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## The Book of Revelation

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NO OTHER SINGLE WORK HAS HAD AS GREAT AN INFLUENCE on the apocalyptic tradition as the book of Revelation. Its opening word, "apocalypse" or "revelation," which serves as a kind of self-designation, has become the name of a kind of writing and the ideas and themes associated with it. Although its key images have precedents in Jewish literature and parallels in other early Christian writings, it is from the book of Revelation that the popular images of "Armageddon," the "tribulation," the "millennium," and the "New Jerusalem" come. The purpose of this essay is to place the book in its social-historical context and to consider its relationships with Jewish apocalypticism and the Jesus tradition.

## THE AUTHOR

The author of the book of Revelation refers to himself as "John" (Rev. 1:1, 4, 9; 22:8). Since the name was not uncommon among Jews and followers of Jesus at the time, we may not simply assume that this John is John the son of Zebedee, one of the Twelve, to whom the Gospel of John has also been attributed by Christian tradition. The author of Revelation never refers to himself as an apostle or a disciple of the Lord. Justin, surnamed Martyr, writing

around 135 C.E., refers to the book and says that its author was John, one of the apostles of Christ (*Dialogue with Trypho* 81). Irenaeus refers to the author of Revelation as "John, the Lord's disciple" (*Against Heresies* 4.20.11; 5.35.2). The reliability of this tradition is called into question by a combination of two other factors. One is the likelihood that the book of Revelation was written in the mid-nineties C.E. (see below). The other is the tradition that John, the son of Zebedee, was killed for his allegiance to Christ, apparently before 70 C.E. (see Charles 1920, 1:xliv–xlix). The attribution of the book of Revelation to John, the son of Zebedee, therefore, occurred either by mistake or as a way of increasing the authority of the book.

Since ancient times, some have argued that the book of Revelation is pseudonymous, that is, that it was written by someone who wanted those who received the work to think that it had been written by John, the son of Zebedee. The Alogi, a group active in the second century who strongly opposed the New Prophecy (Montanists), argued that neither the Gospel of John nor the book of Revelation was composed by John. Rather, they were written by Cerinthus, a teacher criticized for various reasons, including his ideas about a future kingdom of God on earth. The reason for this strange accusation seems to be that the Gospel of John and the book of Revelation supported certain ideas of the New Prophecy (see Swete 1917, cxi–cxiv). In modern times, some scholars have argued that the book of Revelation was written pseudonymously, because pseudonymity is a typical feature of ancient Jewish apocalypses. This argument is not compelling because there was a revival of prophecy among the followers of Jesus, which led, for a short time at least, to the willingness to prophesy and to write books of prophecy in one's own name. The apocalyptic work from the second century called *The Shepherd of Hermas*, for example, was written by a Christian in Rome, Hermas, in his own name. Another reason that this argument is unpersuasive is that the author would probably have taken care to specify more clearly that he was an apostle or a disciple of the Lord, if he had intended to be so recognized.

The most reasonable conclusion about the authorship of Revelation is that it was written by a man named John who is otherwise unknown to us (see Yarbro Collins 1984, 25–53). Although John never claims to be a prophet, he describes his work as a "prophecy" (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18, 19). Further, he comes very close to designating himself as a prophet when he attributes the following words to the revealing angel in 22:9, "I am a fellow servant with you and your brethren the prophets" (RSV). Thus, the author presented himself indirectly as a prophet, that is, as one whose task it was to mediate an intelligible message to his fellow Christians, a message that he claimed derived ultimately from God (1:1). His intimate knowledge of Jewish scriptures and evidence

that he knew Hebrew and Aramaic indicate that he was probably a Jew by birth and a native of Judea. The fact that he addressed several different communities suggests that he was an itinerant prophet. His presence in Asia Minor and his attitude toward Rome may be explained with the hypothesis that he was a refugee from the first Jewish war with Rome, which erupted in 66 and climaxed with the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 C.E.

### ☞ THE DATE

The earliest statement about the date of the book of Revelation is the remark of Irenaeus that the revelation was seen at the end of the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian (*Against Heresies* 5.30.3). There is no good reason to doubt this dating. Domitian ruled from 81 to 96 C.E. (see Yarbrow Collins 1984, 54–83).

The most important internal evidence for the date consists of references to a city called "Babylon" and prophecies of its destruction (14:8; 16:19; 17:5; 18:2, 10, 21). It is unlikely that the author was referring to the city in Mesopotamia or the one in the delta of the Nile in Egypt, both of which bore that name. The name is not literal but symbolic, as the statement in Rev. 17:5 shows, "and on her forehead was written a name of mystery: 'Babylon the great, mother of harlots and of earth's abominations.'" The explanation of the "mystery" in 17:7–9 makes clear that the woman represents the city of Rome. She sits on a beast with seven heads; the heads represent seven hills on which the woman is seated. Writers of antiquity frequently referred to Rome as the city of seven hills. Furthermore, the woman is interpreted as "the great city which has dominion over the kings of the earth" (17:18). In the first century such a city could only be Rome.

It is likely that John took over this symbolic name from Jewish tradition current in his time. In ancient Jewish sources, "Egypt," "Kitim," "Edom," and "Babylon" are all used as symbolic or code names for Rome. "Kitim" is the most common name for Rome in the Dead Sea Scrolls, and "Edom" is the most common in rabbinic literature. Most of the occurrences of "Babylon" occur in apocalyptic works. In each occurrence, the reason for this choice of symbolic name is made clear in the context. It is the fact that Rome's forces, like those of Babylon at an earlier time, destroyed the city of Jerusalem and the Temple (4 Ezra = 2 Esdras 3:1–2, 28–31; 2 *Baruch* 10:1–3; 11:1; 67:7; *Sibylline Oracles* 5.143, 159). The use of the name in Jewish tradition suggests that John used it not only to allude to the great power, wealth, arrogance and decadence of Rome but also and most especially to call to mind the events of

70 C.E. This interpretation implies that the book of Revelation was written after 70 C.E., but not necessarily immediately afterward. The two great Jewish apocalypses that react to those events, 4 Ezra and 2 *Baruch*, were not written immediately after the destruction of Jerusalem, but around 100 C.E.

### ☞ SUMMARY OF THE CONTENTS

The book of Revelation opens with a preface in the third person; that is, in it John does not speak but is spoken about (1:1–3). It is difficult to determine whether the preface was added later by someone else or whether John used the third person here as a literary device. In any case, the style and content of the preface are very similar to those of the rest of the work.

The preface refers to the work as an "apocalypse" or "revelation" that was given by God to Jesus Christ to show his servants what must soon take place (1:1). This emphasis on the imminence of significant events is repeated at the end of the preface, "for the time is near" (1:3). The revelation was mediated in a series of steps: from God to Jesus Christ to an angel to John to the servants of God (1:1–2). The work is also called "words of prophecy" and a blessing is pronounced on the one who reads it aloud (in a communal setting) and on those who keep or observe the things written in it (1:3).

Apart from the preface, the book has the framework of an ancient letter (1:4–22:21). In this part of the work, John speaks in the first person and also quotes other speakers. This part of the work begins with the typical opening elements of an ancient letter: the salutation, that is, the naming of the sender and the addressees (1:4a); the greeting, in this case the wish that God and Christ grant grace and peace to the addressees (1:4b–5); and a doxology (1:5b–6). The latter corresponds to the thanksgiving that typically occurs near the beginning of the letters of Paul. The work closes with a concluding blessing, typical of early Christian letters (22:21).

