

## 12. The Book of Revelation: A Call to Worship, Witness, and Wait in the Midst of Violence

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The book of Revelation speaks to Christian believers living in a violent world. In the first century, the dominance of Rome in the Mediterranean had been achieved through bloody military conquest. It was sustained by a combination of military force, economic exploitation, and cultural imperialism. The violence of imperial Rome can be overstated, but Rome was, in many respects, a brutal regime. The Roman historian Tacitus recognized that the much vaunted *pax romana* (“Roman peace”) of the first century was only a “peace with bloodshed.”<sup>1</sup> The practices of crucifying criminals,<sup>2</sup> decimating weak or disobedient units in the army,<sup>3</sup> and entertaining the masses with the blood-sport of *venationes* (beast-fights)<sup>4</sup> and gladiatorial contests,<sup>5</sup> all indicate a society in which violence was a widely accepted means of social control.<sup>6</sup> The book of Revelation speaks to Christian believers who not only lived in this world, but who faced persecution, violence, and even death for their devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the Christian response to violence envisioned by the book. My thesis is that the book of Revelation functions as a prophetic call to Christian believers to respond to violence not with further violence, but by *worshiping* the one true God, by bearing *witness* to his work in Jesus Christ, and by *waiting* patiently for his final victory in the world. Part 1 provides a brief orientation to the book of Revelation. Part 2 sketches the origins and nature of the persecution of Christians within the Roman world, with specific reference to the Roman imperial cults and the province of Asia. Part 3 explores the book’s prophetic call to worship, witness, and wait.

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<sup>1</sup> Tacitus, *Ann.* 1.9–10.

<sup>2</sup> See esp. Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* (London: SCM, 1977), chs. 4–10.

<sup>3</sup> Suetonius, *Aug.* 24.2; Suetonius, *Cal.* 48.1; *Galb.* 12.2; Tacitus, *Ann.* 3.21.

<sup>4</sup> Nicholas Purcell, “Venationes,” in *OCD*, ed. Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 1586.

<sup>5</sup> See John P. Balsdon and Andrew W. Lintott, “Gladiators,” in *OCD*, 637–38.

<sup>6</sup> Cicero, *Tusc.* 2.41 and Pliny the Younger, *Pan.* 33.1 both criticized the blood-sport of the arena, but did not consider this a problem if the gladiators were condemned criminals.

## 1. The Book of Revelation

The book of Revelation is an “unveiling” or “disclosure” (1:1: ἀποκάλυψις) of the creator God’s purposes for his world. The book was most likely written by John, the son of Zebedee, brother of James, and apostle of Jesus (1:1, 4, 9),<sup>7</sup> from the island of Patmos (1:9), toward the end of the reign of the emperor Domitian (ca. AD 81–96).<sup>8</sup> The book is an *apocalyptic prophecy* in the form of a *circular letter* to the seven churches of Asia (1:4, 11; 2:1–3:22).<sup>9</sup> As an *apocalypse* (1:1), Revelation claims to be the word of the risen Lord Jesus himself,<sup>10</sup> given via an angel, through John,<sup>11</sup> to reveal the view from God’s

<sup>7</sup> The author of the book identifies himself for his readers simply as “John” (1:1, 4, 9; 22:8), who is God’s “slave” (1:1), “your brother and partner,” and a “witness” for Christ who is in exile on the island of Patmos (1:9). The probability that this John is the apostle, the son of Zebedee, is suggested by: (i) the early and widespread testimony of early Christian writers, who identify the author of Revelation as “John, one of the apostles of Christ” (Justin, *Dial.* 81.4; cf. *Apocryphon of John* 1.7–8; 1.30–2.16; Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.11.1; 3.16.5, 8; 5.30.3; Clement of Alexandria, *Quis div.* 42; Hippolytus, *Antichr.* 35–36; Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 2.41–42; Victorinus, *In Apoc.* 11.1; Muratorian canon); (ii) the significant stylistic, thematic, and terminological similarities between Revelation and the Gospel and letters of John. For a defense of this view, see esp. Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, rev. ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 8–15; Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 2–6. For the connections with the Gospels and letters of John, see C. G. Ozanne, “The Language of the Apocalypse,” *TynB* 16 (1965): 3–9; Stephen S. Smalley, “John’s Revelation and John’s Community,” *BJRL* 69 (1987): 549–71. Alternatively, it is argued that Revelation was written by: (i) “John the Elder,” one of Jesus’ Palestinian disciples and a member of the broader apostolic circle (see esp. John J. Gunther, “The Elder John, Author of Revelation,” *JSNT* 11 (1981): 3–20); (ii) “an early Christian prophet” named John (e.g., Craig R. Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 38A (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 68–69). The view that Revelation was written by someone using “John” as a pseudonym is now widely discounted.

<sup>8</sup> A strong minority of scholars advocate for a date in the 60s AD, prior to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. See esp. J. B. Lightfoot, *Biblical Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1893), 52; F. J. A. Hort, *The Apocalypse of John I–III* (London: Macmillan, 1908), x; John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1976), 221–53; Christopher Rowland, *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 403–13; J. Christian Wilson, “The Problem of the Domitianic Date of Revelation,” *NTS* 39 (1993): 587–605. For a date in the reign of Domitian, see: H. B. Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John*, 3rd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1911), xcix–cvi; I. T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John* (New York: Macmillan, 1919), 197–208; R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1920), 1:xcix–xcvii; A. Y. Collins, “Dating the Apocalypse of John,” *BFER* 26 (1981): 33–45; Gregory K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 4–27; Koester, *Revelation*, 71–79. For a mediating position, that the book was initially composed following the Neronian persecution in the AD 60s but given its final shape at the time of Trajan, see Martin Hengel, *The Johannine Question*, trans. J. Bowden (London: SCM, 1989), 80–81; cf. David E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1997), lviii.

<sup>9</sup> On the genre and its implications, see esp. Richard J. Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 1–22.

<sup>10</sup> The Greek phrase Ἀποκάλυψις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ could be understood as a subjective genitive (Jesus Christ as the one who made the revelation) or an objective genitive (Jesus Christ as the content of the revelation). Since Revelation 1:1 continues that God gave this revelation to Jesus “to show to his servants,” it seems most likely that it should be understood as a subjective genitive: Jesus is the revealer of the vision.

heavenly throne-room, showing reality in true perspective, so that its recipients may rightly understand the world, and conduct themselves accordingly (1:1–3).<sup>12</sup> As a *prophecy* (1:1–3, 10–19; 4:1–2; 17:1–3; 21:9–10; 22:6–7, 10, 18, 19), Revelation places itself in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets (10:7–11; 19:10; 22:6, 9), and shows how their promises of God’s universal kingdom on earth have begun to reach fulfillment in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.<sup>13</sup> As a *circular letter* (1:4–5, 11; 22:16, 21), Revelation addresses the seven churches of the Roman province of Asia in seven individual letters (2:1–3:22), which are connected in a range of ways to John’s initial vision-commission (1:9–20), to each other (2:1–3:22), and to the book’s major vision (4:1–22:5). The letters address the particular challenges facing each of the churches,<sup>14</sup> while calling all of them together to engage in the eschatological battle described in the book’s central vision, confident of the victory God has won in Christ.<sup>15</sup>

Revelation, then, provides the view from God’s eternal throne. The book’s claim is that the Lord Jesus himself has opened the door of heaven (4:1) and revealed to his servant John (1:1) the true nature of reality, so that the book’s auditors might see through the false worldviews of non-Christian Judaism and the Greco-Roman world and learn to live faithfully as they wait for God’s final victory.<sup>16</sup> The book addresses “the seven churches that are in Asia” (1:4) who had faced, were facing, and were about to face, violent persecution for their devotion to the Lord Jesus. Its primary purpose is to comfort and encourage such believers with the knowledge that “the Lord God Almighty” reigns (4:8; 11:17), and that his victory over evil—in Christ’s death and resurrection—will soon be worked out in all its fullness. Christian believers, therefore, must resist compromise with the world around them, and instead *worship* the one true God, bear *witness* to his victory in Christ, and patiently *wait* for its final outworking in the world.

In what follows, I examine, in Part 2, Roman rule, the Roman imperial cults, and the persecution of Christians in Asia in the first century, before turning, in Part 3, to Revelation’s response to this persecution.

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<sup>11</sup> This revelation primarily takes the form of a “vision” (9:17: ὄρασις), which John “heard and saw” (22:8) and which he has, at divine command, written down (1:3, 11, 19; 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14; 14:13; 19:9; 21:5).

<sup>12</sup> For recent discussion of the genre of “apocalypse,” see esp. John J. Collins, “What is Apocalyptic Literature?” in *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature*, ed. John J. Collins, Oxford Handbooks (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1–16.

<sup>13</sup> Bauckham, *Theology*, 145: the process of “interpreting Jesus Christ in the light of the Old Testament and the Old Testament in the light of Jesus Christ” climaxes in John’s new prophetic revelation.

<sup>14</sup> See esp. Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting*, JSNTSup 11 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1986).

<sup>15</sup> The symbolism of *seven* churches indicates that the seven letters address the church at large, in its *totality*, as the body of believers throughout the whole world. See esp. Bauckham, *Theology*, 15, 125, 213.

<sup>16</sup> For an insightful analysis of Revelation’s rhetorical strategy, see David A. deSilva, *Seeing Things John’s Way: The Rhetoric of the Book of Revelation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2009).

## 2. A Hostile World: Roman Rule, the Roman Imperial Cults, and the Persecution of Christians in Asia in the First Century

### 2.1. Roman Rule and the Roman Imperial Cults

The principate of Octavian (= Augustus; 27 BC–AD 14) marks the transition from the Roman Republic to the Roman Empire. Among many new developments, Augustus oversaw the remarkable rise of “imperial cults” in which worship was directed not only to Rome, as previously, but to the person of the *princeps* (later emperor) himself. These “imperial cults” are best understood as the range of ways in which people honored the Roman emperors—and members of their families—with titles and practices traditionally reserved for gods and goddesses.<sup>17</sup> Roman citizens and provincials honored the emperors by constructing temples, appointing priesthoods, offering sacrifices, celebrating games, holding festivals, instituting choirs, and in other related activities.

Older scholarship tended to view these imperial cults as a political tool, in the guise of religion, that served to unify the provinces with Rome.<sup>18</sup> More recent approaches have nuanced this view, emphasizing the way in which the rituals and symbols of the cults served to define the emperor’s central role in the cosmic, political, economic, and social order by integrating the emperor into the established patterns of life in the Greco-Roman world.<sup>19</sup> Crucially, the emperor—who was recognized as both human and divine—came to be seen as the one who connected heaven and earth. The imperial order, with the emperor at its head, was the “guarantor and mediator of the favor of the

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<sup>17</sup> For an excellent review of the literature on the Roman imperial cult and the book of Revelation to 2010, see Michael Naylor, “The Roman Imperial Cult and Revelation,” *CurBR* 8.2 (2010): 207–39 (208). Important contributions since 2010 include: Anthea Portier-Young, *Apocalypse against Empire: Theologies of Resistance in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011); Richard B. Hays and Stefan Alkier, *Revelation and the Politics of Apocalyptic Interpretation* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012); Bruce W. Winter, *Divine Honours for the Caesars: The First Christians’ Responses* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), esp. 286–306.

<sup>18</sup> See, especially, the influential works of Arthur Darby Nock, “Notes on Ruler-Cult, I–IV,” *JHS* 48.1 (1928): 21–43; “ΣΥΝΝΑΟΣ ΘΕΟΣ,” *HSCP* 41 (1930): 1–62; *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), esp. 229: “By the time of Claudius it [ruler worship] was an outward sign of loyalty which involved little sentiment”; “The Emperor’s Divine Comes,” *JRS* 37, no. 1/2 (1947): 102–16; *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972); “Religious Developments from the Close of the Republic to the Death of Nero,” in *The Cambridge Ancient History*, ed. I. E. S. Edwards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970/75), 10:465–511; esp. 481–82; cf. also M. P. Charlesworth, “Some Observations on Ruler-Cult, Especially in Rome,” *HTR* 28.1 (1935): 5–44.

<sup>19</sup> See especially, with different emphases, Keith Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves*, *Sociological Studies in Roman History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 197–242; Simon R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Steven J. Friesen, *Twice Neokoros: Ephesus, Asia and the Cult of the Flavian Imperial Family*, *Religions in the Graeco-Roman World* (Leiden: Brill, 1993).

gods.”<sup>20</sup> The imperial cults, therefore, which focused on the worship of the emperors, did not displace the traditional worship of gods and goddesses. They provided a crucial point of integration between the newly established cosmic order and the traditional life and worship of the cities across the empire.<sup>21</sup>

There was, however, no single, monolithic, centrally-established “imperial cult” during the first century. It is now increasingly recognized that the initiative in worshiping the Roman emperors was, by and large, taken by local elites, who sought to integrate their cities with the Roman world and ingratiate themselves with their Roman overlords. Emperor worship developed, therefore, in different ways across the empire.<sup>22</sup> In particular, the imperial cults took a different form in Rome, where only deceased emperors were officially honored as divine, and in the provinces, where the living emperor could officially be worshiped as a god.<sup>23</sup>

In the city of Rome, the Roman Senate honored worthy emperors, after their deaths, with a ceremony of *apotheosis* or divinization, subsequent to which the deceased emperor was considered to dwell among the gods in the region of the stars.<sup>24</sup> This practice began as early as 42 BC, when the Roman Senate, responding to the initiative of Octavian and his fellow *triumvirs*, posthumously deified Julius Caesar as *Divus Iulius* (“divine Julius”). It was confirmed in 29 BC when Octavian, Julius Caesar’s adopted son, dedicated a temple to his deified father in the Roman forum.<sup>25</sup> The longstanding Roman opposition to monarchy, however, meant that Octavian was careful to manage the honors offered to him during his lifetime. In 27 BC he accepted the honorific titles *Princeps civitatis* (“first citizen”) and *Augustus* (“revered one”), but made no claims to royal or divine status. The more prudent of the Roman emperors in the first century followed suit.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, Augustus was able to use the divinization of his adoptive father to present himself, on

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<sup>20</sup> John M. G. Barclay, *Pauline Churches and Diaspora Jews*, WUNT 275 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 355–56.

<sup>21</sup> For this understanding of the imperial cults, see esp. Price, *Rituals and Power*, 239–48.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Mogens H. Hansen and Simon R. F. Price, “Ruler-Cult: II. Roman,” in *OCD*, 1338–39.

<sup>23</sup> Dio Cassius, *Hist.* 51.20.

<sup>24</sup> Cicero, *Phil.* 1.13; 2.110; Pliny, *Pan.* 10.4; 24.5; 89.2; Manilius, *Astron.* 1.799–804; Herodian, *Hist.* 4.2. For discussion, see esp. Simon R. F. Price, “Noble Funeral to Divine Cult: The Consecration of Roman Emperors,” in *Rituals of Royalty: Power and Ceremonial in Traditional Societies*, ed. David Cannadine and Simon R. F. Price (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 56–105; Larry J. Kreitzer, “Apotheosis of the Roman Emperor,” *BA* 53.4 (1990): 210–17; *Striking New Images: Roman Imperial Coinage and the New Testament World*, JSNTSup 134 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996), 69–98.

