himself only knows about the sect from the references in Revelation 2 and 3, as his picture adds nothing to this and even refers to the passages (as "the Word"). Clement (*Stromata* 3.4) speaks of a legend concerning Nicolas, one of the seven deacons of Acts 6, who remarked once that "the flesh must be treated with contempt," a phrase which he meant as instruction towards guarding against jealousy, but which the Nicolaitans took up as a call to demonstrate contempt for the flesh through moral abuses. Here, however, Clement is clearly speaking in refutation of a contemporary group, and the whole argument reflects an unhistorical development of tradition. It is probable that later Gnostic groups invented the tale as part of the "secret teachings" and found in the Nicolaitans heroes who were suppressed by the "children of darkness."

The question has been raised whether or not to regard the Nicolaitans apart from the disciples of Balaam and Jezebel. The common content of their teaching, at least its effects as described by John, suggests a close link between these groups and figures. Moreover, as Moffatt notes, νικο-λαος (the first root referring to conquering, the second meaning "people") is a rough Greek equivalent for נִכְלָה לְעַמּוֹ ("he wears out the people"), suggesting an identity of these groups.⁵⁶ The syntax will bear regarding the Nicolaitans as the manifestation of those who follow the teaching of Balaam. The OT portraits of Balaam and Jezebel afford the best key to their position and therefore threat to John.

Balaam blesses Israel when Balak calls him to curse the people, but this narrative does not dominate his memory. Rather, the short and obscure reference in Num 31:16 remained his epitaph. The name of Balaam, son of Beor, was attached to the apostasy of Israel at Peor, recounted in Num 25:1-3, wherein the Israelites "began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab," with the consequence that they accepted the Moabites' invitation to bow down to their gods and eat of their sacrifices. The rabbinic tradition preserves a reference to the disciples of Balaam as the opposite of the disciples of Abraham (*Abot* 5.29). Balaam became thus a figure for apostasy, the false teacher, and is particularly connected with teaching the Midianites to convince the Israelites to "eat food sacrificed to idols and practice immorality." The Deuteronomic danger associated with this is loss of identity as the "people of God," becoming indistinguishable from the nations around them. Against this threat the purity codes and ceremonial law sought to defend. The great threat was the threat of syncretism, and thus of losing ethnic and religious identity, and consequently losing the blessing and promise of God.

⁵⁶ Moffatt, "Revelation," 352.

John casts the Nicolaitans as “disciples of Balaam,” an especially appropriate choice as the issue again appears to be a literal participation in the sacrifices to pagan deities,⁵⁷ an element of membership in the trade guilds. Some commentators regard the practice of fornication as part of the entertainment of these feasts, but one must hold the spiritual dimension clearly in mind as well, namely, forsaking a faithful relationship to Jesus. Indeed, the symbols of virgin and harlot in Revelation are best understood in these terms, rather than being reduced to a glorification of celibacy and asceticism. The asceticism for which John calls is not, as Troeltsch would say with regard to the Catholic Church, against sensuality, but rather, as Troeltsch would say with regard to sectarian movements, against participation in the world.⁵⁸ It is a lifestyle asceticism, an asceticism of allegiance reserved for the Lord and the *communitas*.

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

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

As so many women of means in the early church, such as were able to open up their houses to churches and apostles, she no doubt was an important figure and voice in the Thyatirian assembly. For both theological and economic reasons, she advocates the stance preached by the Nicolaitans concerning how to relate with the pagan society and its pressures for the sake of the survival of the community. Those who “commit adultery with her” and “her children” are violently threatened and condemned by John in this oracular denunciation precisely for their compliance with her way of thinking, for embracing an open relationship with the pagan society.

⁵⁷ Mounce, *Revelation*, 98.

⁵⁸ E. Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (2 vols.; London: George Allen, 1931) 1.332.

Mounce, citing Caird, concludes that "the sum total of the Nicolaitans' offense is that they took a laxer attitude than John to pagan society and religion."⁵⁹ This laxer view, however, came at a dangerous time for the community, a time when the social pressures were mounting in a way that the Nicolaitans did not see, which could result in total absorption of the Christian *communitas* into the pagan environment if the boundaries were not fortified. Such, at least, was John's analysis.