Attached to the epistolary prescript are two prophetic sayings (1:7, 8), which hint that this work is not a typical letter. Similarly, a series of prophetic sayings precedes the epistolary conclusion (22:6–20). These sayings enclose what may be called the body of the work, 1:9–22:5. This main part is a description of the revelation received by John and an account of how and from whom he received it. This report falls into two main parts: an account of an appearance of the risen Christ to John (1:9–3:22) and a description of visions and auditions of heavenly origin (4:1–22:5). The second part begins with a vision of the heavenly court (4:1–5:14), which introduces a series of symbolic visions (6:1–22:5).

## THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

It is clear that an organizing principle in the book of Revelation is the number seven: seven messages, seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls are presented. The symbolic significance of this number is cosmic. According to late Pythagorean tradition and to the Jewish exegete and philosopher Philo,<sup>2</sup> all reality is ordered and that order expresses itself in patterns of seven (see Yarbrow Collins 1996, 90–99, 122–27). Jewish writers argued that the observance of the sabbath is thus in accordance with the cosmic order, but John does not make this point, at least not explicitly.

It is not so clear, however, how each of the series of seven relates to the others. They manifest parallels among themselves and some repetition. The similarities between the trumpets and the bowls are so close that the latter seem in large part to repeat the former. Some scholars think that the repetition results from the use of written sources. Others think that it is part of the author's literary design. Within the latter group, some think that the literary design involves a linear sequence of events, whereas others argue that the same events are described repeatedly from different points of view.

The theory that the book of Revelation describes the same events from different points of view was adopted by the author of the oldest surviving commentary on the work, written ca. 300 C.E. by Victorinus of Pettau. He stated that both the trumpets and the bowls predict the eschatological punishment of unbelievers (Haussleiter 1916, 84, line 14–p. 86, line 7). Victorinus's principle of recapitulation was taken up by Tyconius as an independent rule in his exegetical work *Three Books of Rules*, written around 382 C.E. (Steinhauser 1987, 32, 250). Tyconius then applied this rule in his influential commentary on the book of Revelation, written about 385 C.E. This commentary has unfortunately been lost, but it survives in fragments and something of its nature can be known by its influence on others. The approach to Revelation pioneered by Victorinus has been called the recapitulation theory.

The source-critical approach was first applied to the book of Revelation by Daniel Völter in 1882. An extreme source-critical analysis was proposed by Friedrich Spitta in 1889, who argued that the seals, trumpets, and bowls each reflect a source based on a sevenfold series (see Bousset 1906, 109, 113–14). In the twentieth century, the source-critical approach has been adopted by M. E. Boismard, J. Massyngberde Ford, and Ulrich B. Müller. Boismard used the repetitions in the book to distinguish two sources, one written under Nero and the other somewhat later (Boismard 1949). Müller used differences in messianic ideas to distinguish sources in Revelation from the minimal edi-

torial work of the author (Müller 1972). Ford suggested that chaps. 4–11 constitute a source containing the prophecies of John the Baptist and that chaps. 12–22 represent another, later source, originating from among the disciples of John the Baptist (Ford 1975). It is now generally accepted that the author of the book of Revelation used sources, but not as many or as extensive ones as some source critics have argued. The argument for an extensive use of sources has been undercut by the demonstration of the unity of style in the work as a whole (Bousset 1906, 159–77; Charles 1920, 1:lxviii–lxxxix).

Charles argued that the literary design of Revelation describes a linear sequence of events. Most of the events are given in strict chronological order, but there are significant exceptions. Chapter 12 is a flashback intended to provide the background for chapter 13. Three "proleptic" or anticipatory visions interrupt the orderly unfolding of events in order to encourage the audience by flashing forward to some more distant point of the future; these are 7:9–17; 10:1–11:13; and chapter 14. The adequacy of this theory was called into question both by these significant exceptions and by the hypothesis that the text had been thrown into disarray by an incompetent disciple of the author after his death (Charles 1920, 1:xxii–xxiii, 1–iv, lix).

The failure of the attempt to interpret the plan of the book as a linear sequence of events led to the revival of the recapitulation theory. Scholars had been reluctant to admit the validity of this approach, because it had been used by those who argued that Revelation prophesied history from the time of its composition to the time of the interpreter (see below). But Günther Bornkamm was able to show that this theory was compatible with a historical-critical approach to the book, that is, with an interpretation that understands the prophecies to refer to the past and present of the author and otherwise to the eschatological future. Bornkamm pointed out the close parallel structure between 8:2–14:20 and 15:1–19:21. He suggested that the former passage describes the same series of events as the latter, but in a mysterious, fragmentary, and proleptic manner (Bornkamm 1937). Another way of retrieving the recapitulation theory is the argument that the book of Revelation is composed of two great cycles of visions, 1:9–11:19 and 12:1–22:5. Each of these cycles is made up of three series of seven: (1) seven messages, seven seals, and seven trumpets; (2) seven unnumbered visions, seven bowls, and another series of seven unnumbered visions. Beginning with the seven seals, each series expresses the message of the whole book in its own particular way. The constant elements of the message are (a) persecution, (b) punishment of the persecutors, and (c) salvation of the persecuted. These themes are introduced in the first cycle in a way that seems deliberately veiled and fragmentary. The second cycle maintains the symbolic and mythic language of the first, but pre-

sents the message of the book in a fuller and more coherent manner. In particular, the second cycle is more explicit about the historical contexts of the visions. The first cycle makes clear that persecution is of major importance, but it is only in the second cycle that the identity of the persecutors is made explicit, namely, the Roman authorities (see Yarbrow Collins 1976, 32–44).

Structural, thematic, and text-linguistic approaches have also been offered. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza discerned a pattern of inclusion or symmetry in the book of Revelation. The first (1:1–8) and the last (22:10–21) units are related to one another as promise and fulfillment. The second (1:9–3:22) and sixth (19:11–22:9) units correspond because they each have an “inaugural” vision of Christ (1:12–20 and 19:11–16). The third (4:1–9:21) and fifth (15:1, 5–19:10) units are related to each other because both evolve out of the scroll with the seven seals. The fourth unit is then the center and climax of the book (Schüssler Fiorenza 1985, 170–75). Charles Homer Giblin, building on the work of Ugo Vanni, argued that the themes of divine judgment and divine disclosure are articulated and correlated in chaps. 16–22. The narrative of the seventh bowl, wrath against “Babylon” (16:17–21), describes the negative aspect of divine judgment. The narrative of the elimination of all eschatological adversaries (19:11–21:8) is the fulfilled aspect of divine judgment that entails a new creation. The disclosure of the significance of “Babylon” (17:1–19:10) is correlated with the disclosure of the New Jerusalem (21:9–22:6) (Giblin 1974). In his text-linguistic study of Revelation, David Hellholm concluded that the level of communication most profoundly embedded in the work is the speech of God in 21:5–8. This speech also occurs on the highest grade of the hierarchy of text sequences. This hierarchic embedment of divine speech enhances the authority of the message (Hellholm 1986, 45).

### ☞ SOCIAL SETTING AND PURPOSE

The messages to the seven congregations in the seven cities reveal conflict among the followers of Jesus in this region and rivalry among their leaders. Each message is addressed to “the angel” of the congregation in that particular city. Since angels were equivalent to stars in Jewish tradition and the angels of the congregations are identified with stars in 1:20, it is clear that John refers to angelic beings in 2:1 and in the other messages, not to human messengers. This motif is a democratization of the Israelite and Jewish idea that each people or nation has an angel ruling over it, as representative and patron. At the same time, however, the address to the angel is a literary device through

which the author can address each community as a whole, speaking in the name of Christ. It may be that the author employed this device in order to circumvent the institutional leaders of these communities (bishops, elders etc.) and to relativize their authority. The charismatic authority of the prophet may bypass the institutional authority of the local leaders.