<sup>25</sup> Suetonius, *Jul.* 88.1; Pliny the Elder, *Nat.* 2.93–94. Cf. Hansen and Price, “Ruler-Cult: II. Roman,” 1338.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Arnaldo Momigliano, “How Roman Emperors Became Gods,” *American Scholar* 55 (1986): 181–93 (187): “Generally speaking, the emperor had to approve, to limit, and occasionally to refuse ruler-cult. He had to be worshiped, and yet he had to remain a man in order to live on social terms with the Roman aristocracy of which he was supposed to be the ‘Princeps.’” Momigliano summarizes the situation by saying that during his lifetime, the Roman emperor of the first century was “more of a god in his absence than in his presence.”

his coins and inscriptions, as *divi filius* (“son of the divinity”).<sup>27</sup> And certainly, after his death, Augustus was also divinized, and widely believed, by virtue of his *apotheosis*, to be ruling the world from the heavens, in the presence of his father.<sup>28</sup>

In the years that followed, the honor of divinization was officially only granted posthumously, and was never automatic.<sup>29</sup> In the first century, it was paid to Claudius (AD 41–54),<sup>30</sup> Vespasian (AD 69–79),<sup>31</sup> and Titus (AD 79–81),<sup>32</sup> but not to Tiberius (AD 14–37), Gaius Caligula (AD 37–41), Nero (AD 54–68), or Domitian (AD 81–96). This official reserve, however, did not stop at least some sections of the general populace in Rome, and in towns across Italy, from honoring living Roman emperors as divine.<sup>33</sup> It also did not stop some of the more audacious emperors from making exalted claims for themselves, even during their lifetimes, and even in the city of Rome. In the middle of the century, Gaius Caligula sought royal and even divine status for himself in Rome as well as in the provinces.<sup>34</sup> And forty years later, at the time when Revelation was being written, Domitian audaciously styled himself “our lord and god,”<sup>35</sup> minted coins that show him enthroned as “father of the gods,”<sup>36</sup> and filled Rome with his statues, even demanding that he be worshiped as a god, by sacrifice, in the capital itself.<sup>37</sup> In the first century, however, such claims remained—in the city of Rome—the exception rather than the rule.

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<sup>27</sup> For the Roman emperors as “son of god,” see esp. Michael Peppard, *The Son of God in the Roman World: Divine Sonship in Its Social and Political Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). For Augustus, see Lily Ross Taylor, *The Divinity of the Roman Emperor*, Philological monographs (Middletown, CT: American Philological Association, 1931), 142–80. For Nero as “son of God,” see Miriam T. Griffin, *Nero: The End of a Dynasty* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 98.

<sup>28</sup> For the *apotheosis* and heavenly rule of Augustus, see: Suetonius, *Aug.* 100.4; Tacitus, *Ann.* 1.10; Dio Cassius, *Hist.* 41.9; Seneca, *Apocolocyntosis* 1, 10; *Oct.* 477–91, 504–33; *Clem.* 1.10.3–1.11.4; Manilius, *Astron.* 1.7–10, 384–86, 800–803, 915–16, 925–26; 4.551–52, 932–35; *Insc. lat. sel.* 137.

<sup>29</sup> Price, “Noble Funeral,” 56–105 (57) notes that between Augustus and Constantine, a total of thirty six of the sixty emperors, as well as twenty-seven of their family members, underwent *apotheosis* and received the title *divus* (“divine”).

<sup>30</sup> Suetonius, *Claud.* 45; Dio Cassius, *Hist.* 61.35.1–4.

<sup>31</sup> Herodian, *Hist.* 4.2.

<sup>32</sup> Suetonius, *Dom.* 2; cf. Herodian, *Hist.* 4.2. Note also the Temple to Vespasian, which Titus began building in the Roman forum (AD 79), and which Domitian completed and dedicated to his father and brother (ca. AD 87).

<sup>33</sup> See esp. Ittai Gradel, *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion*, Oxford Classical Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>34</sup> Suetonius, *Cal.* 22; cf. also Josephus, *A.J.* 18.261–62; *B.J.* 2.184–87; Philo, *Legat.* 184–96, 346–48.

<sup>35</sup> Suetonius, *Dom.* 13; Cf. Ruurd R. Nauta, *Poetry for Patrons: Literary Communication in the Age of Domitian*, Mnemosyne, bibliotheca classica Batava Supplementum (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2002), 383 who demonstrates that “lord” and “god” were applied to Domitian by his contemporaries.

<sup>36</sup> Aline Abaecherli, “Imperial Symbols on Certain Flavian Coins,” *CP* 30 (1935): 131–40.

<sup>37</sup> Suetonius, *Dom.* 13; Dio Cassius, *Hist.* 67.4; cf. 8.1; Pliny, *Pan.* 52.1, 7. Cf. Statius, *Silvae* 5.2.170 who designates Domitian *deus praesens* (“present deity”).

In the provinces, things were different: provincials were granted official permission, from the beginning, to worship living emperors.<sup>38</sup> In the Greek East this practice had deep roots in the long established Hellenistic ruler-cults, in which living rulers were granted divine honors.<sup>39</sup> Thus, for Roman intellectuals, like Tacitus, the honor paid to the emperor was a *Graeco adulatio* (“Greek adulation”);<sup>40</sup> and for Jews, like Philo, it was a “barbaric custom.”<sup>41</sup> Already during his lifetime, Augustus allowed local elites to honor him (and Rome) by constructing temples, erecting cult statues, establishing a range of associated activities (games, priesthoods, processions, sacrifices), and by attributing to him titles and qualities traditionally directed to the gods and goddesses.<sup>42</sup> No less than sixty-six temples were dedicated to the divine Augustus in the first century, either alone or in conjunction with the goddess *Roma* or other figures.<sup>43</sup> For our purposes, it is particularly significant that these imperial cults developed first and fastest in the Greek East, including in the province of Asia. Indeed, the evidence indicates that “the diffusion of the cult of Augustus and of other members of his family in Asia Minor and throughout the Greek East from the beginning of the empire was rapid, indeed almost instantaneous.”<sup>44</sup>

## 2.2. Roman Imperial Cults in Asia in the First Century

In the first century, the Roman Empire dominated the political landscape of Asia Minor. The Roman armies had defeated the Seleucid King Antiochus III, who ruled the region, in 189 BC, and Rome had taken direct control of Asia in 133 BC when Attalus III of Pergamum bequeathed his kingdom to the Romans. From this point onwards, loyalty to Rome became part and parcel of

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<sup>38</sup> Elias J. Bickermann, “Consecratio,” in *Le culte des souverains dans l’empire romain*, ed. Willem den Boer (Geneva: Fondation Hardt, 1972), 1–37 (9–10).

<sup>39</sup> Price, *Rituals and Power*, 29–30, 52, argues that the Greek ruler cults can be at least partly explained as a means by which Greek cities made sense of the unprecedented power wielded by the Greek monarchs in the Hellenistic period.

<sup>40</sup> Tacitus, *Ann.* 6.18. For discussion, see Glen W. Bowersock, “Greek Intellectuals and the Imperial Cult in the Second Century A.D.,” in *Le Culte des souverains dans l’Empire Romain. 7 exposés suivis de discussions*, ed. Elias J. Bickerman and Willem den Boer, Entretiens sur l’antiquité classique (Vandœuvres-Genève: Fondation Hardt; Francke, Berne: Dépositaire pour la Suisse, 1973), 179–212.

<sup>41</sup> Philo, *Legat.* 116: Philo denounces the fact that, at the time of Gaius, some people had “even introduced the barbaric custom [τὸ βαρβαρικὸν ἔθος] into Italy of falling down in adoration [τὴν προσκύνησιν] before him [= the Roman emperor].”

<sup>42</sup> See Hansen and Price, “Ruler-Cult: II. Roman,” 1338–39: from the time of Augustus onwards living Roman emperors were accommodated within the established Olympian pantheon and “granted temples and cult statues, priests and processions, sacrifices and games.”

<sup>43</sup> For the details, see Heidi Hänlein-Schäfer, *Veneratio Augusti: Eine Studie zu den Tempeln des ersten römischen Kaisers.*, Archaeologica (Rome: Bretschneider, 1985). While fewer temples were dedicated to Augustus’s immediate successors, there were many cults which gave generic honor to “the emperors.” Price, *Rituals and Power*, 57–58 argues that this demonstrates that Augustus’ “charisma” had been effectively institutionalized.

<sup>44</sup> Stephen Mitchell, *Anatolia: Land, Men, and Gods in Asia Minor*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 1:100.

life in Asia Minor. Indeed, even as early as 195 BC, Smyrna had become the first city in the region to erect a temple to the goddess Roma.<sup>45</sup> It was in the first century BC, however, during the principate of Augustus, that imperial cults specifically directed to the worship of the emperor began to develop. Indeed, the loyalty of Asia to the Roman emperors from Augustus onwards may be gauged by the Council of Asia's decree, in 9 BC, that the region's calendar would henceforth be measured from "the birthday of the god (Augustus)." That date, it declared, "was the beginning for the world of the glad tidings (εὐαγγέλια = gospels) that have come to men through him." The Calendar Decree goes on to announce that Augustus by his "appearance" (ἐπιφάνεια) as "savior" (σωτήρ) had brought "peace" (εἰρήνη) and "hope" (ἐλπίδα) to the known world.<sup>46</sup>

The imperial cults in the provinces primarily took three forms. First, provincial councils established official provincial cults with the approval of the Roman Senate and the emperor.<sup>47</sup> Leading cities vied with each other for the privilege of hosting a temple to the emperor, and those cities granted permission to establish an imperial cult boasted the title νεοκόρος ("temple caretaker").<sup>48</sup> At these centers, the cult generally followed the Roman custom of reserving the title θεός ("god") for deceased emperors who had been officially deified by the Senate.<sup>49</sup>

The first city in Asia to formally establish a Roman imperial cult of this kind was Pergamum. In 29 BC Augustus granted the Council of Asia permission to build a temple in the city "to himself and the City of Rome."<sup>50</sup> Although Pergamum lost to Ephesus its status as the leading city of the region during the course of the first century,<sup>51</sup> it remained the center of the Roman

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<sup>45</sup> Tacitus, *Ann.* 4.56.

<sup>46</sup> For the full text, see *OGIS* 2:458. For a translation, see V. Ehrenberg and A. H. M. Jones, eds., *Documents Illustrating the Reigns of Augustus and Tiberius*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976) § 98b. For further examples, see G. A. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 366–67; trans. of *Licht vom Osten* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1908); Ehrenberg and Jones, *Documents*, nos. 14, 38, 41, 98, 99.

<sup>47</sup> For discussion and the primary evidence, see esp. Steven J. Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 25–55.

<sup>48</sup> For discussion, see esp. Friesen, *Twice Neokoros*, 50–75. The term originally referred to a temple official who assisted the priests and priestesses in their work. During the first century it came to be applied to cities which "took care" of the temples of the imperial cult.

<sup>49</sup> Friesen, *Twice Neokoros*, 22–23. See *IGRom.* 1:55–56; 4:1756.

<sup>50</sup> Tacitus, *Ann.* 4.37; cf. Dio Cassius, *Hist.* 51.20.6 records that following Octavian's victory at the battle of Actium (31 BC), the *koinon* (provincial council) of Asia requested, in 29 BC, permission to establish in Pergamum a cult for Rome and Octavian. The inscriptions and coins universally identify this temple as the "Temple of Rome and Augustus" (the honorific title granted Octavian in 27 BC). Two early bronze coins depict in the temple a statue of Augustus in military garb with a spear in his right hand—from AD 4–5: *BM Coins, Rom. Emp. (Mysia)* 139, #242, pl. 28; from AD 29–35: *BM Coins, Rom. Emp. (Mysia)* 140, #256, pl. 28). Two later silver coins depict in the temple a statue of Roma crowning Augustus—from the time of Claudius: *BM Coins, Rom. Emp.* 1.196, #228, pl. 34; from the time of Vespasian: *BM Coins, Rom. Emp.* 2.94, #449, pl. 43. For discussion, see especially Friesen, *Twice Neokoros*, 7–15.

<sup>51</sup> David S. Potter, "Pergamum," in *ABD*, ed. D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:228–30 (230).

imperial cult in the province.<sup>52</sup> In addition to the temple of Rome and Augustus, Pergamum was granted the right to hold sacred games in honor of the emperor,<sup>53</sup> and to establish an imperial choir of “hymn singers,” drawn from local elites with hereditary membership, which gathered at regular festivals throughout the year “to sing hymns in honor of Roma and Augustus on behalf of the province of Asia.”<sup>54</sup> In the middle of the first century the Council of Asia decreed that Pergamum should host an annual festival to “Sebastos Tiberius Caesar god.”<sup>55</sup> And not long after Revelation was written, the construction of a new temple to the Roman emperor Trajan (AD 98–117; ca. AD 113), the Traianeum, prominently situated at the top of the Pergamene acropolis, provides a clear indication of the trajectory towards which the imperial cult in Pergamum was headed in the latter part of the first century.<sup>56</sup> The construction of this temple allowed the city to boast that it was “twice temple-warden” (νεωκόρος)—the center of devotion to Caesar in the whole province of Asia.<sup>57</sup>

Not to be outdone, the city of Smyrna, in AD 23, requested—and was granted—the right to build a temple “to Tiberius, to his mother (Livia), and to the Senate.”<sup>58</sup> This was an unusual move, since no other province in the empire had two temples to the emperor at this time, and Tiberius was forced to explain his actions to the Senate.<sup>59</sup> Several cities vied for the honor of hosting the temple, but eventually Smyrna was chosen. The construction of this temple gave Smyrna the coveted title, together with Pergamum, of “temple warden” (νεωκόρος). In the course of time the city was granted the right to build two further temples to Roman emperors under Hadrian (AD 117–138) and Caracalla (AD 211–217).<sup>60</sup>

In the same way, towards the end of the first century, the Council of Asia established a third temple for the imperial cult, at Ephesus, in honor of the

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<sup>52</sup> Antony Spawforth and Charlotte Roueché, “Pergamum,” in  *OCD*, 1138; cf. Pliny, *Nat.* 5.126, writing in AD 77, who describes Pergamum as “the most famous place of Asia.”

<sup>53</sup> *IGRom.* 4:1064 = *SIG* 3:1065 (Kos, reign of Caligula); *IGRom.* 4:498 (Pergamum).

<sup>54</sup> Price, *Rituals and Power*, 118. See: *I. Ephesos* Ia 18d 11–19; *I. Pergamon* 374.

<sup>55</sup> *IGRom.* 4:1608c = *I.Eph.* VII 2, 3801 (restored) records the decree of the Asian assembly which provides for an annual festival in Pergamum (translation from *Rituals and Power*, 105): “Since one should each year make clear display of one’s piety and of all holy, fitting intentions towards the imperial house, the choir of all Asia, gathering at Pergamum on the most holy birthday of Sebastos Tiberius Caesar god, performs a task that contributes greatly to the glory of Sebastos in hymning the imperial house and performing sacrifices to the Sebastan gods and conducting festivals and feasts.”

<sup>56</sup> Indeed, Price, *Rituals and Power*, 252–53 provides a catalogue of Imperial Temples and shrines in Asia Minor that shows that by the end of the early second century Pergamum boasted not only the temple to Rome and Augustus, but also the Temple of Zeus Philios and Trajan, and an Imperial Room in the Asclepieum. See also an inscription from the time of Hadrian that shows the cult continued well into the second century (*IGRom.* 4:353).