The examination of tensions surrounding wealth and deprivation carried out by Collins provides a window into the broader social tensions surrounding the communities addressed by Revelation.⁶⁰ John, however, has a different perspective on wealth and poverty, calling for examination. There is a sociological reason for his attitude towards wealth, grounded in a theological one, but it is not the one commonly attributed to the hostility of the poor against the rich.

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

The oracle to Laodicea has been acclaimed as yielding the most fruit for reconstructing the city's setting and conditions. It is intriguing that John felt that Laodicea could only be addressed on the basis of its civic identity, as if to say that the church and society shared everything in common and that there was no basis on which to address the church in terms which the whole society would not share. The appeal to the images of the lukewarm and nauseating water forming their water supply, the medical achievements of the school in the city, and the civic sense of pride in their riches and need for nothing (an allusion to the city's ability to rebuild itself only thirty years earlier without imperial aid),⁶¹ all depict the Laodicean Christians first as Laodicean citizens. From this posture they are called to trade in their civic identity for a renewed Christian identity.

They are to trade in their shame in Laodicean wool for white garments, their riches for the "gold tried in the fire," and their pride in their medical school for "eyesalve" so that they might see their peril as John sees it. In all this, it is their pride in their wealth—"for you say, I am rich, I have

⁵⁹ Mounce, *Revelation*, 98.

⁶⁰ Collins, *Crisis*, 94.

⁶¹ Mounce, *Revelation*, 123.

prospered, and I need nothing"—which John attacks as the source of their spiritual condition. The response of the Lord to those who remain in this condition will be to "vomit [them] out of my mouth." This "wealth" John calls "poor" and "wretched" (Rev 3:17), while for their poverty John calls the Smyrnan assembly "rich."

Here the true nature of the tension between wealth and poverty in John's mind reveals itself to be precisely that, in the social situation, wealth attaches itself to accommodation and assimilation, while poverty attaches itself to those who seek to maintain the boundaries against the external social pressures, and who thus have no defense against economic embargoes. John considers that the economic pressures will only increase now that the official status of Christians is becoming manifest as a *religio illicita*, hence the boycott on buying and selling without the mark of the beast envisioned in chapter thirteen and noted as such as early as Engels.⁶² The churches cannot be allowed to believe the *societas*' definition of what constitutes desirable wealth. Only if they accept John's attribution of true wealth to the faithful who suffer economic hardship and social ostracism for the sake of the "testimony of Jesus" will the churches survive the economic pressures that will rise along with the political pressures in the decades to come. For this reason, Laodicea is depicted as in the gravest danger, but also given the most tender promise.

IV. *Social Definition—the Church as Communitas*

The term *communitas* has been applied to the Christian communities, or ἐκκλησίαι, throughout this study for it is particularly appropriate to the social nature of the church within the context of the larger environment, referred to as *societas*. It has been assumed as a technical term, and it is now time to define more precisely what it signifies.

Peter Berger has given significant theoretical background to the understanding of the early church's situation. "To be in culture means to share in a particular world of objectives with others," these objectives having their origin in the process of objectification.⁶³ "It is well-nigh impossible in the long run to keep up alone and without support one's own counter-definitions of the world."⁶⁴ Along these lines, we can depict the Christian communities as sharing in a set of objectives, namely, the worldview, view of history, and hope contained in the εὐαγγέλιον, but this set of objectives is different from the set of objectives shared by the larger, "outsider," non-Christian society. The church is thus a body which serves as a "plausibility structure" for the "counter-definitions" of reality.

⁶² Engels, *On Religion*, 340.