The Christians in Ephesus are commended because they “cannot bear evil men but have tested those who call themselves apostles but are not, and found them to be false” (2:2). They are also praised for hating the works of the Nicolaitans, which Christ also hates (2:6). In the message to the followers of Jesus in Pergamum, the teaching of the Nicolaitans is equated with that of Balaam (2:14–15). According to Numbers 22–24, Balaam was a foreign priest and a diviner or seer, whom Balak, the king of Moab, paid to curse Israel. Moved by the power of the Lord, however, Balaam blessed Israel instead. But the book of Revelation seems to allude not to these mostly positive accounts but to Num. 31:16, which says that Balaam counseled the women of Midian to cause the people of Israel to act treacherously against the Lord in the matter of Peor. This text in turn alludes to the story in Num. 25:1–18, according to which some of the men of Israel married women of Moab and Midian, who then persuaded them to worship their god, Baal of Peor. The teaching attributed to Balaam which some in Pergamum are accused of holding involves eating food sacrificed to idols and practicing immorality (Rev. 2:14). It is not entirely clear whether either or both of these activities are meant literally or metaphorically. The eating of food, probably meat, sacrificed to idols is an issue addressed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 8–10. It could very well be meant literally here. Practicing (sexual) immorality could also be meant literally, but in some restricted sense regarding distinctions between permitted and forbidden types of marriage. If the terms are taken literally, the controversy here may be related to the so-called apostolic decree reported in Acts 15:29. Another possibility is that both terms are meant to symbolize laxness in monotheistic devotion to the one true god. “Harlotry” is a term used frequently in the prophetic books of the Jewish scriptures for honor paid to other gods. In either case, the point at issue seems to be how to live as a servant of God and a follower of Jesus in a pluralistic society. In antiquity there was no concept of a secular state; religious, social, economic, and political aspects of life were closely intertwined. John evidently disagreed with some traveling and local teachers in Ephesus and Pergamum on this question.

The issue is even more explosive in the message to Thyatira. The Christians in that place are criticized for tolerating the woman “Jezebel” (2:20). As “Babylon” is a symbolic name for the city of Rome, so “Jezebel” is a code name for a female prophet active in Thyatira. According to 1 Kgs. 16:31–33,

Jezebel was the daughter of the king of Sidon and a worshiper of Baal. Ahab, the king of Israel, married her, presumably to form an alliance with Sidon. Ahab then built a temple for Baal in Samaria. A struggle then followed between the devotees of Baal and those of Yahweh. In the end, Jezebel was thrown from a window and her body was eaten by dogs (2 Kgs. 9:30-37).<sup>2</sup> John's endowment of the otherwise anonymous prophet with the name "Jezebel" is already in itself a harsh condemnation of her teaching. Her teaching is described in the same way as that of Balaam: practicing immorality and eating food sacrificed to idols (2:20). The words attributed to Christ hint that her teaching also involved "the deep things of Satan" (2:24). This phrase could be understood to mean that her teaching was similar to Gnostic speculation or that she was involved in the practice of magic. It could, however, simply mean that she taught "mysteries," that is, apocalyptic or heavenly secrets, perhaps through the interpretation of texts, about Satan and the evil angels associated with him. Such teaching is intelligible entirely within the context of Jewish and Christian apocalypticism. But we do not have sufficient information to be sure about what this teaching was.

The messages also reflect a social setting in which followers of Jesus are in conflict with their Jewish neighbors. Although the movement that originated with the historical Jesus could still be defined as a type of Judaism in the nineties C.E., it is likely that considerable social differentiation had taken place. The use of the term *ekklesia* ("congregation" or "church") in the book of Revelation (1:4, 20; 2:1 etc.) indicates that the followers of Jesus in each city had their own association, separate from the *synagōgē* ("synagogue"), the assembly of the local Jewish community. In the message to Smyrna, the speaker refers to "the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan" (2:9). "Those who say that they are Jews and are not" could be Jewish or judaizing Christians condemned for some reason by John. For example, they could be Gentiles by birth who argue that those who would be saved in Christ must be circumcised and observe all or some commandments of the Torah. This line of interpretation seems unlikely, however, since John shows no interest in the theological principles dear to Paul, such as salvation by faith rather than works of the law. Furthermore, the rhetorical force of the saying implies that "Jews" is a positive designation. The implication is that the *ekklesia*, the Christian congregation, is the synagogue of God, and that the local Jewish community, which does not recognize Jesus as the Messiah, is a synagogue of Satan. The polemic is analogous to that of the community of the Dead Sea Scrolls against other Jews who have not joined in their new covenant with the Lord. For example, the *Community Rule* states: "They shall separate from the congregation of the men of falsehood and shall

unite, with respect to the Law and possessions, under the authority of the sons of Zadok, the Priests who keep the covenant, and of the multitude of the men of the Community who hold fast to the Covenant" (1QS 5:1-3; trans. Vermes). The men of falsehood are equivalent to the men of the lot of Satan (Belial) (cf. 1QS 4:9-14 and especially 1:4-10). In the *Thanksgiving Hymns*, the (probably Jewish) opponents of the Qumran community are designated "a council of deceit and a congregation of Belial" (1QH 2:22 Vermes = 10:22 García Martínez; my translation).

Immediately following the reference to "the synagogue of Satan" is encouragement in the face of expected persecution. John uses the word "tribulation" to speak of the sporadic persecutions that have already happened and continue to occur (1:9; 2:9) and for the persecutions that he expects to happen in the future (2:10; 7:14). He uses the term once for the punishment that may fall upon a false prophet (2:22). In the message to Smyrna, the speaker says, "Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life" (2:10). These words imply expectation of official arrest and imprisonment, presumably to await trial. Now at this time, the Roman officials did not seek out Christians to arrest and interrogate them. They took action only when a citizen or resident with civil rights brought an official accusation or charge against Christians, in accordance with the normal legal process. The juxtaposition of the two remarks suggests that in Smyrna, conflict between Christians and Jews had led, or was about to lead, to the formal accusation of Christians by Jews before the Roman authorities. The charge could have been disturbing the peace or introducing a new (unlawful or subversive) cult. The message to the congregation in Philadelphia also mentions a "synagogue of Satan" and "those who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie" (3:9). The promise that those who claim to be Jews will come and bow down before the feet of the congregation and know that Christ has loved them expresses the hope for a reversal of the present situation in which the Christian congregation has little or no status and power.

The need to endure and the need to avoid denying the name of Christ are prominent themes in the messages. These themes reflect a social situation in which it is difficult to maintain the identity of the group in light of the dominant symbolic system and lifestyle and in which there is active opposition to the Christian communities. The messages reveal tensions between Christians and non-Christian Jews. It is likely that there were tensions between Christians and non-Christian Gentiles as well. As already noted in the discussion of the date of the work, the book of Revelation manifests great antipathy to

Rome because of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. Another point of potential conflict was the imperial cult. This issue begins to emerge in chap. 12.

The revelatory report in chap. 12 consists of a vision with three scenes (vv. 1–6, 7–9, and 13–17) and an audition (vv. 10–12) that interprets the second scene of the vision. The first and third scenes constitute a birth narrative in which a suprahuman female figure gives birth to a son with a heroic or divine destiny. Mother and son are threatened by a great monster, but the mother receives divine aid and the child is saved. This narrative has similarities with several ancient texts, but it is most like stories about Leto giving birth to Apollo, in spite of the pursuit of Python, a monster who rightly fears that Apollo will take his place as ruler of Delphi and its oracle. During the period of the Roman Empire, Roman rule was likened to the golden age of Apollo, and various emperors were identified as Apollo manifest or incarnate. John co-opts this imperial propaganda to claim that the true golden age will come with the messianic reign of Christ (see Yarbrow Collins 1976, 57–155).