<sup>57</sup> For a comprehensive survey of the evidence from Pergamum, see Helmut Koester, *Pergamon Citadel of the Gods: Archaeological Record, Literary Description, and Religious Development*, HTS 46 (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998).

<sup>58</sup> Tacitus, *Ann.* 4.15.

<sup>59</sup> Tacitus, *Ann.* 4.55–56.

<sup>60</sup> Price, *Rituals and Power*, 258–59.

emperor Titus.<sup>61</sup> This temple is attested in thirteen inscriptions from AD 89–90, and is more properly known as the “the Temple of the Sebastoi” (ναὸς τῶν Σεβαστῶν), a title that reflects what became the common practice of referring to the reigning emperor as “god Sebastos” (σεβαστός = *Augustus* = “Revered One”), and the members of the imperial family as “Sebastoi gods” (“revered gods”).<sup>62</sup>

In addition to these formally established provincial cults, a second form of imperial cult, known as municipal or civic cults, were often established on local authority, following local customs.<sup>63</sup> These cults were freer in the divine honors paid to living emperors. In Asia in the first century, there were municipal or civic sanctuaries of this kind at Ephesus, Thyatira, Laodicea, and Aphrodisias. In Ephesus, for example, while the worship at the great temple of Artemis continued to dominate the civic landscape, as early as AD 15, the “Association of Roman Citizens” (*conventus Civium Romanorum*) erected, in the city’s “State Agora,” a temple in honor of “Divine Caesar” (*Divus Caesar*) and the “goddess Roma” (*Dea Roma*). While these institutions did not have the formal recognition of the Roman Senate, they were often established by the leading families or groups in the city, were well integrated with the city’s main institutions, and played an important role in civic life.

Finally, in addition to the official provincial cults, and the municipal or civic cults, private imperial cults were established, throughout the course of the first century, in a range of unofficial locations, including among the guilds and in private households.<sup>64</sup> These private cults provided a means for professional associations and family groups to honor the emperor in their own way. In Smyrna, for example, there was a group called the “Caesarists” who offered sacrifices for the emperors as “revered gods” and held banquets in their honor.<sup>65</sup> And in Ephesus, at the time of Domitian, the worship of the goddess Demeter also included mysteries and sacrifices to the emperor.<sup>66</sup>

Imperial cults were, therefore, a major feature of life in the cities of Asia during the first century. Loyal citizens of the empire participated in the cults as part and parcel of their daily life. By burning incense, offering sacrifice and joining in public festivals and processions, they declared that “Caesar is Lord.” In the ordinary course of life, therefore, Christian believers faced pressure to demonstrate their loyalty to the divinely established cosmic and

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<sup>61</sup> It used to be thought the cult was established for Domitian. Steven J. Friesen, “Ephesus: Key to a Vision in Revelation,” *BAR* 19 (1993): 24–37 notes, however, that further examination of the colossus erected at Ephesus has revealed that it depicted Titus (AD 79–81) rather than Domitian (AD 81–96).

<sup>62</sup> *I. Ephesos* 2.233, lines 9–10. Cf. *I. Ephesos* 2.232, 232a, 233, 234, 235, 237, 238, 239, 240, 241, 242; 5.1498; 6.2048. For discussion, see esp. Friesen, *Twice Neokoros*, 29–49. For a comprehensive survey of the evidence from Ephesus, see Helmut Koester, *Ephesos Metropolis of Asia: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Its Archaeology, Religion, and Culture*, HTS 41 (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995); cf. Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, *St. Paul’s Ephesus: Texts and Archaeology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2008).

<sup>63</sup> For discussion and primary evidence, see esp. Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 56–103.

<sup>64</sup> See esp. Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 104–21.

<sup>65</sup> *IGRom.* 4:1348.

<sup>66</sup> *I.Eph.* 213.

social order, not only as members of the civic community, but also in their professional guilds and in their households. Refusal to participate was conspicuous and costly. It was both religious impiety and political disloyalty; both “atheism” and “treason.”<sup>67</sup> It threatened the entire cosmic and social order. It was “hatred of the human race.”<sup>68</sup> The fundamental and irreconcilable clash between the basic Christian conviction that Jesus is Lord and participation in the imperial cults, therefore, meant that it was only a matter of time before the early Christians came into conflict with the supporters of Roman rule in Asia.

### 2.3. Roman Imperial Cults and the Persecution of Christians in the First Century

The persecution of Christians in the first century must be carefully understood. The scholarship has rightly emphasized that there is no evidence for an empire-wide, state-sponsored persecution of Christians in this period, whether under Domitian or otherwise.<sup>69</sup> That came later, but not until the emperor Decius (AD 249–51).<sup>70</sup> Indeed, prior to Nero’s persecution of Christians in Rome in the mid-sixties AD and the Jewish War of AD 66–70, Roman authorities tended to treat Christians as a subset of the Jews, with the effect that Christians benefitted from the *mos maiorum* granted to Jews (i.e., the right to live according to ancestral custom). This included exemption from participation in Roman religious observance, including the imperial cults.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Justin, *1 Apol.* 6: “Hence we are called atheists. And we confess that we are atheists, so far as gods of this sort are concerned, but not with respect to the most true God”; Tertullian, *Apol.* 24.1: Christians face “the accusation of treason most of all against Roman religion.”

<sup>68</sup> Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44. Tacitus refers to the charges against Christians at the time of the Neronian persecution in Rome. He does not make direct reference to Christian non-participation in imperial cults. There is no doubt, however, that such non-participation was widely viewed in these terms.

<sup>69</sup> It was once widely suggested that the emperor Domitian (AD 81–96) sponsored an empire-wide persecution of Christians. Leonard L. Thompson, *The book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) demonstrated that the evidence cannot sustain this view, but overstated the case in his attempted rehabilitation of Domitian. For a balanced assessment, see esp. Beale, *Revelation*, 12–15; cf. T. B. Slater, “On the Social Setting of the Revelation to John,” *NTS* 44.2 (1998): 232–56 (254–55); Naylor, “Imperial Cult,” 226–27: “it has generally been accepted in recent years that a full-blown, empire-wide persecution directed against Christians under Domitian is unlikely.”

<sup>70</sup> See esp. G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, “Why Were the early Christians Persecuted?” *Past and Present* 26 (1963): 6–38, esp. 6–7: “We know of no persecution by the Roman government until 64, and there was no general persecution until that of Decius. Between 64 and 250 there were only isolated, local persecutions; and even if the total number of victims was quite considerable (as I think it probably was), most individual outbreaks must usually have been quite brief.”

<sup>71</sup> For the *mos maiorum*, see esp. Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.5 and Josephus, *A.J.* 16.163. See discussion in O. F. Robinson, *The Criminal Law of Ancient Rome* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 97. For the inclusion of Christians under the Jewish umbrella, including exemption from participation in the imperial cult, see B. W. Winter, “Gallio’s Ruling on the Legal Status of Early Christianity,” *TynBul* 50 (1999): 213–24. Winter argues convincingly that Gallio’s ruling (Acts 18:12–17) effectively recognized Christians as a “party” within Judaism and thus granted Christians in the province of Achaëa exemption from participation in the cult.

There is, however, plenty of evidence for sporadic, localized persecution of Christians across the empire from the very beginning. This is clear in the earliest Christian texts, including the Gospels,<sup>72</sup> the book of Acts,<sup>73</sup> the Letters of Paul,<sup>74</sup> the Letters of Peter,<sup>75</sup> and others,<sup>76</sup> all of which provide consistent evidence of Christians facing persecution.

The pattern of these persecutions seems, at first, to have taken the form of Jewish opponents persecuting Christians, and/or “stirring up” non-Jews to persecute Christians, and/or denouncing Christians to Roman authorities, with more or less success in prosecuting the case.<sup>77</sup> Jewish accusations against Christians were not, for the most part, directed at Christian non-participation in Greco-Roman religion or the imperial cults, but focused on the claim that Christians were distorting Jewish traditions and practices, and disturbing the peace.<sup>78</sup>

There is, however, also early evidence of non-Jews actively joining in the “hatred” of Christians,<sup>79</sup> and of persecution of Christians for their refusal to properly honor Caesar as Lord. As early as AD 49 Paul can speak of the Thessalonian believers suffering persecution at the hands of their “own countrymen” (1 Thess 2:14: ὑπὸ τῶν ἰδίων συμφυλετῶν). According to the book of Acts, this persecution began with the Jewish accusation against Paul and his companions that Christians were refusing to properly honor Caesar by declaring that “there is another king, Jesus” (Acts 17:6–7).<sup>80</sup> The book of Acts, further, reports that on at least two occasions, in Philippi and in Ephesus, non-Jews initiated the persecution of Christians because of a perceived threat to the worship of the Greco-Roman gods and to the Roman

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<sup>72</sup> In the Gospels, Jesus repeatedly predicts the persecution of his followers: Matt 5:11, 44; 10:23; 23:34; 24:9–12; Mark 10:30; 13:9–13; Luke 21:12–19; John 15:20; 16:2; cf. 9:22; 12:42.

<sup>73</sup> In the book of Acts, the apostles and other believers face repeated persecution in diverse geographical locations: (i) In Jerusalem: Acts 4:1–22; 5:17–42; 6:8–7:1; 7:54–60; 8:1–3 (cf. Acts 22:4–5, 7–8, 19–20; 26:9–12, 14–15; 1 Tim 1:13); 12:1–5, 11; 21:27, 31 (cf. 23:27; 26:21); 22:2, 10, 22–24; 23:5–6, 9, 12–15, 21, 30; 24:27; 25:3; 25:6–26:32; (ii) In Pisidian Antioch: Acts 13:50; (iii) In Iconium: Acts 14:5; (iv) In Lystra: Acts 14:19; (v) In Philippi: Acts 16:19–24, 37; (vi) In Thessalonica: Acts 17:5–9; (vii) In Berea: Acts 17:13–14; (viii) In Athens: Acts 17:32; (ix) In Corinth: Acts 18:6, 12; 20:3; (x) In Ephesus: Acts 19:9–10, 23–41; (xi) In Rome: Acts 28:20, 22. See also the general principle: Acts 14:22; cf. 6:9; 15:26; 20:11, 13, 19, 23; 21:11–13.

<sup>74</sup> Rom 8:35; 2 Cor 1:8; 6:4; 12:10; 1 Thess 1:6; 3:2–7; 2 Thess 1:4, 6; 2 Tim 3:11.

<sup>75</sup> 1 Pet 1:7; 3:13–17; 4:12–19.

<sup>76</sup> Heb 10:33–34.

<sup>77</sup> Acts 4:1–22; 5:17–42; 6:8–7:1; 7:54–60; 8:1–3 (cf. Acts 22:4–5, 7–8, 19–20; 26:9–12, 14–15; 1 Tim 1:13); 12:1–5, 11; 13:45, 50; 14:2–7, 19; 17:5–9, 13–14; 18:6, 12; 19:9–10; 20:3, 11, 19; 21:27, 31; 22:2, 10, 22–24; 23:5–6, 9, 12–15, 21, 27, 30; 25:3; 25:6–26:32; 1 Thess 2:14–16; Mart. Pol. 12:1–2; 13:1; Tertullian, *Scorp.* 10; cf. Justin, *Dial.* 16, 47, and 96, who reports the synagogue practice of pronouncing curses on Christians.

<sup>78</sup> Acts 18:12–17; 24:1–9.

<sup>79</sup> Matt 24:9; Mark 13:13; Lk 21:17; Acts 13:50; 14:5, 19; 17:5–9.

<sup>80</sup> Acts 17:5–9; cf. anticipations in Luke 23:1–5; John 19:2, 12–16. For discussion of the persecution of Christians in Thessalonica, see Murray J. Smith, “The Thessalonian Correspondence,” in *All Things to All Cultures: Paul among Jews, Greeks and Romans*, ed. Mark Harding and Alanna Nobbs (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 269–301 (275–77).

way of life.<sup>81</sup> Christian non-participation in imperial cults is not explicitly given as the reason for the persecution in either case. Nevertheless, given that the imperial cults were “a major part of the web of power that formed the fabric of society,” any attempt to advocate “customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice” (Acts 16:21) would have been perceived as a threat to the Roman imperial order.<sup>82</sup> In the same way, Tacitus’s account of Nero’s persecution of Christians following the fire of Rome in AD 64–65 does not explicitly highlight Christian non-participation in imperial cults. Nevertheless, his description of Christianity as a “mischievous superstition,” characterized by a range of “hideous and shameful ... abominations,” including “hatred against humankind,” suggests that Nero singled out the “immense multitude” of Christians because they were perceived as a threat to the imperial order.<sup>83</sup> And certainly, Pliny’s letter to the emperor Trajan in AD 110 makes it clear that Christian non-participation in the imperial cult was at issue.<sup>84</sup> Pliny reports to Trajan how he had allowed those denounced as “Christians” the opportunity to repudiate Christ and to demonstrate their loyalty by offering “prayer with incense and wine *to your image*.” Pliny further reports that many Christians had accepted this invitation: “they all *worshipped your image* and the statues of the gods, and cursed Christ.”<sup>85</sup> Indeed, a range of evidence from later in the second century confirms this trajectory: Christians were required to demonstrate their loyalty to the emperor by making sacrifices to him and by declaring that “Caesar is Lord”;<sup>86</sup> many refused to do so, and were persecuted as a result.<sup>87</sup>

Taken together, this evidence explains well why Christians faced sporadic and localized persecution from the supporters of Roman authority in the first century: (i) the Christian proclamation of Jesus as the Jewish “Messiah” resulted in discord within the Jewish community and so threatened the peace; (ii) the Christians’ exclusive devotion to the one God of Israel, the “Father,” as he had revealed himself in his “Son,” the “Lord Jesus Christ,” cut against the polytheistic practices that bound the Greco-Roman world together, and; (iii) Christian refusal to worship the emperor as “Lord” was a shocking failure to honor the one who guaranteed and mediated the favor of the gods, and who embodied in himself the power, prosperity, and peace of the empire.

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<sup>81</sup> Acts 16:19–24, 37; 19:23–41; cf. Acts 17:32.

<sup>82</sup> Simon R. F. Price, “Ritual and Power,” in *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 71.

<sup>83</sup> Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44; cf. 1 Clem. 1.1 in which Clement of Rome speaks of “the sudden and repeated misfortunes and reverses that have happened to us” (διὰ τὰς αἰωνιδίους καὶ ἐπαλλήλους γενομένας ἡμῖν συμφορὰς καὶ περιπτώσεις).

<sup>84</sup> Pliny, *Ep.* 10.96.

<sup>85</sup> Note, however, that in his reply Trajan instructs Pliny to not seek out the Christians, but to respond when accusations are brought to him against them (Pliny, *Ep.* 10.97).

<sup>86</sup> Mart. Pol. 8.1–12.2; cf. Tertullian, *Apol.* 34.1 who states clearly: “For my part, I am willing to give the emperor this designation [“Lord”], but in the common acceptation of the word, and when I am not forced to call him Lord as in God’s place.”