⁶³ P. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Doubleday, 1967) 10.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

Berger speaks of the "apotheosis" of the nomic constructions which uphold the larger society, that is, the complete objectification of the pagan worldview into the cosmic realm.⁶⁵ "The ruler speaks for the gods, or is a god, and to obey him is to be in a right relationship with the world of the gods."⁶⁶ The Roman empire embodied this principle through the imperial cult, the political institution expressed in religious form. This was an essential part of the definitions of reality, together with the many cults to pagan deities, which gave order, form, and meaning to the *societas*. The Christian communities, however, espoused a set of meanings that denied the objectives of the society, and so became a deviant subgroup, a foreign body within the larger body, participating in an alternate definition of reality.

Thompson cites Berger's classification of "public" and "deviant" knowledge as a key to understanding Revelation:

When compared to that "public knowledge" transmitted through institutions, myths, and rituals involving the town fathers and their social order, the Book of Revelation reveals "deviant knowledge": that is, its knowledge deviates from the knowledge given and generally taken for granted in the social order. . . . It is deviant in its source, . . . in its assessment of the social order, . . . and in its cosmology.⁶⁷

The Christian communities had from the very beginning been called into existence through the revelation of this "deviant knowledge" and so stepped out of the world and definitions of the *societas* and into the world and definitions of a *communitas*. The preaching of Paul called people to live between the accomplished resurrection of the crucified Lord and the return of this risen Lord at which return all the faithful would share in the resurrected life. He called them to live under a set of definitions (which others have called doctrines) which turned the society's attitude towards death and the present life on its head and also rearranged the focal points of history around the figure of Jesus. The *communitas* was thus called into a new set of norms and called to follow a new set of behaviors and values attaching to those norms.

It became what Bainbridge and Stark might have analyzed as a "sect" in terms of its new relationship to the society.⁶⁸ True, there was no real "church" figure against which to measure it (not even Judaism) any more, but this is precisely why Bainbridge and Stark's work is so much more valuable than the work of Troeltsch. Sectarian tendencies are manifested with regard to the surrounding society, and not only with regard to other religious bodies claiming the same religious heritage. The early church

⁶⁵ Ibid., 27.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 34.

⁶⁷ Thompson, *Revelation*, 181.

⁶⁸ W. S. Bainbridge and R. Stark, "Sectarian Tension," *Review of Religious Research* 22 (1980) 122.

quickly came to the point where it felt the mutual rejection of sect and society, as early as the Corinthians began to address the issue of membership in trade guilds and participation in idol feasts. For them it was an issue of maintaining relations with the *societas*.

The preachers of the counter-definitions such as Paul, however, engineered social boundaries to coincide with the boundaries of the worldviews. Thus began the spiral of increasing hostility which later won for the Christians (as indeed the orthodox Jews as well, who shared the basic status of *communitas* in the diaspora) the charges of ἀθεότης, "godlessness," for their rejection of the gods of the pagan κόσμος, and "haters of the human race" for their antisocial behavior, most likely in regard to nonparticipation in trade guild and civic feasts and festivals.

The *communitas* comes to a period of *consolidation*. External pressures are perceived to be very great, and indeed the circumstances indicated in the seven oracles, including the martyr Antipas, the firstfruits, as it were, support this perception. The communities are faced with an important question—how to survive through the situation. The question is one of identity, or of definition, and one of action. The Nicolaitans have presented one appealing option. These have apparently redefined the *mythos* of the gospel so as to allow for a course of action which will lead the communities back towards a peaceable and profitable relationship with the society.

V. Social Significance of John's Desired Effects

John the prophet finds something particularly threatening in the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Their path appears to him an internal weakening of the underpinnings of the worldview of the *communitas*, a path which would lead to a blurring of the distinctions between community and society and the eventual absorption of the community into the society. True to the same line of thought and social action that guided Paul in a period of expansion, John insists that the life of the church as *communitas* must be preserved over against the life of the *societas*. John's program consists of a purging of the communities of elements of internal innovation and suggestions of compromise, and a fortification of the boundaries through a re-presentation of the essential elements of the counter-definitions and its assessment of the social order (cf. Revelation 17 and 18). Based on this, he can call for a response of heightened energy against the external pressures to conform, both the present economic pressure and the soon-to-be-manifested political pressure.