The vision of the beast rising out of the sea (13:1–10) is a rewriting and adaptation of the vision of the four beasts rising out of the sea in Daniel 7. At the end of the previous vision, the dragon or serpent that threatened the woman is shown standing on the sand of the sea (12:17). The dragon thus watches as the beast arises from the sea in 13:1. The implication is that the beast is the agent of the dragon. This impression is confirmed by the statement in 13:2b, "And to it the dragon gave his power and his throne and great authority," and by 13:4, "Men worshiped the dragon, for he had given his authority to the beast, and they worshiped the beast, saying 'Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?'" Since the dragon is identified with Satan (12:9), the beast is presented as an ally or agent of Satan. In the original context of Daniel, the four beasts represented the Babylonian empire, the Medes, the Persians, and the Greeks. Josephus provides evidence that the fourth beast was understood to be Rome in the first century C.E. That the beast of Rev. 13:1–10 represents Rome is clear from the statement in 13:7b, "And authority was given it over every tribe and people and tongue and nation." Rather than describe four beasts, each more terrible than the last, John has combined the attributes of all four to create one overwhelmingly monstrous creature. The result is a reduction of attention to history and a focus on the terrors of the recent past and the present.

The vision of the beast from the sea makes clear what the dominant concerns of John are. Like the beasts of Daniel 7, this beast, that is, Rome, is portrayed as rebelling against God, as an adversary of God. This theme is evoked by the very images of the sea and the sea monster (cf. Ps. 74:12–17; 89:10; Job

26:12–13; Isa. 27:1; 51:9). It is made explicit by the motif of the blasphemous name upon its heads and the mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words (Rev. 13:1, 5). This theme reaches its climax in the statement that "it opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven" (13:6). So far, the language of conflict is symbolic or mythic. In 13:7a it becomes clear that this mythic conflict has a historical dimension: "Also it was allowed to make war on the saints and to conquer them." This statement may be understood in two ways. It reflects the incidents of persecution that have already occurred (cf. 2:13) and those that John expects to occur in the future (13:9–10; cf. 1:10). It also probably reflects the first Jewish war with Rome, which began during the reign of Nero. The Roman forces were at first under the command of the military leader Vespasian, until he was proclaimed emperor. His son, Titus, then took over the command. It was he who led the siege of the Temple mount and under whose command the Temple was burned and the city leveled. Later, he succeeded his father as emperor. Thus, the Romans made war on the saints (that is, the people of God; in Daniel, the "saints" or "holy ones" are angels and the people are "the people of the saints of the Most High"; cf. Dan. 7:27) and conquered them.

The blasphemous name and haughty and blasphemous words evoke not only rebellion and war, but also the imperial cult. Worship of the living emperor was not a typically Roman phenomenon, but it was popular in the East. In the cultures of Mesopotamia and Egypt, it was traditional to view the king or pharaoh as a deity manifest or incarnate. The Greeks had a tradition of honoring the special dead with hero cults and of honoring living benefactors with religious rituals. When Alexander the Great conquered the Near East, he accepted and apparently even encouraged the peoples he ruled to give him divine honors. His successors did the same. Various ruler cults appeared among the Greeks during the Hellenistic period. When Roman hegemony was established in the eastern Mediterranean area, various cities established cults in which divine honors were given to Roma and Augustus and then to various other emperors, often while they were still alive. It is clear that these cults had important social and political functions. They expressed gratitude to Rome for creating social and political stability, and were part of a system of benefaction and patronage. The philosophical and religious dimensions of the phenomenon are debated. S. R. F. Price has argued that the imperial cult in the Hellenistic cities resulted from the attempt by Greek subjects of the Roman Empire to relate their ruler to their own dominant symbolic system (1984, 241).

The imperial cult was a ubiquitous and impressive phenomenon in the

regions in which the seven cities of the book of Revelation were located. No resident could overlook it. There were eighty imperial temples in sixty cities in Asia Minor (Price 1984, 134). The cult was celebrated not only in temples but also in the major civic centers, the meeting place of the council, the theater, the stadium, and the gymnasium (ibid., 109). The emperor was regularly associated with the gods and sometimes presented as a god himself. For example, gold was normally used only in statues of the gods, but it was also often used in those of the emperors. Images of the emperor were often carried in processions (ibid., 186–89). Finally, many of the coins in use carried the portrait of the emperor, often depicted as Zeus, Apollo, or Hercules.

John's awareness of the imperial cult is evident in the remark, "and they worshiped the beast, saying, 'Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?'" (13:4b). His disapproval of it is displayed in the statement that "all who dwell on earth will worship it, every one whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb that was slain" (13:8). In the account of the last judgment, it is said, "and if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire" (20:15). This lake of fire is the second death (20:14b). The remark in 13:8, then, is a heavy condemnation of those who worship the beast and a strong threat addressed to those who may be contemplating doing so. The threat in 14:9–11 is even more direct and terrifying.

By associating the emperor with the beast and the beast with Satan, John argued that honoring the emperor was betrayal of God. This position was not taken by all Christians. Paul instructed the Christians in Rome to be subject to the ruling authorities. He implied that the emperor is God's servant and minister and that he was worthy of respect and honor (Rom. 13:1–7). The author of 1 Peter similarly advised his audience to be subject to the emperor and to honor him (1 Pet. 2:13–17). Until the outbreak of the war with Rome, the Jewish people offered a daily sacrifice in the Temple in Jerusalem in behalf of the emperor. So early Christians may have debated with one another whether to honor the emperor and, if so, how to do so. Some, like John, chose to condemn, rather than honor the emperor. Others may have advocated praying for the emperor, as a kind of spiritual sacrifice. Yet others may have seen nothing wrong in pouring a libation to the emperor or in burning incense before his image. For John, however, doing so was idolatry, the worst offense imaginable.

Following the vision of the beast from the sea is a vision of a beast that arises out of the earth. On the mythic level, these two beasts recall Leviathan and Behemoth, primordial creatures that must be conquered by divine power (cf. Job 40:15–41:34). On the historical level, the beast from the sea repre-

sents the Roman Empire and its heads Roman emperors. The beast from the land is described as follows: "It exercises all the authority of the first beast in its presence and makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast, whose mortal wound was healed" (13:12). Earlier it was said that one of the heads of the beast "seemed to have a mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed, and the whole world followed the beast with wonder" (13:3). By adapting legends about Nero, John has created a picture of an Antichrist figure, even though he does not use the term (see Yarbro Collins 1976, 176–90). Both Jesus and the beast as Nero are kings who die and rise again. The vision of the beast from the land may refer to the future from John's point of view, but it reflects his present, a situation in which the local elite, wealthy, powerful families in Asia Minor, occupy positions of power with the blessing of Rome for mutual advantage. In order to maintain good relations with Rome and enhance their own prestige, local leaders in various cities of Asia Minor tried to outdo one another in building temples, statues, and other monuments honoring the emperor.

John says that the second beast had the power to cause those who refused to worship the first beast to be slain (13:15). This should not be taken to mean that the Roman governor or local leaders attempted systematically to force people to participate in the imperial cult. The pressure was cultural rather than legal. Since the imperial cult was a significant part of civic life in Asia Minor, it would have been difficult to resist joining in. The pressure to celebrate Christmas in American society today is formally analogous. The authorities did apply force, however, in one set of circumstances. They would not seek out Christians, but if anyone was accused of being a Christian, the governor would ask him or her to offer wine and incense before images of the gods and the emperor. If this act was refused, the individual would be executed (see Pliny *Letters* 10.96; Yarbro Collins 1984, 72–73).