<sup>87</sup> Tertullian, *Apol.* 10 (ca. AD 197) reports the common charge as follows: “You do not worship the gods,” you say; “and you do not offer sacrifices for the emperors” (*deus non colitis et pro imperatoribus sacrificia non penditis*); cf. Minucius Felix, *Oct.* 5–10; Origen, *Cels.* 8.55–67.

## 2.4. Roman Imperial Cults and the Persecution of Christians in the Book of Revelation

In this context, it is no surprise that when we turn to the book of Revelation, we find good evidence of Christians facing persecution for their refusal to participate in Roman imperial cults. Revelation opens with numerous indications that the Christians it addresses have suffered—or are about to suffer—violent persecution. John introduces himself as “your brother and partner in the tribulation (ἐν τῇ θλίψει) and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus” (1:9). The risen Lord, in his letter to the church of Pergamum, speaks of “Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you” (2:13). The book’s central vision includes a picture of “the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne” (6:9–10).<sup>88</sup> And the great multitude depicted in 7:9 are described as “the ones coming out of the great tribulation” (7:14: οἱ ἐρχόμενοι ἐκ τῆς θλίψεως τῆς μεγάλης). Moreover, as the book reaches its climax, this focus on Christians suffering persecution is significantly intensified by repeated references to the “blood” (τὸ αἷμα) of God’s people. We read of “the blood of the saints and prophets” (16:6), “the blood of the saints, the blood of the martyrs of Jesus” (17:6), “the blood of prophets and of saints” (18:24), and “the blood of his servants” (19:2). There are, finally, also “those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God” (20:4).<sup>89</sup>

Revelation lays responsibility for this bloodshed squarely at the feet of a transcendent evil power, identified as “Satan” or the “devil” and pictured as the “dragon,” which is at work through evil human empire, variously pictured as the “beast from the sea,” the “beast from the land,” the “prostitute,” and the “great city.” Indeed, Revelation makes it clear that Christians are engaged in nothing less than a spiritual war in which these powers are presented as the enemies of God and his people. “The dragon ... makes war” (12:17: ποιῆσαι πόλεμον; cf. 12:7; 16:13–14) and the “beast ... makes war” against God and the Lamb and the saints (11:7: ποιήσει ... πόλεμον; 13:7: ποιῆσαι πόλεμον; 19:19: ποιῆσαι τὸν πόλεμον; cf. 13:4; 16:14; 17:14). Similarly, the “the beast” will “make war on” (ποιήσει ... πόλεμον) and “conquer” (νικήσει) and “kill” (ἀποκτενεῖ) God’s “two witnesses” (11:7–8). The “great prostitute,” which is “the great city” (17:18), for its part, is “drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of the martyrs of Jesus” (17:6; cf. 18:21, 24; 19:2). She is judged because “in her was found the blood of the prophets and of saints, and of all

<sup>88</sup> Theodor Zahn, *Introduction to the New Testament Vol 2*, trans. M. W. Jacobus (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1909), 165–73, 409–10 argues that Rev 6:9–10 refers to Neronian persecution.

<sup>89</sup> Roman law distinguished between two forms of the death penalty, which were variously applied depending on the nature of the offense and *dignitas* (status) of the offender. Members of the lower classes (later called *humiliores*) were subjected to severe forms of execution known as the *summum supplicium* (burning alive, crucifixion, exposure to wild animals); members of the upper classes (later called *honestiores*) were either exiled or, if executed, beheaded (*capite puniri*). The verb *πελεκίζω* at Revelation 20:4 means to “behead with an axe” and probably indicates that the Christian believers so executed belonged to the upper classes. See David E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1998), 1085–88.

who have been slain on earth” (18:21, 24). And, in the end, the “the great multitude in heaven” praise God whose “judgments are true and just” because he has “avenged on her [the great prostitute] the blood of his servants” (19:2). Certainly, Revelation includes evidence of Christians suffering persecution at the hands of Jewish opponents, and in more general terms. In what follows, however, I demonstrate that key passages in Revelation 2–3, 13–14 and 17–18 present the transcendent evil power of “Satan” (the “dragon”), at work through the Roman Empire and its local supporters (the two “beasts” and the “prostitute” or “great city”), as the primary source of Christian suffering in late first century Asia.<sup>90</sup>

(a) *The Lord’s Royal Edicts to his Suffering Churches (Revelation 2–3)*

To begin with, the seven letters of Revelation 2–3 suggest that Revelation addresses Christians suffering persecution because of their refusal to participate in some of Asia’s imperial cults. The letters present themselves, beginning with their opening form of address (τάδε λέγει: “thus speaks”), as “royal edicts” from the risen Lord Jesus, “the ruler of kings on earth” (1:5), and “the King of kings and the Lord of lords” (17:14; 19:16).<sup>91</sup> They are each designed to comfort Christians facing persecution, while also warning them against compromise with the world. The references to persecution in these letters are, in some cases, quite general in nature, and concern the need for “patient endurance” (2:3, 19; 3:10) in the face of “the hour of trial that is coming on the whole world” (3:10). Similarly, some of the warnings they contain are directed generally against participation in “sexual immorality” and “idol worship” (2:14, 20, 24; cf. 3:4), which fit well in a context in which Christians faced pressure to participate in imperial cults, but can also be understood as more general references to the difficulties faced by Christians making their way in the Greco-Roman world (cf. Acts 15:28–29).

In three of the letters, however, the Lord Jesus speaks more directly into the situation of Christians facing pressure to participate in Roman imperial cults. First, the Lord’s “royal edict” to Smyrna acknowledges the “slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan” (2:9; cf. 3:9), and immediately prophesies that the Smyrneans are “about to suffer” because “the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation” (2:10). The gravity of this “tribulation” is evident in the exhortation which follows: “Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life” (2:10). It is difficult to be certain about the precise situation, but given Smyrna’s role as a center of the

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<sup>90</sup> Cf. Price, *Rituals and Power*, 197–98 effectively argues that Revelation is best understood as a response to the increased pressure on the Christian communities following from the establishment of the provincial cult of Domitian at Ephesus (but cf. n. 61 above).

<sup>91</sup> This opening form of address simultaneously evokes the Lord God of Israel’s address to his people through the prophets, and the form of address chosen by the Persian kings in their royal edicts, which was also taken up in various analogous ways in the Roman imperial edicts of the first century. For the details, see Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, 141; Beale, *Revelation*, 229.

imperial cult in Asia, the close connection between “Satan” and Roman imperial cults later in Revelation (see below), and the threat of “imprisonment” and even “death”—which only the legitimate authority in the city could achieve—it seems quite likely that the letter speaks into a situation in which Jews were denouncing Christians to Roman-sponsored authorities for their failure to participate in the imperial cults.<sup>92</sup>

Second, the Lord’s “royal edict” to Pergamum carries four distinctive features that suggest it addresses Christian non-participation in the imperial cults of that city (2:12–17). To begin with, it is significant that Pergamum is singled out from among the seven churches as the place “where Satan’s throne is ... where Satan dwells” (2:13).<sup>93</sup> The letters indicate that Satan is active elsewhere (2:9, 24; 3:9), but “the throne of Satan” (ὁ θρόνος τοῦ Σατανᾶ) is in Pergamum. There may have been various reasons for this designation.<sup>94</sup> The strong connection made between Satan and Roman emperor worship later in the book (see below), however, suggests that Pergamum was the “throne of Satan” especially because it was the first center of Roman imperial cults in all of Asia.<sup>95</sup> Further, sandwiched between these references to “Satan’s throne,” the letter to Pergamum contains the first and only reference to a named Christian martyr in the book (2:13). The Lord commends the church in Pergamum because “you hold fast to my name” (καὶ κρατεῖς τὸ ὄνομά μου) and “did not deny my faith” (καὶ οὐκ ἠρνήσω τὴν πίστιν μου) even in the days of Antipas my faithful witness, who was killed among you” (Ἀντιπᾶς ὁ μάρτυς μου ὁ πιστός μου).<sup>96</sup> While the details remain opaque, it seems that the Lord here refers to a past period (the “days of x”), when the church in Pergamum did not yield to pressure to deny the “name” and the “faith” of the Lord Jesus by participation in the imperial cults, and that Antipas, presumably a prominent member, suffered the ultimate consequence.<sup>97</sup> Moreover, the

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<sup>92</sup> Cf. Beale, *Revelation*, 240.

<sup>93</sup> Note the *inclusio* created in this verse by the repetition of the particle ὅπου with the verb κατοικέω which first has the church and then Satan as its subject. This *inclusio* emphasizes the stark reality for the church in Pergamum: where the church dwells, Satan dwells also.

<sup>94</sup> The designation may include reference to: (i) the Temple of Zeus “the Savior” (σωτήρ), which had statues of giants with serpents’ legs; (ii) the Temple of Asclepius, whose symbol was a serpent, and who promised “healing” or “salvation” (σωτηρία)—and even resurrection life—to his devotees; (iii) the temple of Athena the “Victory-bearer” (νικήφορος), the city’s presiding deity; (iv) the throne-like shape of the acropolis itself. For discussion and bibliography, see esp. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, 183–84. See also Steven J. Friesen, “Satan’s Throne, Imperial Cults and the Social Settings of Revelation,” *JSNT* 27.3 (2005): 351–73.

<sup>95</sup> Mounce, *Revelation*, 96–97 makes the interesting suggestion, based on Revelation 13:2 and 16:10 that, just “as Rome had become the center of Satan’s activity in the West ... so Pergamum had become his ‘throne’ in the East.”

<sup>96</sup> Just as Israel was called to bear the Lord’s name before the nations (Exod 20:7), so the church in Pergamum, as the new Israel and the new humanity (5:9–10), is to bear the name of the Lord Jesus in the midst of an unbelieving world (cf. Matt 28:19). This involves the open confession of Christ as Lord in a world where doing so invites persecution and even death.

<sup>97</sup> So Hans-Joseph Klauck, “Das Sendschreiben nach Pergamon und der Kaiserkult in der Johannesoffenbarung,” *Bib* 73 (1992): 153–82; Mounce, *Revelation*, 97; cf. Gerhard A. Krodel, *Revelation*, Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 114

letter contains the second of two references to an enigmatic group identified as the “Nicolaitans” (τῶν Νικολαϊτῶν), who are here connected with “sexual immorality” and “idol worship” (2:14–15 and note οὕτως; cf. 2:6). The identity of this group remains uncertain, but the Greek name, when transliterated into Hebrew, gives the numerical value 666, which then suggests a close association between this group and the second “beast” and the “false prophet” in 13:11–18, and thus with the imperial cult (see below).<sup>98</sup> Finally, the Lord Jesus presents himself in this letter as “the one who has the sharp two-edged sword [τὴν ῥομφαίαν τὴν δίστομον τὴν ὀξεῖα] in his mouth” (2:12; cf. 2:16; 1:16; 19:15, 25). In doing so he employs an image that has its roots in the Scriptures of Israel (Isa 11:4;<sup>99</sup> cf. Isa 30:27–28, 33; 49:2; Ps 32:6; Pss. Sol. 17.24; 2 Thess 2:8), but which speaks with polemical daring into the Roman world, where the Roman emperor carried a sword or dagger as a symbol of his office, and the Roman governor exercised the *ius gladii*, or “right of the sword,” in his province (Rom 13:4).<sup>100</sup> This striking polemical engagement with Roman imperial rule, precisely at the point where “Satan has his throne,” where a deviant group is advocating “sexual immorality” and “idol worship,” and where at least one Christian has been killed, strongly suggests that the imperial cults of Pergamum, and Christian non-participation in them, are at issue. The Lord Jesus, then, in speaking of himself as “him who has the sharp two-edged sword,” comforts the church in Pergamum by announcing that his throne is higher than that of the emperor or his governor, and by implying that his sword of justice will be exercised against the enemies of his people (cf. 19:15, 25).<sup>101</sup>

Third, more briefly, the risen Lord Jesus, in his “royal edict” to the church in Thyatira (2:18–29), speaks of himself as the “Son of God” (2:18). This is the only occurrence of the title in the book. The title, of course, has obvious roots in the biblical understanding of Israel, and especially of David, as “son of God” (Exod 4:22; 2 Sam 7:13–14; Ps 2:7). It also speaks, however, with polemical force into a world where the Roman emperors, from Augustus onwards, regularly presented themselves as “son of God.”<sup>102</sup> It is significant, then, that Thyatira had, sometime before 2 BC, established a civic cult in honor of Rome and Augustus, and that the city was famous for its purple cloth, favored by the emperors (Acts 16:14).<sup>103</sup> In this context, the references

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who notes that there is no evidence that Christians were persecuted for failure to participate in the other cults.

<sup>98</sup> Michael Topham, “Hanniqola’itēs,” *ExpTim* 98 (1986): 44–45.

<sup>99</sup> The allusion here is confirmed by the use of Isaiah 11:2 at Rev 1:4b.

<sup>100</sup> Tacitus, *Hist.* 3.68; Suetonius, *Galb.* 11; Dio Cassius, *Hist.* 42.37.

<sup>101</sup> Mark W. Wilson, *Revelation*, ZIBBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 268 suggests that the enigmatic reference to the “white stone” which the Lord promises to give “to the one who conquers” (2:17) may be a further polemical reference to Roman power since the Asian Calendar Decree of 9 BC was inscribed on white stones (see n. 46 above).

<sup>102</sup> See n. 27 above.

<sup>103</sup> See E. M. Blaiklock, “Thyatira,” *ZPEB* 5:743–44; Robert North, “Thyatira,” *ISBE* 4:846; Everett C. Blake and Anna G. Edmonds, *Biblical Sites in Turkey* (Istanbul: Redhouse, 1996), 131–33.

in the letter to a false prophetess, identified as “Jezebel” (2:20), who seduced Christians to “practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols” (2:20), and whose teaching is associated with “Satan” (2:24), are best understood not merely as general references to the pressure faced by Christians to conform to Greco-Roman religion, but more specifically to the pressure they faced to participate in the city’s Roman imperial cults.

(b) *The Dragon and the Beasts (Revelation 12–13)*

Revelation 12–13 further develops these connections between the activity of “Satan” or “the Devil” and evil human empire, suggests that Rome is the contemporary manifestation of this evil empire, and identifies this complex as the primary source of the persecution of Christians. Revelation 12 introduces a “great dragon” (12:3, 9: δράκων μέγας; 12:9: ὁ δράκων ὁ μέγας) and identifies this dragon as “that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world” (12:9: ὁ ὄφις ὁ ἀρχαῖος, ὁ καλούμενος Διάβολος καὶ ὁ Σατανᾶς, ὁ πλανῶν τὴν οἰκουμένην ὅλην; cf. 20:2, 7, 10). The “great dragon” is clearly an evil transcendent being.<sup>104</sup> At the same time, the description of Satan in these terms hints that the “dragon” is to work out its evil purposes in the world through human empire. The only occurrence of the phrase “the great dragon” in the LXX is found in Ezekiel’s vision of “Pharaoh the great dragon” (Ezek 29:3: Φαραῶ τὸν δράκοντα τὸν μέγαν),<sup>105</sup> and the Scriptures of Israel consistently employ the image of the “dragon” (תנין = δράκων) to speak of foreign powers that oppress God’s people.<sup>106</sup> Later Jewish literature follows this trajectory,<sup>107</sup> and even applies the image to Rome.<sup>108</sup> Strikingly, the Sibylline Oracles at one point identify the Roman emperor Nero as “a terrible snake” (δεινὸς ὄφις).<sup>109</sup> Thus, while the “great

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<sup>104</sup> The roots of the image, of course, go back to the foundation narrative of the Hebrew Scriptures and the “serpent” of the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:1, 2, 4: ὁ ὄφις). The term “Satan” is a transliteration of the Hebrew שָׂטָן = adversary (e.g., 1 Kgs 11:14 for Hadad the Edomite as a “satan” the LORD raised up against Solomon). The OT has a few references to “satan” as the transcendent adversary of God and his people (Job 1–2; 1 Chr 21:1; Zech 3:1–2), but it was Jesus’ encounter with “the Satan” that more fully revealed the character of this transcendent evil being (see Mark 1:13 and Matt 4:1–11 where “the satan” is also described as “the devil/slanderer” (ὁ διάβολος) and “the tempter” (ὁ πειράζων)). “Satan” appears throughout Revelation (2:9, 13 [x2], 24; 3:9; 12:9; 20:2, 7).