In this interpretation, apocalyptic Christianity in John is not divorced from its appearance in Paul. The social assessment is much the same, only more forcefully portrayed in John (cf. 1 Cor 1:18-25; 2 Cor 2:15; 4:18; 5:7), and the basic parts of the worldview and view of history coincide. The

difference is in the social conditions of the Pauline mission and the provincial churches at the end of century. What was once a movement in expansion is now faced with the crisis of consolidation, made necessary by the manifestation of the break with the synagogue to Roman officials. The pressures upon Paul and his communities were considerable, but not crushing. For John, the matter has gained considerable gravity, and the escalation of the hostility demanded an escalation of the boundaries and stronger social interpretation of the opposing forces, society and community.

John must be considered a true prophet in the Weberian sense, even upon the crucial point, namely, that a prophet announces a break with the established order.⁶⁹ John does not originate this break, but the need for deciding for a new break or a stance of continued break with society is present and John's is the voice announcing it. His call to sustain the liminal existence of the *communitas* is a prophetic call.

Berger noted the need for plausibility structures if one wished to maintain the plausibility of any worldview.⁷⁰ These plausibility structures are in fact social structures subscribing to the worldview. For John, then, the commitment to maintain the *communitas* would be equivalent to holding fast to the norms and definitions of the gospel, for were the *communitas* to be assimilated into the *societas*, the counter-definitions would no longer have any plausibility structure upon which to rest—no social body subscribing to them. The call to maintain *communitas* became a call to remain faithful to the risen Lord, and the result of remaining faithful to the risen Lord would be the continued commitment to *communitas*.

A sect begins as and remains a voluntary community, according to Troeltsch, "formed by awareness of stepping out of ordinary social, economic, and religious associations and by individual commitment to the 'body'."⁷¹ The task for the prophet is to motivate continued commitment to the body and excite desire to remain outside of those formerly ordinary associations. He does this in part by communicating the called-for response in terms of salvation. Salvation, or "personal legitimation which is in accord with the ultimate standards," which are in fact "in essential conflict with the institutionalized worldly order,"⁷² is gained by holding fast, by not denying the name, and by rejecting the innovations introduced by the Nicolaitans (Rev 2:10, 22, 25; 3:8). The Apocalypse is not a theodicy in its primary sense of offering an explanation for why faithful behavior is visited with evil. Instead, it turns these apparent frustrations of the order into expectations. The one who is faithful is to expect suffering and even death as a result. There is, however, the promise attached to this behavior in every oracle, and of course in the vision of the Heavenly Jerusalem at the conclusion of the book.

⁶⁹ M. Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (Boston: Beacon, 1963) xxxv.

⁷⁰ Berger, *Canopy*, 45.

⁷¹ Troeltsch, *Social Teaching* 1.339-40.

⁷² Weber, *Sociology*, xlix.

Berger offers an explanation of the "good death" as dying "while retaining to the end a meaningful relationship with the nomos of one's society—subjectively meaningful to oneself and objectively meaningful in the minds of others."⁷³ For this reason, Moffatt is correct when he points to the actions of the *δειλοί* and *ἄπιστοι*, the "cowards" and "faithless ones," who bear witness to the meaning of the nomos of the society and deny the meaningfulness of the counter-definitions of the community.⁷⁴ The nomos is only as plausible as it stands in the face of death. Therefore the highest ideal for John is that of the *martyr*, the "witness" (*μάρτυς*), who expresses commitment to the definitions of the community at great cost, even at the price of dying.

One might ask whether or not Berger's concept of alienation comes into play here. Is the self identified with the socialized self (that is, socialized in the community's counter-definitions) to the point where freedom of choice is restricted and personal action appears a function of necessity? John seems to call for this sort of identification when he rejects the options for personal action presented by the Nicolaitans, along with the preachers themselves. Through the Apocalypse he teaches the churches not to regard these as options at all, but only the faithfulness unto death, the one response of the faithful.

John's desire to excite this sort of commitment to the *communitas* was not without clear social significance. He attributes to the posture of "holding fast" and "not denying" the absolute value of "overcoming," of victory over the world. Was this what fed the Christian's resolve as she or he stood before Pliny neither denying the name nor submitting, which resolve he punished simply as *contumacia*? Nevertheless, such a confrontation maintained the identity and counter-definitions of the Christian *communitas* most effectively against the society's offer of "recantation."