John also says that "no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name" (13:17). As noted earlier, many of the coins in circulation in Asia Minor bore the image of the emperor with divine attributes and his name. This aspect of the vision expresses the offense caused by the virtual necessity of using such coins for strict monotheists and strict interpreters of the commandment against images (see Yarbro Collins 1996, 212–14). In the following verse, the allusion to "the number of its name" is explained as follows, "Here is wisdom: let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a human being, and his number is six hundred sixty-six" (13:18). These remarks are based on the fact that Hebrew and Greek letters served sequentially as numerals. For example, the first letter of the alphabet is used as the numeral "one,"

the tenth as "ten," the eleventh as "twenty," and so forth. Thus, the letters of any name may be added up, and the sum may be used cryptically to refer to the name or the person bearing the name. The "wisdom" involved is not only the knowledge of what numerals the letters represent. To calculate the sum related to a name is easy; there is only one correct sum. But to determine what name is represented by a particular sum is difficult, since the same sum may represent the total of many different series of numerals. Two types of evidence support the theory that "Nero Caesar" is the name alluded to in Rev. 13:18. One is the fact that the references to the beast from the sea allude to the legend about Nero's death and return. The other is the fact that a number of manuscripts read "six hundred sixteen" rather than "six hundred sixty-six." Nero's name was sometimes spelled "Neron" and sometimes without the final *n*. If one uses Hebrew letters (another aspect of the "wisdom" needed to solve the riddle), the name "Neron Caesar" adds up to 666; without the final *n*, it adds up to 616.

John's thinking was dualistic in the sense that he perceived the situation in which he lived as characterized by a cosmic struggle between two diametrically opposed powers and their allies. God and Satan, along with their agents and spokespeople, were engaged in a struggle for the allegiance of the inhabitants of the earth. Jesus Christ, the primary agent of God, had been slain but would return to establish the rule of God on earth. At his return, he would be opposed by the primary agent of Satan. As the historical Jesus was transformed by his resurrection into a powerful, transhistorical figure, so Nero is presented as transformed by his descent into the underworld into an opposing, transhistorical figure. This symbolic or mythic construct expresses the insight, or makes the argument, that the primary conflict in John's time was the cultural tension between the views and lifestyles of a strictly monotheistic and exclusive type of Christianity, on the one hand, and the Roman imperial ideology on the other. A major purpose of the book of Revelation is to discourage its audience from accepting the ideology of the provincial elite, which involved a pyramid of power and patronage with the emperor at the pinnacle, and from participating in any form of the imperial cult, which was the religious aspect of that system. This purpose was accomplished by the imagery of the beast, which provided a highly negative redefinition of the imperial symbolic system, by threats, for example, the angelic proclamation of 14:9-11, and by promises, for example, the reward predicted for those who do not worship the beast (20:4).

The work's critical attitude toward Rome is also clearly expressed in the vision of the prostitute in chapter 17. As noted above, the depiction of the woman as sitting on a beast with seven heads and the explanation of the heads

as seven hills show clearly that the woman is a symbolic representation of the city of Rome. The Hebrew prophets often personified cities. Isaiah exclaimed that the faithful city, Jerusalem, had become a prostitute, thereby condemning the corruption and injustice that occurred there (1:21). Ezekiel personified Jerusalem as a prostitute and associated this image with the worship of gods other than Yahweh (chapter 16). He also personified both Jerusalem and Samaria as prostitutes and defined their tributary alliances with other nations as prostitution (chapter 23). Given the lack of differentiation of politics and religion, such alliances would almost inevitably involve some recognition of the foreign religious symbolic system and thus of their deities. The prophet Nahum depicted Nineveh as a prostitute because of its deceitful and treacherous dealings with other cities (3:4). Isaiah described the commercial dealings of Tyre as prostitution (18:15-18). Analogously, and perhaps inspired by these texts, the author of the book of Revelation depicted the alliances and commercial activities of the city of Rome as prostitution (cf. 17:2 with 18:3 and 18:9-10 with 18:11, 15, 19, and 23). The association of prostitution with the worship of other gods is implied by the motifs of the blasphemous names and the abominations and impurities (17:3-4). The motif of injustice appears in the allusions to the persecution of the followers of Jesus in 17:6 and 18:24. Violence against non-Christians is also condemned in 18:24 and a critical attitude toward the slave trade is implied in 18:13.

Besides biblical precedent, the portrayal of the city of Rome as a prostitute may have another set of associations. Beginning with the second century B.C.E., cults of the goddess Roma appeared in cities of Asia Minor, the region to which the book of Revelation is addressed (Price 1984, 24, 40-43, 187-88, 250, 252, 254). Such a cult is attested for the city of Erythrae, which was situated on the mainland opposite the island of Chios, not far from Smyrna, one of the seven cities of the Apocalypse. Around the same time, the city of Chios voted to hold a procession, sacrifice, and games for Roma. When Octavian became emperor and the cities of Asia Minor wished to give him divine honors, he allowed himself to be worshiped only in conjunction with the goddess Roma. Temples dedicated to them are attested for the island of Samos and for the cities of Pergamum and Ephesus. If, as suggested above, the author of the Apocalypse was a native of Palestine, he may have seen the temple that Herod built in Caesarea Maritima in which stood a colossal cult statue of Augustus, modeled on the statue of Zeus at Olympia, and another of Roma, of the same size as that of Hera at Argos. The cult of Roma is a good example of the inseparability of the religious and the political in antiquity. She was a goddess and also a personification of the power of Rome. The cults of Roma probably arose in western areas under Greek cultural influence during the Roman



republic, but soon spread to Greece and Asia Minor and continued into the imperial period, so that John was probably familiar with them. From this perspective, the portrayal of the city of Rome as a prostitute in Revelation 17 has a polemical edge. Instead of depicting her as a goddess like Hera (as she was presented in the temple at Caesarea mentioned above) or Athena (as she appeared on coins [Price 1984, 44]), John portrays her as an ostentatious, luxury-loving woman of loose morals, displaying her wealth in the finest clothing and jewelry and drinking to excess, even drinking blood. By painting such a picture, John expressed the outrage already felt by many Jews and Christians because of the destruction of Jerusalem; the portrait also had the effect of challenging any members of the audience who accepted the dominance of Rome and the symbolic and social system connected with it to reconsider their perceptions and their loyalties.

As we have seen, the book of Revelation reflects conflict among Christians, conflict between Christians and Jews, and conflict between Christians and the representatives of Rome. The work attempts to interpret these conflicts and to resolve them in accordance with its own perspective. These interpretations and proposed resolutions are intended to win or reinforce the commitment of members of the audience to that perspective, and they are reinforced by admonitions and threats. They are also reinforced by promises of future rewards and glory. Each of the seven messages in chapters 2–3 contains a promise to “the one who conquers.” The Greek phrase could also be translated “the one who overcomes” or “the one who is victorious.” The notion of Christian victory in the book of Revelation is complex and paradoxical. It is a metaphor that has its deepest root in the experience and language of victory in battle. According to Hesiod, the goddess of Victory was honored by Zeus for assisting the gods against the Titans (*Theog.* 383–403). The poets depicted her as ruling over athletic and all other competitions, as well as military contests. She appeared in Roman allegorical art as a symbol of victory over death. The paradox of the image is expressed most vividly in Revelation 5. The statement that “the lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals” (5:5) evokes for the audience with its messianic language the idea of a military victory. The vision that follows the statement, however, focuses on the slain Lamb. According to the announcement of the heavenly voice in chapter 12, “the brothers” have conquered the Accuser (Satan) by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their own testimony, and they are acclaimed as those who “did not love their lives unto death” (12:10–11). These two passages imply that it is by dying that Christ and his followers become victorious over Satan and all

their enemies. But later in the book, military imagery is used; for example, according to the vision of Rome as prostitute in chapter 17, “[the beast and the ten kings] will do battle with the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, because he is Lord of Lords and King of Kings, and those with him are called and chosen and trustworthy” (17:14). The battle alluded to here is announced already in chapter 16. After the sixth bowl is poured out, the beast will assemble the kings of the earth for battle on the great day of God the Almighty. The scene of this great battle is to be a place called “Armageddon” in Hebrew (16:12–16). “Armageddon” is a reference to Megiddo, an ancient city on a plain in northern Israel that was the scene of several decisive battles in the history of Israel (Judg. 5:19; 2 Kgs. 9:27; 2 Chr. 35:22). Christ is also pictured as a victorious warrior in 19:11–21. The vivid depiction of the past metaphorical victory of Jesus and the future military victory of the risen Christ encourages the audience to stand firm in their loyalty to him. The main way in which they conquer the beast is to refuse to participate in the activities that involved giving the emperor divine honors, even if such resistance resulted in death (cf. 15:2 with 20:4 and 7:14).