<sup>105</sup> Cf. Beale, *Revelation*, 633.

<sup>106</sup> Egypt and Pharaoh: Ps 74:13–14; 87:4; 89:10; Isa 30:7; 51:9; Ezek 29:3; 32:2–3; Hab 3:8–15; Nebuchadnezzar: Jer 51:34.

<sup>107</sup> Tg. Isa. 27:1 interprets Isaiah’s prophecy of God’s victory over the “dragon” as a reference to God’s victory over “the king who became great” and uses Pharaoh and Sennacherib as the paradigm. CD VIII, 10 interprets the תנינים “dragons” of Deut 32:33 as “the kings of the peoples.” Cf. 2 Bar. 29.3–5 which prophesies that the Messiah will destroy “Behemoth” and “Leviathan” at the end; T. Ash. 7.3 has God “breaking the head of the dragon in the water.” Neither of these texts make an explicit connection with foreign powers.

<sup>108</sup> Pss. Sol. 2.25–29 employ δράκων to speak of the Gentile ruler (probably the Roman general Pompey) whom God has judged for his sins against Jerusalem and describe him as “pierced on the mountains of Egypt.” Sib. Or. 8.88 similarly identifies the “sea dragon” with Rome.

<sup>109</sup> See esp. Sib. Or. 5.28–34.

dragon” of 12:3 *denotes* an evil transcendent being, the image strongly *connotes* evil human empire, including Rome.

Revelation 13 then introduces two beasts, the “beast rising out of the sea” (13:1: ἐκ τῆς θαλάσσης θηρίον ἀναβαῖνον),<sup>110</sup> and the “beast rising out of the earth” (13:11: θηρίον ἀναβαῖνον ἐκ τῆς γῆς). The first beast, the one “from the sea,” is set in parallel with the great dragon, since both figures are depicted with “seven heads” and “ten horns” (12:3; 13:1: ἔχον κέρατα δέκα καὶ κεφαλὰς ἑπτὰ). At the same time, the beast is differentiated from the dragon because the dragon gives its “power” and “throne” and “great authority” to the beast, resulting in the beast having “authority ... over every tribe and people and language and nation,” being “allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them,” and demanding universal allegiance so that “all who dwell on earth ... worship it” (13:2, 4, 7–8). The dragon, then, is the transcendent evil power which stands behind the beast’s evil human empire. Significantly, three observations suggest that this beast’s evil power is at least partly manifested in the Roman Empire: (i) the “seven heads” and “ten horns” (13:1: ἔχον κέρατα δέκα καὶ κεφαλὰς ἑπτὰ) allude to the fourth beast in Daniel’s vision which, in its original context, is an image of evil human empire opposed to God and his people, and which a range of later Jewish texts identify with Rome (Dan 7:7, 24);<sup>111</sup> (ii) the “ten diadems” (13:1: δέκα διαδήματα) indicate that it is a kingly power which, in first century context, must have suggested Rome; (iii) the beast’s arrival “from the sea” (13:1: ἐκ τῆς θαλάσσης) probably evokes the practice of the Roman emperors in annually sending out the Roman proconsul to arrive in Ephesus by boat.<sup>112</sup>

The second beast, the one “from the land,” is likewise connected to—but distinguished from—the dragon and the beast from the sea, and is likewise associated with the Roman Empire. It speaks “like a dragon” (13:11: ἐλάλει ὡς δράκων). It “exercises all the authority of the first beast in its presence, and makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast” (13:12). This beast is, however, a different beast, since it looks like a “lamb” with “two horns,” and directs its activities towards the worship of the first beast (13:12).<sup>113</sup> Most likely, the “beast from the land” includes reference to either the local Roman governor, or the priesthood of the Roman imperial cults in Asia. This is suggested by three observations: (i) The “beast from the land,” rather than coming from afar (“from the sea”), arises in close proximity to the recipients

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<sup>110</sup> This is almost certainly the same beast described in 11:7 as arising “from the abyss.”

<sup>111</sup> Beale, *Revelation*, 684–85 notes the following: Midr. Gen 44:17; 76.6; Midr. Exod 15:6; 25:8; Midr. Lev 13:5; b. Avodah Zarah 2b; b. Shevu’ot 6b; Mekilta Rabbi Ishmael, Bahodesh 9.30–36; Pesiqta Rabbati 14.15; Pesiqta de Rab Kahana 4.9; Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer 28. He further notes that others make the allusion clear enough without citing specific verses from Daniel: Tanh. Gen 12:13; Midr. Ps 11.5; 18.11; 80.5–6; Tg. Zech 4:7 [codex f] with 6:5; Matt 24:15; Luke 21:20; cf. 4 Ezra 12.10; 2 Bar. 39.5–6; As. Mos. 10.8; Josephus *A.J.* 10.203–10 with 10.272–78.

<sup>112</sup> Cf. Rowland, *Open Heaven*, 431–32; I. E. S. Edwards, ed. *The Cambridge Ancient History*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970/75) 11:581.

<sup>113</sup> The evil of this beast is evident in the way in which it parodies the Lamb of Revelation 5, since it has “two horns like a lamb.”

of the book (“from the land”) and acts under the authority of, and for the benefit of, the “beast from the sea.” (ii) Revelation 13:14–15 announces that this “beast from the land” fosters the false worship of the first beast by commanding the construction of an “image for the beast” (εἰκόνα τῷ θηρίῳ) and by demanding worship (προσκυνήσωσιν) before it on pain of death. This seems to speak directly into the situation in the Roman province of Asia towards the end of the first century when the imperial cult was renewed at Ephesus by the erection of a colossal statue of the emperor Titus in the city, and the requirement that cities across the province make dedications to the new image.<sup>114</sup> (iii) Revelation 13:16–17 speaks figuratively of the beast’s requirement that “all, both small and great” alike be “marked on the right hand or the forehead.” These references to bearing the “mark of the beast” and “worshiping its image” are then repeated in 14:9–11, 16:2, 19:20 and 20:4 (cf. 15:2). While it is difficult to be certain of what is intended, these texts point to the local expression of the evil human empire (in this case, Rome) requiring both “worship” and some public sign of loyal devotion (“the mark”). The dire consequences of non-participation in this worship are made explicit in Revelation 13:15: the “image of the beast” is given authority so that it might “cause those who would not worship the image of the beast to be slain.”

Taken together, it seems clear that these texts in Revelation 12–13 address the threat posed to Christians in the Roman province of Asia towards the end of the first century who refused to participate in the imperial cults.

*(c) The Great Prostitute and the Great City (Revelation 17–18)*

Revelation 17–18 confirms and extends this understanding of the beasts as evil human empire manifested in Rome and its local representatives or supporters in Asia.<sup>115</sup> Revelation 17:1 announces the “judgment” of “the great prostitute, who is seated on many waters” (17:1: τὸ κρίμα τῆς πόρνῆς τῆς μεγάλης τῆς καθημένης ἐπὶ ὑδάτων πολλῶν). This evil “woman” is further described as “sitting on a scarlet beast” which has “seven heads and ten horns” (17:3; cf. 17:7). She is finally identified as “the great city that has dominion over the kings of the earth” (17:18: ἡ πόλις ἡ μεγάλη ἡ ἔχουσα βασιλείαν ἐπὶ τῶν βασιλείων τῆς γῆς; cf. 18:10, 16, 18, 19, 21; also 16:19).

Several observations indicate that this “great prostitute” or “great city” includes reference to Rome:<sup>116</sup> (i) mention of the beast with “seven heads and ten horns” connects this vision to that of Revelation 12–13, which already suggests Rome; (ii) the identification of the woman as “the great city that has

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<sup>114</sup> See esp. Price, *Rituals and Power*, 197–98. Price’s assessment is supported by Friesen, “Ephesus: Key to a Vision in Revelation,” 24–37 (but cf. n. 61 above).

<sup>115</sup> Cf. Giancarlo Biguzzi, “Is the Babylon of Revelation Rome or Jerusalem?” *Bib* 87 (2006): 371–86 which surveys interpretations of the “great city” and concludes that it is best identified as Rome.

<sup>116</sup> This city is distinguished from the other “great city” mentioned in 11:8 since that earlier city is “symbolically called Sodom and Egypt” and is “where their Lord was crucified,” i.e. Jerusalem.

dominion over the kings of the earth” (17:18; cf. 17:15; 18:10, 16, 18, 19, 21), in the context of the first century, cannot but have evoked the largest and most powerful city in the known world; (iii) the further descriptions of the great city’s moral degradation and economic prosperity, likewise, must have suggested an identification with Rome (17:2, 4–5; 18:3–4, 7, 9, 11–19, 23); (iv) the woman/city is described as “arrayed in purple and scarlet,” the colors of imperial Rome and its wealth (17:4; 18:16);<sup>117</sup> (v) the “name of mystery,” “Babylon the great,” which is given to the city, is commonly used in early Jewish and Christian texts as a code-word for Rome (17:5; 18:2, 10, 21; also 14:8; 16:19);<sup>118</sup> (vi) the “seven heads” of the beast are interpreted as the “seven mountains on which the woman is seated,” which probably alludes to the famous seven hills of Rome (17:9);<sup>119</sup> (vii) the further identification of the “seven horns” and the “ten heads” with “seven kings” and “ten kings” likewise evokes royal dominion of the kind best exemplified in the first century by the Roman emperors (17:10–12); (viii) the description of “the beast that ... was, and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit and go to destruction” (17:8; cf. 17:11 with 13:3, 12, 14) has remarkable similarities with the *Nero redivivus* (“Nero living again”) or *Nero redux* (“Nero returned”) myth, which circulated widely in the late first century, and according to which the dead emperor Nero would return at the head of a Parthian army to reclaim the imperial throne in Rome.<sup>120</sup>

Taken together, these observations indicate that the “great prostitute,” which is a “great city,” is a symbol of evil human empire opposed to God, manifested in the first century in imperial Rome. Given the repeated references to the “great city’s” responsibility for the “blood of the saints” in these chapters (16:6; 17:6; 18:24; 19:2; cf. 20:4), it is again clear that the book

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<sup>117</sup> See Ludwig A. Moritz, “Purple,” in *OCD*, 1280.

<sup>118</sup> Babylon was an appropriate code-word for Rome, since Babylon and Rome had defeated and destroyed Jerusalem in 587 BC and AD 70 respectively. For Rome as “Babylon,” see: Midr. Num 7.10; Midr. Ps 137.1, 8; Midr. Lev 6.6; Midr. Cant 1.6 §4; 1QpHab II, 11–12; Tg. Lam 1.19; 2 Bar. 11.1; 33.2; 67.7; 79.1; 4 Ezra 3.2, 31; b. Sanh. 21b; Sib. Or. 5.137–61, 434; 1 Pet 5:13. For discussion, see: Claus-Hunno Hunzinger, “Babylon als Deckname für Rom und die Datierung des I. Petrusbriefes,” in *Gottes Wort und Gottes Land. Hans-Wilhelm Hertzberg zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. Henning Graf Reventlow (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965), 67–77.

<sup>119</sup> So also Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John*, 707–8; George Bradford Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 218–19.

<sup>120</sup> Nero was deposed by the Senate and declared a public enemy on 8 June AD 68. He committed suicide the next day, though few witnessed his death. Suetonius, *Nero* 57.1 records that following Nero’s suicide some in Rome acted “as if he were still alive and would shortly return and deal destruction to his enemies.” The Sibylline Oracles reflect the myth that Nero had escaped to the Parthians and would soon return at the head of an army (Sib. Or. 4.119–22, 137–39; 5.28–34; 137–54, 214–27; 8.68–72; 12.78–94). Dio Chrysostom, *Pulchr.* 10 states “even now everyone wishes that Nero were alive and most people actually believe it.” At least three “false Neros” appeared in the following years—(i) AD 69: Dio Cassius, *Hist.* 63.9.3; Tacitus, *Hist.* 2.8–9; (ii) AD 80: Dio Cassius, *Hist.* 66.19.3; (iii) AD 88: Suetonius, *Nero* 57.2. The myth appears to have been stronger in the East than in the West, and gained widespread currency later in the first century. In this connection, it is significant that Juvenal, *Sat.* 4.38 identified Domitian as “Nero.”

of Revelation identifies the Roman Empire as a primary manifestation of Satan's transcendent evil power, and indicates that the Roman imperial cults in Asia were a primary cause not only of pressure on Christians to conform to the social norms, but of very real persecution, leading to imprisonment and even death.<sup>121</sup>

### 3. The Church's Mission in a Hostile World: Worship, Witness, and Wait!

Revelation's apocalyptic prophecy speaks into this world of violence. It is remarkable, then, that rather than calling on its auditors to respond to the violence of the Roman world with further violence, Revelation calls upon its auditors to fight the great spiritual battle by *worshipping* the one true God, by *bearing witness* to him even to the point of death, and by *waiting* for him to deliver his people and judge his enemies.

#### 3.1. Worship!

The book of Revelation calls on its Christian auditors to *worship* the one true and living God as their most fundamental response in a hostile world. Christians faced with persecution, hostility, and violence, rather than "fighting fire with fire," are called first and foremost to worship the Lord who rules over all. This is because the battle in which Christians are engaged is a spiritual battle—a battle of true and false worship. The following brief survey examines, first, Revelation's language of worship, second, the God worshiped in the seven hymns of praise that punctuate the book, and third, the goal of this worship in the book as a whole.

##### (a) Revelation's Language of Worship

The book of Revelation contains many direct references to "worship." The primary verb προσκυνέω is used twenty-four times.<sup>122</sup> The root idea is that of prostrating oneself before a higher authority to kiss their feet or the ground before them.<sup>123</sup> The word also refers, by extension, to more general reverence shown towards a social superior, and to religious worship of a deity.<sup>124</sup> The

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<sup>121</sup> This is not to say, however, that the images of the "beast from the sea," the "beast from the land" and the "great prostitute" or "great city" are *exhausted by* reference to Rome. The images are specific enough to make clear that they include reference to the Roman empire and the city of Rome itself, but allusive enough that they are not exhausted by that reference. That is, they retain a trans-temporal and universal horizon. For this perspective, see Beale, *Revelation*, 714, 869.