To this end, John focused not only on individual commitment and decision, but also on the important need for reminder. Berger situates the origin of liturgy in this need of people to be reminded of the cosmic order undergirding the society.⁷⁵ Yarbro Collins insightfully discerns how this is operative in the Apocalypse as well. The Apocalypse aims at the liturgy of the church and on its own incorporation into the worship life of the community.⁷⁶ The book itself is full of hymns and litanies of one sort or another, such as the litany of the fall of Babylon in Revelation 18 and the hymns to God and the Lamb in Rev 4:8; 5:9-12; 11:17-18; and 15:3-4. Indeed, several of these have survived into the canticles of the Protestant Episcopal Church, in the Order for Morning Prayer. That the whole book may have functioned thus is evident from the opening benediction upon the *one* who reads and *those* who hear.

⁷³ Berger, *Canopy*, 44

⁷⁴ Moffatt, "Revelation," 312.

⁷⁵ Berger, *Canopy*, 40.

⁷⁶ A. Yarbro Collins, "The Revelation of John," *CurTM* 8 (1981) 12.

The Apocalypse represents more than a single appeal, in all likelihood. The initial resolve of the recipients to "hold fast," that is, to remain faithful to the counter-definitions of the *communitas* and bear this witness before the authorities of the *societas*, receives regular support through the incorporation of the work into the liturgical life of the communities. The prophetic work of John might thus have its most far-reaching effect on the church, serving the function of evoking the hearers' commitment to continuing and fortifying the identity of *communitas* over against the *societas*, thus to maintain their unconditional allegiance to the God revealed in Christ against both the coercive and seductive drives towards compromise with the imperial world.

VI. *Social Function of the Apocalypse*

The trend in scholarship that regards apocalyptic consistently as a response to suffering and persecution will no longer afford fruitful results. This trend has seen in the stark dualism and other-worldly promises of apocalyptic literature a hopelessness for this world, even a relinquishing of hope for defeating the enemy of the faith this side of death.

As we have seen in John's Apocalypse, however, the language of complete renunciation of participation in and hope for the world applies only to the external pressures of the *societas*. What is called for, however, is complete commitment to participation in the *communitas* and its hope. The aim of the Apocalypse is the preservation of the *communitas* in all its social distinctiveness alongside the *societas*. The Apocalypse calls for the consolidation of the community's identity in a particular way, one that is most interested in preserving the counter-definitions (the internal boundaries) and the exclusive participation of those who subscribe to them. It thus enunciates those definitions once more and interprets the social situation so as to call for a response aiming at strengthening the boundaries and leading to the preservation of the plausibility structure, the *communitas*. The importance of the other-worldly hope and the deliverance from the "second death" is that these enable the members of the community to choose the course of action and maintain the set of definitions that keep the *communitas'* identity and boundaries clear, and so preserve the life of the community as well as its message (gospel, or counter-definitions).

The Apocalypse functions, therefore, not as theodicy. It is not the attempt of John the Seer to console the churches regarded by him as his field of ministry. It is not the attempt to fit meaningless suffering into some meaningful cosmic order. The Apocalypse is a social challenge to the seven churches to maintain their liminal status against the mounting external pressures. The Apocalypse is a call not to "give in" to the "powers that be" grounded on the counter-proposal that these powers that are shall not be forever, and that therefore one may respond to the eternal Power, the Lord Christ, who stands at the heart of the community's counter-definitions.

John functions as a prophet, looking at the recent developments in the status of the church now that the synagogue has made a decisive declaration against sectarianism. He perceives the shape of things to come, and seeks through the medium of apocalyptic to deliver a word of the Lord which will prepare the churches to meet the coming crisis effectively, that is, in such a way as to preserve *communitas* rather than to accommodate to the *societas*. His Apocalypse is a call for radical, social action, for choosing life in the margins of society rather than assimilation.

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