In the message to Ephesus, those who are willing to make such a commitment, those “who conquer,” are promised that they will eat of the tree of life that is in paradise or the garden of God (2:7). This is a clear example of the way in which visions of definitive salvation in the final age are similar to myths of origin. The one who conquers will be allowed to enter the garden from which Adam and Eve were driven and to eat from the tree of life, to which they were denied access (Gen. 3:22–24). The implication is clear: in the new age, death will be no more. The promise to Smyrna is similar: “The one who conquers will not be harmed by the second death” (2:11). Some in Smyrna may be killed (2:10), but this first death, the death of the earthly body, is of little consequence. A death faced in commitment and loyalty is like a triumph in a contest, and it will be rewarded by “the crown of life” (2:10). The victor in athletic and other contests received a crown of laurels, but those who suffer this noble death will be spared the second death, the death of the soul or eternal torment (cf. 20:14–15 with 14:10–11), and will enjoy eternal life. Such beliefs provided powerful motivation for resistance.

The promise to Pergamum involves the gift of manna and a new name (2:17). Like the promise of the tree of life, the promise of manna compares the future, definitive salvation to a former time. In this case it is the time of the wandering in the wilderness, when God nourished the people in an extraordinary, if not miraculous, way. The intimacy between God and the people enjoyed in the time of the exodus will be restored in the new age. The motif of

the new name implies a new beginning; the former name, the lack of status, the suffering—all will be removed and a new, secret name of power will be granted.

The promise to Thyatira, that the one who conquers will rule the nations with a rod of iron, evokes the military aspect of victory once again (2:26–27). The victors will share in Christ's messianic rule and power (cf. 5:10; 22:5). Christ also promises to give the victor the morning star (2:28). In ancient Near Eastern and Greek myths, the morning star was a deity. According to the book of Revelation, Christ is the morning star (22:16). This promise seems to be a figurative way of promising that the victor will share in Christ's glory and divinity. The promise to Sardis, that the victor will be clothed in white garments (3:5), is similar. The white garments signify a glorious, exalted state like that of the angels and other immortals.

The promise to Philadelphia, that Christ will make the victor a pillar in the temple of God, is odd, because John explicitly states in the description of the New Jerusalem that he saw no temple there (21:22). Yet he also says that the temple of the city is the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb. This implies that, in effect, the whole city takes the place of the temple in which God or his name traditionally dwelled. The promise to Philadelphia, therefore, may be read as a figurative way of saying that the victor will participate in an important way in the life of the city, the focal point of the new age. This interpretation is supported by the association of the gates of the cities with the twelve tribes of Israel and the foundations with the apostles of the Lamb (21:12, 14).

The promise to Laodicea, like the one to Thyatira, indicates that the one who conquers will share in the victory of Christ. Not only will the victor have power over the nations (2:26–27); he will even share the throne of Christ, which is also the throne of God (3:21). Such language suggests the identification of the follower of Christ with Christ himself, a kind of mystical union that involves the deification of the one who conquers. At the very least, the image signifies that the victorious follower of Jesus enjoys a fulsome delegation of authority and will act as an agent of God and Christ in the new age. The image is similar to the dream of Moses narrated by Ezekiel the tragedian in the Greek drama *The Exodus* (Holladay 1989, 362–63). A figure, probably representing God, rises from a throne on Mount Sinai and commands Moses to sit on it.

A very important reward for those who resist the beast, especially those who lose their lives because of such resistance, is a share in the first resurrection. Those who have been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and the word of God and who did not worship the beast are to come to life and to reign with Christ for a thousand years while Satan is bound. The rest of the

dead are not to rise until after the thousand years are ended (20:4–6). This is the vision from which the apocalyptic theme of “the millennium” derives, “millennium” coming from the Latin word for a thousand.

The theme of the rewards of the victor is concluded with the words attributed to God in Rev. 21:7, “the one who conquers will inherit these things.” “These things” include the new heaven and new earth (21:5) and the enjoyment of the intimate presence of God with God's peoples (21:6–7), symbolized by the water of life (cf. 22:1–2).

## WOMEN AND FEMININE SYMBOLISM

Actual, historical women are invisible in the book of Revelation with two exceptions. The first is the message to Thyatira with its attack on “the woman Jezebel” (2:20). Some readers take the criticism of this early Christian female prophet at face value, perhaps because they accept the claim that these words were spoken by the risen Christ or acknowledge the authority of the author, whom they assume to be John the son of Zebedee, one of the twelve apostles, or simply because of the canonical authority of the book of Revelation itself. A more critical reading starts from the assumption that here the author is claiming the authority of the risen Christ for his own point of view in a struggle within the early Christian movement (see above). “Jezebel” is criticized for encouraging followers of Jesus to eat “food sacrificed to idols.” Like some of the Christians in Corinth (see 1 Corinthians 8–10), this female prophet may have argued that it was permissible to eat such food because the gods worshiped by the Greek, Roman, and other residents of Asia did not exist. She may have called upon the criticism of idols in the book of Isaiah for support. She may have argued that, since there is one God, the Creator, all food is clean and may be eaten after giving thanks. In 1 Cor. 8:6, Paul agreed with this point of view in principle. If she communicated revelations concerning Satan and the spirits associated with him (Rev. 2:24), she may have argued that this revelation endowed her followers with power over these intermediary beings, who were identified with the Greek and Roman gods. Such power would allow her followers the freedom to eat dedicated food unharmed and without sin.

For “the strong” in Corinth and the followers of “Jezebel,” the issue of dedicated food was not an abstract theological debate, but a practical matter. A tolerant position on this matter would allow Christians to mingle socially with non-Christian Gentiles. Such social contact would have been important for Christians who wanted to maintain contact with non-Christian relatives or who wished to join or maintain membership in one of the numerous local

associations. Meals taken in common virtually always had a religious dimension. The associations normally had a patron god or goddess who was honored at meetings. The club's common meals often took place on the grounds of a temple. Christians may have wished to join local burial associations or associations of artisans who shared the same craft. Inscriptions provide evidence that there were many such trade associations in Thyatira (Hemer 1986, 108, 246 n. 10). John's teaching advocated a form of Christianity that would remove Christians from the social fabric of their surrounding communities.