<sup>122</sup> Προσκυνέω: Rev 3:9; 4:10; 5:14; 7:11; 9:20; 11:1, 16; 13:4 (x2), 8, 12, 15; 14:7, 9, 11; 15:4; 16:2; 19:4, 10, 20; 20:4; 22:8, 9.

<sup>123</sup> See "προσκυνέω," *NIDNTTE* 4:150–54 (150).

<sup>124</sup> Cf. Walter Bauer et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 882–83.

verb is employed in the classical and Hellenistic Greek literature, as well as in the Greek translations of the Hebrew Scriptures, to describe both reverence towards human persons of superior authority,<sup>125</sup> and reverence toward the gods/God.<sup>126</sup> For our purposes, it is significant that the practice of prostrating oneself before a ruler, which was characteristic in ancient Persia, and taken up in the Hellenistic ruler cults,<sup>127</sup> was also adopted in the Roman imperial cults, particularly in the Greek East.<sup>128</sup>

Revelation often couples the primary verb προσκυνέω with πίπτω, which describes creatures “falling down” before the Lord, so that the two verbs are close to synonymous, describing two elements of a single act of devotion.<sup>129</sup> Right worship of the Lord God and the Lamb in his heavenly temple is also described at two points by use of the verb λατρεύω, which has priestly and cultic connotations (7:15; 22:3). Moreover, Revelation repeatedly speaks of worship in terms of “giving glory” (δίδωμι + δόξα) to God,<sup>130</sup> and at least once depicts the “twenty-four elders ... casting their crowns before the throne” (4:10: βαλοῦσιν τοὺς στεφάνους αὐτῶν ἐνώπιον τοῦ θρόνου), which evokes the practice of conquerors taking or receiving the crowns of vanquished rulers.<sup>131</sup>

The book of Revelation makes clear that people reveal by their worship the identity of their god. The book therefore presents a fundamental division between those who worship God and those who do not. On the one hand, the heavenly beings gathered around God’s throne and the faithful among the inhabitants of the world worship the one true God and him alone (4:10; 5:14; 7:11; 11:16; 14:7; 15:4; 19:4, 10; 22:8–9). On the other hand, “the rest of humankind” worship “demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and

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<sup>125</sup> E.g., Euripides, *Orest.* 1507; Herodotus, *Hist.* 1.119; 3.86.2; 8.118 // Gen 33:7; 1 Sam 25:5; 2 Sam 9:6; 14:4; 18:21; Dan 2:46 // Matt 2:2, 11.

<sup>126</sup> E.g., Aeschylus, *Pers.* 499; Xenophon, *Anab.* 3, 2, 9; 13; Plato, *Resp.* 3.398a; Polybius, *Hist.* 18, 37, 10; Plutarch, *Pomp.* 626 [14, 4]; Lucian, *Pisc.* 21; *PGM IV.* 649 // Gen 24:26; Exod 12:27; 20:5; Deut 32:43; Ps 5:8. The word also describes image worship in the various polytheistic cults: e.g., Pindar, *Isthm.* 3.2; Athenagoras, *Legatio pro Christianis* 15.1; 2 Clem. 3.1; Diogn. 2.5; Mart. Pol. 12.2; cf. Acts 7:43.

<sup>127</sup> For the early and abortive attempt of Alexander III (the Great) to have the men of his court prostrate themselves before him, see Plutarch, *Alex.* 54.3–6; Arrian, *Anab.* 4.10.5–7; 4.12.3–5; Curtius, *Alex.* 8.5.9–12. See Ian Worthington, *Alexander the Great: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 2003), 236–72 for discussion of competing interpretations.

<sup>128</sup> See, for example, Philo, *Legat.* 116 where Philo denounces the fact that, at the time of Gaius, some people had “even introduced the barbaric custom [τὸ βαρβαρικὸν ἔθος] into Italy of falling down in adoration [τὴν προσκύνησιν] before him” (= the Roman emperor). For προσκύνησις in the Hellenistic ruler cults, see Lily Ross Taylor, “The ‘Proskynesis’ and the Hellenistic Ruler Cult,” *JHS* 47 (1927): 53–62; Taylor, *Divinity*, esp. 256–66.

<sup>129</sup> Προσκυνέω + πίπτω: Rev 4:10; 5:14; 7:11; 11:16; 19:4; cf. 19:10; 22:8. πίπτω alone: 1:17; 5:8. Those who fall are identified as: “the twenty-four elders” (4:10; 5:14; 11:16); “all the angels” (7:11); “the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures” (5:8; 19:4). For the combination in other texts, see: 1 Sam 25:23; 2 Sam 14:4; Dan 3:5, 6, 10, 11, 15; Matt 2:11; 4:9; 18:26; Acts 10:25; 1 Cor 14:25; Apoc. Mos. 27.5; Jos. Asen. 28.9; T. Job 40.6; Josephus, *A.J.* 7.95; 9.11; 10.213.

<sup>130</sup> Δίδωμι + δόξα: 4:9; 11:13; 14:7; 19:7; cf. 16:9.

<sup>131</sup> 2 Sam 1:10; 12:30; 1 Chr 20:2; cf. Ezek 21:26; Plutarch, *Frat. amor.* 488D; cf. Tertullian, *Cor.* 15. For discussion, see esp. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, 308–09.

stone and wood” (9:20) and especially give themselves to worship “the dragon” (13:4) and “the beast” or its “image” (13:4, 8, 12, 15; 14:9, 11; 16:2; 19:20).<sup>132</sup> The distinction between these two groups is absolute. No syncretism is possible. The faithful are those who not only obey the command to “worship God” (14:7; 19:10; 22:9) but who also do not worship “the beast or its image” (20:4).

(b) *The God who is Worshiped: Seven Distinctively Christian Hymns of Praise*

The worship of the book of Revelation is concentrated in seven scenes in which true worshipers express their adoration in hymns of praise to God. The presentation of seven hymns is itself probably significant, indicating the complete praise of God.<sup>133</sup> The following table indicates the object of worship in each hymn, the reasons for the worship, and the identity of the worshipers. Taken together, these scenes provide a vision of *distinctively Christian worship*, which is simultaneously distinguished from the worship of Greco-Roman gods and from Jewish worship.<sup>134</sup>

Scene	Object of worship	Reasons for worship	Identity of worshipers
4:8–11	“The Lord God Almighty” “Our Lord and God”	God’s holiness and eternal being God’s action as Creator	The four living creatures The twenty-four elders
5:9–13	“The Lamb” “The Lamb who was slain” “Him who sits on the throne” and “the Lamb”	The Lamb’s sacrifice, ransoming people for God	The four living creatures and the twenty-four elders “Many angels” “Every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth” with the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders

<sup>132</sup> Two references fall outside this sharp dichotomy: (i) 3:9: the Lord Jesus comforts the church in Philadelphia with the promise that he will make its enemies “come and bow down [προσκυνήσουσιν] before your feet”; (ii) 11:1: John is told to “measure the temple of God and the temple and those who worship there.”

<sup>133</sup> This arrangement: (i) counts each of the multi-part songs as a single “composition” (4:8–11; 5:9–13; 7:10–12; 16:5–7 and 19:1–8); (ii) discounts Rev 14:1–5, since the “new song” taught to the 144,000 on Mount Zion, and sung by them, is only reported and not recorded.

<sup>134</sup> For recent studies on the picture of God in Revelation, see Martin Stowasser, *Das Gottesbild in der Offenbarung des Johannes*, WUNT 2 Reihe (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015).

<b>7:9–12</b>	“Our God who sits on the throne” and “the Lamb”	God’s action in salvation	“A great multitude . . . from every nation” “All the angels”
<b>11:16–18</b>	“The Lord God Almighty”	God’s action in judgment	The twenty-four elders
<b>15:3–4</b>	“The Lord God the Almighty” . . . “King of the nations”	“Great and amazing are your deeds”; “just and true are your ways”; “you alone are holy”; “your righteous acts have been revealed”	“Those who had conquered the beast and its image”
<b>16:5–7</b>	“Holy One”; “the Lord God Almighty”	God’s just judgments	“The angel in charge of the waters” and “the altar”
<b>19:1–8</b>	“Our God” “The Lord our God the Almighty”	God’s just judgments God’s reign consummated in the “marriage of the Lamb”	“A great multitude in heaven” with the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders

Table 1. *Worship Scenes in Revelation*

The titles and expressions listed in Table 1 communicate God’s sole sovereignty, unique holiness, and concern for his people (“... our God”). The God here worshiped is unambiguously the God of Israel’s Scriptures: He is the great Creator (4:11; 14:7); the God of Moses and the Exodus (15:3); the God of Israel’s King David (3:7; 5:5; 22:16); and the God of Israel’s prophets (10:7; cf. 22:6). It is this God and this God alone who is worthy of worship.<sup>135</sup> Revelation, therefore, in keeping with the conviction of Israel’s Scriptures—and also of first-century Judaism—distinguishes true worship from the worship of the Greco-Roman deities and of the Roman emperor. The point is made clear by the fact that Revelation not only describes the worship of the

<sup>135</sup> For προσκυνέω in the context of exclusive monotheism, see e.g., 1 Kgs 19:18; 2 Kgs 5:18; Esth 3:2, 5. For the concept without the verb προσκυνέω, see esp. Isa 45:20–23. Both Philo and Josephus who, while sometimes employing προσκυνέω in reference to prostration before a human being as a sign of respect (e.g., Josephus, *A.J.* 2.11), also use the verb in the stricter sense of worship of the one true God (e.g., Philo, *Gig.* 54; Josephus, *A.J.* 6.55, 154; 9.267; 20.164). Indeed, Philo, at *Decal.* 64, explicitly affirms a qualitative difference between the respect shown towards human superiors and the worship offered to God when he states that “we must not worship those who are our brothers by nature” (τοὺς ἀδελφούς φύσει μὴ προσκυνῶμεν).

one true and living God, but also positively commands it.<sup>136</sup> This command is, indeed, of universal significance. At Revelation 14:6–7 the angel with the “eternal gospel” speaks in a loud voice “to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people” and commands them that they should “fear God and give him glory [φοβήθητε τὸν θεὸν καὶ δότε αὐτῷ δόξαν] ... and worship [προσκυνησατε] him who made heaven and earth.” In the same way, at Revelation 15:2–4, the worshipers (“those who had conquered the beast and its image”) praise the Lord God Almighty as “King of the nations” and declare that “all nations will come and worship you.” Similarly, at Revelation 19:5 God himself (“a voice from the throne”) commands: “Praise our God [αἰνεῖτε τῷ θεῷ ἡμῶν], all you his servants, you who fear him, small and great.” Finally, this Jewish-style exclusive monotheism is further underlined at 19:10 and 22:8–9 when John begins to offer worship to the angel who mediates the revelation to him, and is twice corrected with a firm command: “worship God” (τῷ θεῷ προσκυνήσον). Only God is worthy of worship.

Consistent with this perspective, the book categorically condemns worship offered to “demons and idols” (9:20), especially to the symbols of Roman power—“the dragon” (13:4) and “the beast” or “its image” (13:4, 8, 12, 15; 14:9, 11; 16:2; 19:20). Revelation thus rejects the worship of the Greco-Roman deities, and especially any participation in the Roman imperial cult. So comprehensive is this distinction that the faithful may be described as those who have “not worshiped the beast or its image” (20:4). Readers of Revelation are called to worship neither Zeus nor Jupiter, neither Asklepios nor Athena, neither the Roman emperor nor his image, but the Lord God Almighty and him alone. Revelation thus describes and commands the universal and exclusive worship of the one true and living God of Israel’s Scriptures.

Revelation also, however, distinguishes the worship it describes and commands from Jewish worship. The “Lord God Almighty” is praised not only for who he is as the eternal, holy, and all powerful Creator (4:8, 11; 15:3–4), but also for what he has done as the righteous King and Judge of the nations and all history (11:16–18; 15:3–4; 16:5–7; 19:1–6), and especially for his gracious work as Savior of his people through the “blood of the Lamb” (5:9–10; 7:10–12; 19:6–8). It is highly significant here that at several points Revelation includes the Lord Jesus in the worship offered to the one true and living God. The stage is set for this remarkable development by the vision the Lord Jesus grants to John in the first chapter. There John describes the one who appeared to him—clearly the risen Lord Jesus—in terms that evoke not only the Danielic “one like a son of man,” but also the “Ancient of Days” himself (Rev 1:13–14; cf. Dan 7:9–10, 13–14).<sup>137</sup> John’s response is understandable: “I fell at his feet as though dead” (1:17). The explicit worship

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<sup>136</sup> Προσκυνέω appears in the imperative mood at 14:7; 19:10; 22:9.

<sup>137</sup> Rev 1:14: ἡ δὲ κεφαλὴ αὐτοῦ καὶ αἱ τρίχες λευκαὶ ὡς ἔριον λευκὸν ὡς; Dan 7:9: καὶ τὸ τρίχωμα τῆς κεφαλῆς αὐτοῦ ὡσεὶ ἔριον λευκὸν καθαρὸν.

of the risen Lord Jesus first appears in the vision of Revelation 5, which introduces the figure of “the Lion of the tribe of Judah” who is also a slain “Lamb,” and a victorious ram (5:5–6). This vision, remarkably, describes how—while all others “fall down” in the presence of God’s throne—this Lamb is “standing” (ἑστηκός) “at the center of the throne” (ἐν μέσῳ τοῦ θρόνου), so that the “four living creatures” and the “twenty four elders” fall down in front him (ἔπεσαν ἐνώπιον τοῦ ἁρνίου) and sing a “new song” of praise directed to the Lamb alone (5:6–10). In singing this song the heavenly creatures are soon joined by a vast multitude of angels (5:11–12). And when the scene reaches its crescendo, they are joined by every creature in the whole of creation, affirmed by the “four living creatures” and the “twenty four elders,” who combine praise of God with praise of “the Lamb,” declaring “to him who sits on the throne *and to the Lamb*, be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!” (5:13–14).<sup>138</sup> Similarly, at Revelation 7:10 the “great multitude” cry out with a loud voice that “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, *and to the Lamb!*”—a cry that elicits the affirmation “Amen” from “all the angels” and the “elders” and the “four living creatures” (7:11–12). The book of Revelation, then, affirms, with the Scriptures of Israel and Jewish tradition, that the Lord God alone is to be worshiped, while also—remarkably, and against Jewish tradition—including Jesus in the identity of the one true and living God.<sup>139</sup>

The worship described in the book of Revelation is thus both continuous with the worship commanded and described in the Scriptures of Israel, and remarkably new. For this reason it is no surprise that Revelation 15:3–4 indicates that the first song of praise recorded in the Scriptures, the “song of Moses” in Exodus 15, which celebrates the Lord’s victory over that “great dragon” Pharaoh (cf. Ezek 29:3), will also form the basis of the song that the saints will sing for all eternity, now with a new stanza added, celebrating the victory of “the Lamb” over the dragon, Satan. The redeemed will thus sing the “the song of Moses, the servant of God, *and the song of the Lamb*” praising the Lord God Almighty because his “righteous acts have been revealed” in a new and startling way (15:3). Indeed, elsewhere, the redeemed sing an entirely “new song,” extolling the new redemption that God has won through “the Lamb who was slain” (5:9; 14:3). Moreover, in addition to this new content in the worship offered by the redeemed, there is also a new constituency among the worshipers. While Israel’s Scriptures expect and anticipate the universal worship of God (e.g., Psalms 29; 47; 49; 66; 96; 97; 98; 117; 148), Revelation provides a remarkable vision of this expectation fulfilled when it pictures worshipers around God’s throne being drawn not

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<sup>138</sup> Italics added. Indeed, from this point onwards, Revelation repeatedly couples “the throne” or the “one who sits on the throne” with “the Lamb” (5:13; 6:16; 7:9–10), places “the Lamb” at the “center of the throne” (5:6; 7:17), or indicates that the throne belongs jointly to “God” and to “the Lamb” (22:1, 3).