Besides allowing the consumption of dedicated food, "Jezebel" is accused of advocating the practice of prostitution (2:20). In the text to which allusion is made (Num. 25:1-2), the "prostitution" of the Israelites was twofold: intermarriage with non-Israelites and idolatry. It is not clear whether the "prostitution" mentioned in Rev. 2:20 is purely metaphorical and thus refers to idolatry only, or whether some actual sexual practice was involved. In vv. 22-23, the sexual metaphor is extended. Those who accept "Jezebel's" teaching (or her partners in leadership) are described as those who commit adultery with her. The reference to her "children" is probably a way of describing her followers. This figurative language suggests that "prostitution" means idolatry only, although tolerance of mixed marriages may also have been a factor. In ancient Jewish tradition, such marriages were often associated with idolatry, because of the assumption that the non-Jewish spouse would lead the Jewish spouse away from Jewish tradition and into polytheistic practices.

It is unlikely that an early Christian leader advocated polytheism in a theological sense. What was at stake was the question whether the Christian faith and way of life were compatible with Greek and Roman cultures. This was a difficult issue, since no ancient culture even attempted to be religiously neutral. John implies that they are not compatible and that Christians must avoid Greek and Roman cultural institutions and practices. The position of "Jezebel" was, therefore, not as extreme as it appears when the text is taken at face value. Persons who took a position similar to hers were accepted as members of the Christian congregation in Corinth. Paul attempted to modify their views and especially their practices, but he did not vilify them as John does his rivals. John says that the female prophet "calls herself a prophet" (2:20), implying that she was not a genuine prophet. But evidently, she not only claimed to be a prophet but was recognized as such by a considerable number of Christians in the vicinity. If she had not been well received, at least in Thyatira, John would not have been so concerned about her influence. Prophecy was a gift often received by early Christian women. Paul acknowledged the activity of female prophets in 1 Cor. 11:2-16. According to the book of Acts, the female daughters of Philip prophesied in Caesarea Maritima, a city in the land of Israel and

the Roman capital of the province of Judea. John's mention of "Jezebel" is evidence that a woman, whose actual name has not been preserved, exercised the gift of prophecy in Asia Minor toward the end of the first century. It is unlikely that she was the only woman to prophesy in her time and region. John's name-calling has obscured the fact that we have here an important indication of the leadership of women in the early church of this region.

The other text that bears on the lives of actual Christian women of this period is 14:1-5. This vision belongs to the second great cycle of visions that extends from 12:1 to 22:5. The 144,000 who are seen with the Lamb are making in this passage their second appearance in the book. They were introduced first in 7:1-8, where they are portrayed as an assembly consisting of 12,000 persons from each of the twelve tribes of Israel. Since John can dispute the Jewishness of members of the local synagogues, it is likely that he included Gentile Christians among the 144,000. The number clearly has symbolic significance as a multiple of twelve, but the use of a specific number (as opposed to the innumerable multitude of 7:9-17) suggests that a particular group within the whole body of the faithful is intended. In 14:4 it is said that they "follow the Lamb wherever he goes." According to chapter 5, the most distinctive characteristic of the Lamb is the fact that he was slain. The 144,000, therefore, seem to be those who are called to suffer death for the sake of their faith in Jesus. This hypothesis is supported by the citation of this passage in the *Letter of the Churches of Lyons and Vienne*. One of the martyrs, Vertius Epagathus is called "a true disciple of Christ, 'following the Lamb wherever he goes,'" because he laid down his life in defense of his fellow Christians (1.10). The description of the 144,000 is best understood as a rhetorical presentation of ideal discipleship. The description of the group includes the following statement, "These are the ones who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins" (14:4). The language implies that any kind of heterosexual relation is defiling. The root idea, found both in Israelite and Jewish religion, on the one hand, and Greek and Roman religion, on the other, is that sexual relations make the parties unfit to enter the holy space of a sanctuary dedicated to a deity. But this was a temporary defilement, the removal of which was governed by certain regulations (see Lev. 15:18). But Rev. 14:4 goes beyond the idea of a temporary, removable defilement by speaking of the 144,000 as virgins. The passage thus expresses a point of view in which the defiling potential of sexual relations with women is to be avoided absolutely by avoiding such relations altogether. The question arises as to the occasion and rationale for this intensification of the quest for ritual purity and for the androcentric way in which the achievement of purity is expressed.

One possibility is that the occasion for the intensification of the value of

purity was the adaptation of holy war tradition in the book of Revelation. The ancient Israelite notion of holy war involved the understanding that Yahweh and his angels fought alongside the men of Israel and were present in the military camp. Because of this heavenly presence, the camp had to be kept holy. Various regulations were developed to that end, among which were restrictions on sexual relations, which were forbidden for a time preceding the gathering of the military force and within the camp. The ancient holy war traditions had not been forgotten in John's time. The Maccabees had revived them in the second century B.C.E. (Yarbrow Collins 1996, 199–200). The community of the Dead Sea Scrolls adapted the notion of holy war to articulate their understanding of the last days. Revelation also makes use of this tradition, especially in the account of the last battle in 19:11–21 (ibid., 205–7). The expectation that the faithful were to have an active role in the eschatological battle (Rev. 17:14) could be the occasion for the high value placed on sexual continence and for the androcentric point of view (warriors were normally men).

The ascetic tendencies in the Dead Sea Scrolls can also be understood as an intensification of the priestly purity regulations and their extension to the whole community. The notion of the priesthood of the whole Christian community is an important theme in the book of Revelation (1:6; 5:10; 20:6). As in the Dead Sea Scrolls, the notion that purity was necessary for holy war and the idea and practice of priestly purity may have reinforced one another in the milieu of the book of Revelation. The androcentric point of view would thus in part reflect the traditional Israelite-Jewish state of affairs in which only men were priests.

The priest had to be holy because of his special closeness to God. Similarly, around the turn of the era, in some contexts the prophet was seen as one especially close to God. Philo treated the priestly and the prophetic roles of Moses as virtually identical. Near the beginning of his treatment of the third aspect of the life of Moses, his priesthood, Philo states that Moses had to be clean in order to exercise his priesthood, which is the service of God. He had to purify himself from all the calls of mortal nature, food and drink and intercourse with women. Philo says that he disdained the latter almost from the time when, possessed by the spirit, he entered on his work as a prophet, since he had held it fitting to hold himself always in readiness to receive the oracular messages (*On the Life of Moses* 2.68–69). Philo's rationale for the sexual continence of Moses is clearly a metaphysical dualism in which material, earthly things are devalued in comparison with the heavenly. Nevertheless, one may ask whether the book of Revelation, as an apocalyptic work, did not link the prophet in a similar way to the heavenly world and thus to sexual continence.

Besides understanding themselves as priests and as potential holy warriors, the community of the Dead Sea Scrolls understood themselves to be living with and like the angels. This notion appears to be a characteristically apocalyptic one. The aim of apocalyptic revelation and piety is to share in the life of the heavenly world and to overcome the evils, dislocations, and limitations of finite, earthly life. This aim is often expressed by the expectation of human transformation into a heavenly or angelic existence (e.g., Dan. 12:3). In the present, special individuals may attain that angelic existence, at least temporarily (see the Book of the Watchers, i.e., *1 Enoch* 1–36, and the *Ascension of Isaiah*). The Book of the Watchers is especially interesting in relation to Rev. 14:1–5. This early apocalypse contains a narrative about the fallen angels that is similar to but much more elaborate than Gen. 6:1–4. It is said that some angels came down from heaven and took human wives for themselves. These angels taught the women heavenly secrets, including charms and spells, the arts of war, and so on. This illegitimate revelation (and the illegitimate children that they produced, the giants) was the cause of all the evils upon the earth (*1 Enoch* 6–9). The good angels comment that the fallen angels “lay with those women and became unclean” (9:8). Later in the text, the Lord, while decreeing the punishment of the wayward angels, remarks that they “have associated with the women to corrupt themselves with them in all their uncleanness” (10:11). Enoch, who had been “hidden” (cf. Gen. 5:24) and was dwelling with the angels, or Watchers, was sent to the fallen Watchers to inform them of the divine decree. They ask Enoch to intercede with the Lord in their behalf, so that they might be forgiven. Instead of forgiving the Watchers, the Lord instructs Enoch to go and say to them that they ought to petition in behalf of men and not men in behalf of them; they have left the high, holy, and eternal heaven and lain with the women and become unclean with the daughters of men; they were spiritual, holy, living an eternal life, but became unclean upon the women or through the blood of the women, begat children through the blood of the flesh, lusted after the blood of men, and produced flesh and blood as they do who die and are destroyed (15:2–4).