<sup>139</sup> This, of course, is consistent with the book’s presentation of Jesus throughout. For a demonstration of the way in which the book as a whole includes Jesus within the identity of the one true God, see especially Bauckham, *Theology*, 54–65.

only from among Israel, the people of God of old, but from “every tribe and nation and people and language” and, indeed, from the entire creation (esp. 5:13; 7:9–12; 15:4).

*(c) The Goal of Worship*

The purpose of the seven worship scenes, depicting a distinctively Christian worship, is to show auditors the marvel of who God is and what he does, and therefore call them to respond with awe, godly fear, praise, faith, and obedience. God is worshiped primarily in heaven by heavenly creatures (4:8–11; 5:9–12; 11:16–18: the “four living creatures,” the “twenty-four elders”; the “angels”; cf. 16:5: an angel; 16:7: “the altar”), but this worship extends first to human beings in heaven (7:9–12; 15:2; 19:1, 6), and then even further to all creatures in every part of the creation (5:13). These expanding circles of worshipers effectively make the point that the worship of the one true and living God is the inevitable destiny of every creature. The scenes, therefore, draw the book’s auditors into the worship they hear described, and lead them to join in the praise offered by the heavenly beings, the angels, the saints, and all creation.

In the context of persecution, these scenes also have two more specific functions. First, the worship scenes comfort believers in the knowledge that their worship of the one true and living God—weak and despised as it is—is the reason the whole of creation exists, and the destiny of every creature. In worshipping God, worshipers join with the heavenly creatures, the angels and the whole creation in giving the Creator the honor he is due. Judaism called for worship in the temple in Jerusalem, and the imperial cults included worship choirs composed of elites who entered the imperial temples on regular occasions to sing the praises of the emperor and his family.<sup>140</sup> It is no coincidence, then, that Revelation declares that those who belong to the Lord Jesus have been “made . . . a kingdom, priests to his God and Father” (1:6; 5:10; 20:6), or that the book’s central vision gives its auditors privileged entry into true heavenly temple to witness and even participate in the worship of the true God (4:1–5:13). Revelation, in this way, comforts the small Christian communities in the cities of Asia: though their choirs are small compared to those of the emperor, and though they are weak, despised, and persecuted, as they join in songs of praise as part of their worship on the Lord’s day (cf. 1:10), they participate in the eternal praise of the heavenly creatures around the heavenly throne, and anticipate the worship that every creature in the whole of creation will give the Lord God Almighty, and to him alone, at the end.

Second, the worship scenes challenge believers to declare God’s praise in all the earth. Revelation declares that the choirs of the imperial cult are nothing compared to the great choir of creation, announces that the praise of the emperor is to be silenced before that of the living God, and so calls on its

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<sup>140</sup> See nn. 54 and 55 above.

auditors to join in singing a different song to those around them—the song of all creation praising the Lord God Almighty, the Creator and Redeemer of his people, who rules over all. In praising “the One who sits on the throne” as Lord of heaven and earth, the book proclaims a very different “gospel” from that proclaimed by the imperial cults—an “eternal gospel.”<sup>141</sup> It therefore calls on people from every tribe and nation and language to join in the song, worshiping the Lord of all creation (14:6–7). The worshipers affirm that “all nations will come and worship” the one true God (15:4).

Taken together, the worship scenes embody the reality that worship is central to the mission of the church in a hostile world.<sup>142</sup> While the world around refuses to recognize the One seated on the throne and the Lamb at his side, Revelation reveals true reality to the church so that the church can respond with appropriate worship.

### 3.2. *Witness!*

The book of Revelation presents Jesus, and those who belong to him, as those who “bear witness” to God in a hostile world. This is the second element of the church’s mission envisaged by the book. To bear witness is to faithfully persevere in worshiping the one true God, speaking of him, and living for him, even in the face of persecution and even under the threat of death. This is borne out by a study of the language of “witness” in the book.

#### *(a) Revelation’s Language of “Bearing Witness”*

First, the book’s use of the noun *μάρτυς* (“witness”) makes it clear that a faithful “witness” is one who is loyal to God, even in the face of opposition, and even to the point of death. The noun occurs five times in the book and consistently bears this sense. The first occurrence, which is determinative for the others, presents Jesus himself as “the faithful witness” (1:5: ὁ μάρτυς ὁ πιστός). The reference here is built on Psalm 88:38 LXX (= ET 89:37) and forms part of Revelation’s presentation of Jesus as “the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth,” which may well summarize the three stages of Jesus’ career in terms of his faithful life (and death), his resurrection (and ascension), and his heavenly rule (and return in glory).<sup>143</sup> The presentation of Jesus as “the faithful witness,” then, has on view his life of faithfulness even to the point of death (cf. the reference to

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<sup>141</sup> For the language of “gospel” applied by the Council of Asia to the achievements of Augustus, see n. 46 above.

<sup>142</sup> John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 17 puts it well: “Missions is not the ultimate goal of the Church. Worship is. Missions exist because worship doesn’t. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. When this age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. It is a temporary necessity. But worship abides forever.”

<sup>143</sup> Cf. George R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, Rev. ed., New Century Biblical Commentary (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1978), 56.

Jesus' "blood" in 1:5c), and communicates that in God's economy, those who are faithful in this way will ultimately triumph. Jesus' identity as "the faithful and true witness" is confirmed in his "royal edict" to the church in Laodicea, which contrasts the "lukewarm" faith of the Laodiceans with "the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness" (3:14: ὁ ἀμήν, ὁ μάρτυς ὁ πιστός καὶ ἀληθινός).

The noun μάρτυς is applied not only to Jesus, but to others whose lives are patterned after his. The first such occurrence is at 2:13 where the noun describes "Antipas my faithful witness" (Ἀντιπᾶς ὁ μάρτυς μου ὁ πιστός μου) who "was killed," and whose faithful witness followed that of the Lord himself. The next occurrence of the noun is at 11:3, where it describes "my two witnesses" (δυσὶν μάρτυσίν μου). These two give faithful testimony to God until they have completed their testimony (11:7: ὅταν τελέσωσιν τὴν μαρτυρίαν αὐτῶν), when God allows that "the beast" should "rise from the bottomless pit" and "make war on them and conquer them and kill them" (11:7). Afterwards, however, "a breath of life from God" enters them and they stand up "on their feet" and are called "up to heaven in a cloud" (11:11–12). These faithful witnesses, then, like the Lord himself, are killed for their testimony, and yet are ultimately vindicated by God. The final occurrence of μάρτυς is at 17:6, where it refers in the plural to "the witnesses of Jesus" (τῶν μαρτύρων Ἰησοῦ) whose "blood" had been "drunk" by the "woman" representing "Babylon the great." Again, to bear faithful witness involves suffering even death, but results—ultimately—in vindication by God (cf. 20:4). The noun μάρτυς is, therefore, first applied to Jesus, the one who was faithful to his Father even to death (1:5; 3:14), and subsequently connected in each of its occurrences with faithfulness even to the point of death, enabled by the promise of vindication from God beyond the grave (2:13; 11:3; 17:6).<sup>144</sup>

Second, Revelation's use of the verb μαρτυρέω ("I bear witness") and the cognate noun μαρτυρία ("testimony") emphasizes the role of the "witness" in speaking truth about God. The verb μαρτυρέω occurs four times (1:2; 22:16, 18, 20). Revelation opens with John's assertion that he "bears witness [ἐμαρτύρησεν] to the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ" that was revealed to him (1:2). It closes with the Lord Jesus himself, the angel he sent, and John together "bearing witness" to the significance and veracity of what has been revealed in the book (22:16, 18, 20: μαρτυρέω). The verb, then, primarily refers to the activity of Jesus, his angel and John, in faithfully revealing the heavenly truths contained in the book. Related to this is the use of the noun μαρτυρία, which occurs nine times in the book (Rev 1:2, 9; 6:9; 11:7; 12:11, 17; 19:10 (x2); 20:4), six times in the phrase "the testimony of Jesus" (1:2, 9; 12:17; 19:10 [x2]; 20:4: τὴν μαρτυρίαν Ἰησοῦ). The first occurrence of this phrase is most likely a subjective genitive ("testimony Jesus gave") because in its context Jesus is the one who "reveals" and "makes

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<sup>144</sup> Thus, although the term retains its primary meaning of "witness," the roots of its later sense of "martyr" are to be found in these five uses in Revelation (cf. also Acts 22:20). Cf. Bauer et al., *BDAG*, 620 § 3.

known.”<sup>145</sup> If so, then the subjective genitive here might suggest that the other five occurrences should also be read as subjective genitives; that is, primarily as references to the witness *Jesus* bore (to God and his kingdom, or to himself), and which the church *receives*.<sup>146</sup> At the same time, the other five occurrences of the phrase in Revelation may be read as objective genitives, that is, as references to *John/the saints* testifying *to or about* Jesus (1:9; 12:17; 19:10 [x2]; 20:4; cf. 6:9; 12:11). Perhaps the ambiguity of the genitive is, in this case, intentionally employed with both connotations: the “testimony of Jesus” is first the testimony Jesus gave, but also the testimony his people give about him. Certainly, the content of this testimony includes that which the Lord Jesus revealed to John and which is now contained in the book of Revelation itself. At the same time, the close association of the phrase “testimony of Jesus” with the “word of God” (1:2, 9; 20:4) and similar phrases at several points (6:9; 12:11, 17), indicates that the “testimony of Jesus” cannot be narrowly associated with the vision John saw, but includes Christians speaking the truth about God, both before and beyond the content of Revelation itself.

*(b) Revelation’s Call to Faithful Witness in a Hostile World*

Taken together, this analysis suggests that, in the context of persecution, Revelation calls its auditors not only to worship the one true and living God, but to bear witness to him by speaking truth about him, and by persevering in this witness even to the point of death. The church’s mission in a hostile world is to hold fast to the testimony given by Jesus, that is, to the Word of God, and to hold on to this in the way that Jesus did: in faithful obedience to the Father, even to the point of death. Indeed, Revelation 12:11 explicitly connects these two senses of “bearing witness” when it speaks of those who have “conquered by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they have not loved their lives even unto death.” Osborne summarizes it well: “in Revelation ‘witness’ refers to fearless public proclamation and authentication, usually in the face of tremendous opposition, of divine realities in word and life.”<sup>147</sup> This, together with worship of the One who sits on the throne, is crucial to the mission of the church in a hostile world.

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<sup>145</sup> Favored by Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, 19 who translates: “who now bears witness to all the visions he saw which is the message from God, that is, the witness *borne by Jesus*” (italics added); cf. Osborne, *Revelation*, 57.

<sup>146</sup> Rev 6:9 might be thought to tell against this interpretation, since it refers to τὰς ψυχὰς τῶν ἐσφαγμένων διὰ τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ διὰ τὴν μαρτυρίαν ἣν εἶχον (ESV: “the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness *they had borne*”). Even here, however, the primary reference may be to the testimony given *by Jesus* and subsequently “held” (as custodians) by the saints (cf. KJV: “the testimony which *they held*”).

<sup>147</sup> Osborne, *Revelation*, 56.

### 3.3. *Wait!*

Finally, the book of Revelation also call on its auditors, as they face persecution, not to take vengeance into their own hands, but to *wait* patiently for God to establish his kingdom.

#### *(a) Revelation's Language of "Patient Endurance"*

Revelation's call to wait for God to bring his righteous judgment on the earth takes the form of repeated exhortations to "patiently endure." John identifies himself from the outset as "your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus" (1:9). The note of "patient endurance" (ὕπομονή) under suffering is sounded again in the Lord Jesus' encouragement to the churches in Ephesus (2:2), Thyatira (2:19), and Philadelphia (3:10). And it is significant that this same call to "patient endurance" is made twice more in the book, both times in association with the suffering and even death that God's people are to face because of the blasphemous worship of the beast and its image (13:10; 14:12). In the midst of all of this, the book's central vision provides a positive model of what this "patient endurance" might look like when it depicts "the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne" (6:9). These departed faithful have been welcomed into the heavenly throne-room, and yet continue to "cry out with a loud voice [ἔκραξαν φωνῇ μεγάλῃ], 'O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?'" (6:10). Patient endurance, then, means continuing to worship the One true God, bearing witness to him and word and deed, while crying out to God to establish his kingdom and bring his righteous judgment on the earth.

#### *(b) Revelation's Inaugurated Eschatology: The Lamb Has Conquered*

The answer to the prayer of the martyrs in Revelation 6:9–10 is ultimately found in God's action in Christ to conquer his enemies, judge all that is evil, and finally establish his kingdom. The answer, that is, comes in Revelation's inaugurated eschatology, which announces that God has now already triumphed in Christ, and that his victory will "soon" be worked out for the whole creation.

To begin with, Revelation is clear that the Lord Jesus has *already* conquered evil. In the book's opening chapter, Jesus is declared to be "the ruler of the kings of the earth" (1:5). The reference here, built on Psalm 88:28 LXX (= ET 89:27), is to Jesus' present rule over all earthly powers, and is designed to comfort the faithful in their affliction at the hands of those powers. This affirmation that the Lord Jesus already rules is confirmed in the initial vision-commission, when the risen Lord appears to John as the glorious Son of Man (1:12–19), as well as in the seven "royal edicts" to the churches, which repeat key elements of that vision (2:1–3:21). In the initial scene the

Lord Jesus reveals himself in the most exalted manner, and John sees the glory of the Danielic “one like a son of man” merged with that of Ancient of Days himself (Rev 1:13–14; cf. Dan 7:9–10, 13–14). At the same time, the Lord reveals himself in such a way as to demonstrate his supremacy over the powers of the world, including, especially, Rome. He is “the faithful and true witness” (1:5; 3:14); he has “eyes like a flame of fire and feet like burnished bronze” (1:14–15; 2:18); he is “the first and the last” (1:17; 2:8); he has the “keys of Death and Hades” (1:18; cf. 3:7). In all of these ways the Lord Jesus asserts his sovereign power over beginning and end, truth and falsehood, life and death. Most particularly, however, he reveals himself: (i) as the one who holds the “seven stars” in his right hand, using an image that directly challenges Domitian’s presentation of himself on his coins as the father of a son surrounded by seven stars (1:16; 2:2; 3:1),<sup>148</sup> and; (ii) as the one with a “sharp two-edged sword” coming from his mouth, using an image that—as we have already had occasion to note—simultaneously evokes the prophetic promise of the Spirit-anointed deliverer of Isaiah 11:2, and declares Jesus’ supremacy over the Roman emperor and his governor in Asia (1:16; 2:12, 16; cf. 19:15).

Crucially, the Lord Jesus’ present authority is repeatedly grounded in his victory over sin by his faithful obedience to the point of death, and in his victory over death by his resurrection. This starts in the opening chapter, when Jesus asserts that he “holds the keys to Death and Hades” because he is “the living one” who “died” but is “alive forevermore” (1:18). It is repeatedly confirmed throughout the book when Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection are shown to be the foundation of his present rule and the means by which he “conquered” the powers of sin and death (2:8; 3:21; 5:5–13; 12:5–10). It is perhaps clearest in the key moment of the book’s central vision, when it is revealed that the Creator’s plans and purposes for history, symbolized by the “scroll sealed with seven seals,” have been unlocked by “the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David” (5:1–13). In this remarkable scene John hears this mighty Lion described, but then looks to see “a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain” (5:6). This Lamb, to be sure, is also a conquering ram “with seven horns and with seven eyes” (5:6).<sup>149</sup> But the songs of praise that follow celebrate that this Lamb has “conquered” (ἐνίκησεν)—and so can “open the seven seals”—only by the power of his blood shed for others (5:9, 12).<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> See Koester, *Revelation*, 253.

<sup>149</sup> Cf. Osborne, *Revelation*, 255 expresses well the impact of these verses: “It is impossible to overstate the magnificent transformation in 5:5–6: the lion is transformed into a lamb that becomes the slain paschal lamb that is again transformed into the conquering ram (the seven horns)! There is even a certain chiasm: lion—lamb—slain lamb—conquering ram.”

<sup>150</sup> Bauckham, *Theology*, 67–69 helpfully points out that here, as elsewhere in Revelation, John draws attention to Jesus’ Davidic roots in terms that emphasize the militaristic element of the Messiah’s calling, but then declares that his victory over the forces of evil has come not through military might but by his sacrifice of himself (cf. 3:7 “keys of David”; 22:6 “the root and the offspring of David”).

This declaration of Christ's victory permeates the book. The result is that while history continues after the victory of the Lamb by his death and resurrection, the ultimate outcome of history has now been revealed.

*(c) Revelation's Vision of the Final Victory: The "Rider on the White Horse" Will Conquer*

The Lamb "has conquered" by his blood; but his authority in the world is rejected by the "Dragon" and the "beasts" and those who worship them. The final outworking of the Lamb's victory in the world, therefore, remains to be seen. Indeed, Revelation's central vision (4:1–22:5) concerns the outworking of God's rule—the rule of heaven—over the earth, and is divided into three sections. The first and longest section (4:1–16:21) begins with a vision of the heavenly throne room, and a celebration of the victory of the Lamb as the key which unlocks the "scroll" of God's purposes for his creation (4:1–5:13). It then presents a series of four overlapping visions, which repeatedly cover the whole of the church age from a number of different angles (6:1–16:21). The conclusion of each of these four sections presents a complementary vision of final judgment followed by a celebration of eternal salvation (6:12–8:1; 11:15–18; 14:14–15:4; 16:17–21).<sup>151</sup> The second major section (17:1–21:8) then intensifies and extends this pattern of final judgment and salvation so that it becomes the exclusive focus: these chapters present complementary visions of the final return of Christ, and his victory over the powers of evil in the final judgment. The third and final section (21:9–22:5) contemplates the "New Jerusalem" as a picture of the state of eternal bliss to follow the final judgment.

Within this frame, the conflict between the risen Lord Jesus and the earthly powers is a major theme of the book. The evil kings of the earth oppose Christ, but he will utterly defeat them (6:15–17; 10:11; 16:14; 17:2, 14, 18; 18:3, 9–10; 19:18–19). The repeated visions of final judgment and salvation declare that "the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever" (11:15; cf. 12:10 and Dan 7:13–14). The enemies of God and his people "will make war on the Lamb," but "the Lamb will conquer them" (17:14). Ultimately, the kings of the earth will "bring their glory" into the heavenly Jerusalem, submitting themselves to Christ's Lordship (21:24). Jesus is the "King of kings and Lord of lords" (19:16; cf. 17:14).<sup>152</sup>

For our purpose, it is particularly significant that in the final vision of eschatological judgment and salvation, in 19:11–16, Revelation speaks of Christ's return as conquering King with daring polemical force. Revelation 19 is sandwiched between the account of the fall of the "evil city," "Babylon the

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<sup>151</sup> Beale, *Revelation*, 122.

<sup>152</sup> The origins of the title are found in Daniel 4:37 (cf. Deut 10:17; Dan 2:37; 1 En. 9.4; 2 Macc 13:4; 1 En. 63.4; 1 Tim 6:15). The application to Christ here again includes him within the identity of the one true God. For discussion, see Gregory K. Beale, "The Origin of the Title 'King of Kings and Lord of Lords' in Revelation 17:14," *NTS* 31.4 (1985): 618–20.

Great” (17:1–19:5), and the victory of God’s city, the glorious “New Jerusalem,” which comes down out of heaven from God (21:1–22:5; cf. 3:12). In this context, Revelation 19:11–16 presents the return of Christ as conquering King in a manner that picks up and develops the earlier picture of Christ conquering by the “sword of his mouth” (19:15, 21; cf. 1:16; 2:12, 16). It shows how Christ simultaneously fulfills the expectations of Israel’s Scriptures, and challenges the power claims of the Roman emperors. On the one hand, the description of the “rider on the white horse” as the one who “judges ... in righteousness” presents him as the long promised, Spirit-filled, Davidic deliverer (19:11: ἐν δικαιοσύνη κρίνει; cf. Isa. 11:4: יְהוָה יִשְׁפֹּט בְּדִקְלוֹתָיִם).<sup>153</sup> On the other hand, the white horse, the diadems, the title inscribed on the rider, the armies accompanying him, the military imagery, and the description of a decisive victory all evoke common descriptions of Roman military “triumphs.”<sup>154</sup> The vision thus speaks out of the Scriptures of Israel and presents a direct challenge to Roman imperial ideology: Jesus is Lord, and Caesar is not. In this context, it is significant that at Revelation 19:11 “the rider on the white horse ... judges *and makes war* in righteousness” (ἐν δικαιοσύνη modifies both verbs). Throughout Revelation, the “dragon” (12:9 = Satan) has “made war” (12:7, 17; cf. 16:13–14) and the “beast” (= evil human empire/Rome) has “made war” (11:7; 13:7; 16:14; 17:14; 19:19; cf. 13:4; 16:14) against God and the saints. Now, however, it is Christ who “makes war in righteousness” against his enemies (cf. 2:16; 17:14). As Osborne comments: “If there has ever been a “just” or “holy war,” this is the one!”<sup>155</sup> The point is clear: Revelation’s auditors, though facing persecution and even death at the hands of Rome or her supporters in the province of Asia, should not give up. Jesus, the world’s true Lord, will ultimately triumph.

(d) *Imminence and Delay: “How Long O Lord?”*

The inaugurated eschatology of Revelation gives rise to a tension between imminence and delay. The “Lamb ... has conquered,” but the victory of the “rider on the white horse” is yet to come.

On the one hand, Revelation emphasizes that the final victory will come “soon.” The book reveals “what must soon take place” (1:1; 4:1; 22:6: δεῖ

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<sup>153</sup> In the Scriptures of Israel it is preeminently God alone who has the right to judge (Gen 18:25; Judg 11:27; 1 Sam 2:10; Ps 9:8; 82:8; 94:2; 96:10, 13; 98:9; Isa 33:22). Nevertheless, in Psalm 2:8–12 the Lord’s anointed executes God’s judgment, and in 1 En. 49.4; 61.9; 62.2–6; 63.11 the “Son of Man” is active in judgment. In the same way, in Revelation it is generally God who judges (6:10; 11:18; 14:7; 16:5, 7; 18:8, 10, 20; 19:2; 20:12–13), even as that role is taken up by the “Son of Man” (14:14–16; cf. Matt 16:27; cf. Matt 13:41–43; 19:28; 25:31–46) and, here, by the “rider on the white horse” (19:11).

<sup>154</sup> Virgil, *Aen.* 3.537; Dio Cassius, *Hist.* 43.14.3; Juvenal, *Sat.* 10.45; Tibullus, *El.* 1.7.5–8. See esp. Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, 1051; cf. already Aune, “The Influence of Roman Imperial Court Ceremonial on the Apocalypse of John,” *BR* 28 (1983): 5–26. The Roman “triumph” was a celebratory parade which honored victorious Roman generals upon their return to the capital.

<sup>155</sup> Osborne, *Revelation*, 680.

γενέσθαι ἐν τάχει; cf. 2:16; 3:11; 11:14; 22:7, 12, 20: ἔρχομαι ταχύ).<sup>156</sup> And it speaks of the “time” as “near” (1:3; 22:10: ἐγγύς)<sup>157</sup> and “about to be” (1:19: μέλλει γενέσθαι), using language that echoes Jesus’ own announcement of the coming of the kingdom (Mark 1:15: ἤγγικεν; cf. Mark 13:28–29: ἐγγύς; cf. Rom 13:11–12; Phil 4:5; Heb 10:25; Jas 5:8; 1 Pet 4:7).

On the other hand, Revelation also emphasizes that between the victory of the Lamb, through his death and resurrection, and the final outworking of that victory, there will be a period of delay. This is implied already in the three series of seven judgments that fill the central section of the book in Revelation 6–16 (seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls): the Lamb has won the decisive victory, but the outworking of that victory remains to be completed in a series of judgments over the earth.<sup>158</sup> The sense of delay created by this literary structure is confirmed at a number of points where a more explicit note is sounded. The “souls of those who had been slain” under the altar at 6:9–10 cry out: “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, *how long* before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” Similarly, at 11:2 the “temple of God”—a symbol for the church—is to be trampled by the nations for a period of 42 months (3½ years).<sup>159</sup> This assures Christian auditors that their time of trial, though painful, is not indefinite: it is only half of the number of completeness (7), only half of what it could be. Nevertheless, it also communicates that the final victory will not follow immediately. Finally, given the way in which the prayers of the suffering saints function as the impetus for God’s judgments in the earth (8:3–5), it seems that the suffering of the righteous, which demands God’s intervention, is actually part of God’s strategy for establishing his kingdom! His kingdom will come, and “soon,” but only when God’s purposes for his world are full and complete.

Revelation’s emphasis on the “nearness” of the end has led some—despite the indications of delay just noted—to a “Preterist” reading of the book as a whole, according to which its prophecies were all fulfilled in the first century.<sup>160</sup> It is better, however, with Moore, to see that while the New Testament authors, John included, clearly expected the return of Christ to be “soon,” and understood the end to be “near,” they never delimited this expectation in chronological terms.<sup>161</sup> The references to the “nearness” of the

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<sup>156</sup> It is also interesting that Jesus uses the phrase δεῖ γενέσθαι in Mark 13:7 parr. in his prophecy of the signs of the “end.”

<sup>157</sup> In contrast to the command to Daniel to conceal the words and seal up his book until the end of time (Dan 12:4), John is told the exact opposite: “Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near” (Rev 22:10).

<sup>158</sup> In this section of the book the following texts, especially, seem to envisage a significant period of time before the end: 6:1; 7:3; 9:5, 10; 10:11; 11:3; 12:6, 14; 13:5.

<sup>159</sup> Cf. Ps 37:10; Isa 26:20; Heb 10:37

<sup>160</sup> See esp. Ken L. Gentry, *Before Jerusalem Fell: Dating the Book of Revelation* (Tyler: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989); cf. George Bradford Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 12.

<sup>161</sup> Arthur L. Moore, *The Parousia in the New Testament*, NovTSup (Leiden: Brill, 1966), esp. 108–59; cf. John P. M. Sweet, *Revelation*, Westminster Pelican Commentaries (Philadelphia:

end are best read as a theological assertion—or, better, a *christological* assertion—that the victory won in Christ’s death and resurrection is now, already, a present reality, and that the final manifestation of his victory may therefore take place at any moment.<sup>162</sup>

(e) *In the Meantime: Revelation’s Call to Conquer by the Lamb*

On the basis of the victory won by the Lamb through his death and resurrection, and in anticipation of the final outworking of his victory when he returns, Revelation calls on its auditors to “conquer.” Certainly, the Lord Jesus promises eschatological salvation “to the one who conquers” (τῷ νικῶντι) in each of the letters to the seven churches (2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21). The content of the promise is different in each case, but always concerns an aspect of the final eschatological reality. It is significant, then, that the promise does not appear again in the same form until the very close of the book (21:7). This has the effect of enclosing the whole book within the call to “conquer” and the promise of eschatological life to those who do.

Crucially, however, the book defines what it means to “conquer” in terms of following in Jesus’ footsteps, and in stark contrast to the kind of “victory” celebrated in the Greco-Roman world. The goddess Victory (νίκη) was widely celebrated in the cities of the Roman province of Asia.<sup>163</sup> In Pergamum, to take just one example, victory by military force was worshiped at the temples of Zeus “the Savior” (σωτήρ) and Athena “the victory-bearer” (νικήφορος), who had delivered the city from military peril.<sup>164</sup> Far from conquering through violence or force, however, Revelation praises those who “have conquered ... by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death” (12:11). Revelation further describes those who have “conquered” as those who have “harps of God in their hands” (15:2), ready to sing God’s praise. In the terms of the categories we have developed in this chapter, “the one who conquers” is the one who *worships* the Lord God Almighty and him alone, and who faithfully bears *witness* to Jesus in word and deed, even to the point of death. In stark contrast to the Roman conquest of the known world by shedding the blood of those conquered, Jesus’ victory in the world, and the victory of those who follow him, is won by their self-sacrificial faithfulness to the Lord.

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Westminster John Knox, 1979), 58 who notes that Revelation clearly expects the events it depicts to unfold in stages, even if it is difficult to create a precise chronology.

<sup>162</sup> Moore, *Parousia*, 172: “The nearness of the end is bound up with the person of Jesus Christ, in whom the events of the end, including the open, unambiguous manifestation, co-inhere. In him, death, resurrection, ascension and Parousia belong together. They do not belong together as a general principle but as a matter of theological, or more exactly of Christological fact. The Christological unity of the End events is thus the mainspring of the End’s nearness”; cf. C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel according to St. Mark: An Introduction and Commentary*, CGTC, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 408.

<sup>163</sup> Statues celebrating the goddess have been found in Ephesus, Aphrodisias, and elsewhere.

<sup>164</sup> See n. 94 above.

Revelation, therefore, calls on its auditors to “wait” for the final outworking of God’s victory in the world. The final return of Christ to defeat his enemies and vindicate his people is coming “soon,” but not before God’s purposes in history have been fulfilled. God’s people, therefore, must “patiently endure” suffering, worshiping God and bearing witness to Christ in life and deed, confident that those who “conquer” will, in the end, receive the life of the age to come.

#### 4. Conclusion

Revelation addresses the seven churches of Asia in the first century, which lived in a world of violence, and which had faced, were facing, and were about to face persecution for their devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ. The Roman imperial cults in the province were the focal point of this persecution because Christians could not participate in them without denying their most basic confession: “Jesus is Lord.” Revelation speaks into this situation and provides the view from the heavenly throne. It unmasks the false claims of the Roman imperial cults, exposes the pretensions of Roman rule, and so empowers its auditors—in the face of pressure and persecution—to *worship* the one true God, to bear *witness* to Christ in word and deed, even at the cost of their lives, and to *wait* for God’s final victory in the world.

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