A clue for interpretation is the remark “You ought to petition in behalf of men, not men in behalf of you” (15:2). Enoch and some of the angels have exchanged places. The heavenly and spiritual existence of some angels has been transformed into an earthly existence, involving flesh and blood, procreation and death. Enoch's earthly and fleshly existence has been transformed into a heavenly and spiritual one. Sexual intercourse with women stands for earthly existence, as a part for the whole. The exchange by the angels of a spiritual existence for an earthly one is symbolized by their having sexual relations with women. Although it is not explicit in the narrative, the corollary is that a

man's exchange of an earthly existence for a spiritual, heavenly one may be symbolized by abstaining from sexual relations with women. The underlying logic of Rev. 14:1–5 seems to be the same. The 144,000 exemplify the ideal of a Christian apocalyptic piety, in which the goal is a transformed human existence. Through a faithful death, Christians may participate in eternal, heavenly life (14:13; 12:10–11; 7:14–17). In the present, that existence may be anticipated by a life of sexual continence (14:4; cf. Luke 20:34–36).

Feminine symbols are prominent in the second half of the book of Revelation, which extends from 12:1 to 22:5. The three major feminine symbols are the woman clothed with the sun in chapter 12, the prostitute of chapter 17, and the bride of the Lamb in chapters 19 and 21. The roots and purpose of the image of the prostitute in chapter 17 were discussed above. A traditional interpretation of the woman clothed with the sun is that she is Mary, the mother of Jesus, since the child she brings forth is described as the Messiah. Other inner-biblical interpretations are that she is personified Israel, Jerusalem, or the people of God. Such personifications are common in the prophetic traditions of Israel. An approach based on the history of religions leads to the conclusion that the woman is presented as a high goddess with astral attributes: the sun is her garment, the moon her footstool, stars her crown. These attributes suggest that she is the queen of the universe who has power over the movements of the heavenly bodies and thus over human destiny. Only a few goddesses in Hellenistic and early Roman times were so depicted: the mother-goddess worshipped at Ephesus, who was identified with the Greek Artemis and the Roman Diana; the Syrian goddess Atargatis; and Isis, the Egyptian goddess who was worshipped in new forms all over the Mediterranean world in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. The plot of Revelation 12 involves an attack of a monster on a pregnant woman in order to destroy her and her child. As noted above, this narrative has similarities with several ancient texts, especially the pursuit of Isis by Seth-Typhon and of Leto by Python (Yarbro Collins 1993, 21–24). The author of Revelation has adopted motifs and stories about goddesses in order to create a glorious picture of the heavenly Israel. Her story serves as a model for the audience of the book. Like her, they have a heavenly identity: they are God's kingdom in the world, God's priests (1:6). But they are also vulnerable: some have been arrested, some killed; their legal status in the Roman Empire is precarious. The rescue of the woman and her being nourished in the wilderness suggest to the audience that God will deliver them as God delivered the people of Israel from Egypt.

The motif of the bride of the Lamb in chapters 19 and 21 is analogous to the sacred marriage of Zeus and Leto. Traditional interpretations have identi-

fied the bride with the church or with the soul of the individual Christian that is united with Christ after death. An approach based on the history of religions sees the influence of the mythic notion of a sacred marriage in the formation of this symbol. Such a marriage celebrates the establishment of cosmic, political, and social order, both on the narrative level and in the social world of the text. The vision of the bride has also been influenced by Isaiah 54, in which Jerusalem is portrayed as God's wife. The construction of the New Jerusalem out of precious stones may have been suggested by Isa. 54:11–12, "I will set your stones in antimony, and lay your foundations with sapphires. I will make your pinnacles agate, your gates of carbuncles, and all your wall of precious stones." In the Dead Sea Scrolls this text was interpreted as an allegorical description of the "Congregation of His Elect," the sectarian community that used the scrolls. The bride, the New Jerusalem, in Revelation symbolizes the community of the faithful at the time of their uniting with God and the Lamb in the new age. In this work, the fulfillment of God's creation and God's ultimate intimacy with humanity are not described in abstract terms or in metaphors that are only masculine. Both the masculine and the feminine are drawn upon to express the richness, complexity, and vitality of the created world and its fulfillment. This vision of the new creation as a wedding is a counterbalance to Rev. 14:1–5. Because of the present crisis, which John implied was about to intensify, the ideal was to renounce sexual relations and to prepare for the end. At the same time, as one of the fundamental characteristics of God's good creation, sexual union is a symbol of the new creation, of wholeness, of the time of salvation.

#### THE HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION

At least since the time of the early Christian scholar and theologian Origen, the crucial issue in the interpretation of the book of Revelation has been whether to take it literally or spiritually. One focus of the controversy in the early church was the prophecy expressed in Rev. 20:1–6. Some early Christian writers, for example, Papias, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Tertullian, believed that this passage predicted an earthly kingdom of Christ that would follow his second coming and last for a thousand years. This interpretation, especially in the case of Irenaeus, may have arisen in opposition to the purely spiritual notion of salvation held by the Gnostics. Origen, however, taught that hope for an earthly kingdom was an indulgence of unworthy desires. He rejected literal interpretations of prophecies of the new age and argued that they ought

to be interpreted figuratively (*De Principiis* 2.11.2–5). This approach flowered in the work of the late-fourth-century Donatist Tyconius (see above and McGinn 1987, 531). He interpreted the book of Revelation exclusively in terms of the struggle between good and evil throughout the history of the church and excluded any hope for a coming earthly kingdom.

The tension between those who looked forward to an earthly reign of Christ for a thousand years (the chiliasts or millenarians, from the Greek and Latin words for a thousand respectively) and those who did not (the allegorists) was mediated by Augustine's synthesis of teaching about the last things (eschatology). He interpreted Rev. 20:1–6 figuratively as a reference to the ministry of Jesus, because during that time Satan was bound (with reference to Luke 10:18). Thus, the reign of a thousand years was understood as the age of the church, which was to be followed by the second coming of Christ. Augustine's interpretation of the beasts of chapter 13, as this wicked world and hypocrisy respectively, undercut the tendency to identify these beasts with the Roman Empire and its agents or with other specific political or social institutions. Even though Augustine understood the thousand years and the events of the end literally, his spiritual interpretation of the present and his location of the end in the distant future significantly reduced speculations about the end and expectation of its imminent advent.

Augustine's view of eschatology became dominant. Eventually, the thousand years of the age of the church came to be understood symbolically rather than literally. From about 400 to about 1100 C.E., the book of Revelation was interpreted primarily in terms of the moral struggle between vice and virtue. The notion of an earthly reign of Christ or new age remained dormant until it was revived by Joachim of Fiore. Although he maintained the moral perspective of the Augustinian approach and affirmed the literary structure of recapitulation in his *Exposition on Revelation*, Joachim provided a historical reading that correlated the symbols of the book of Revelation with the major events of the history of the church. This interpretation also divided all of history into three great epochs related to the three persons of the Trinity. According to Joachim, the third age of history, which is to begin after the defeat of the Antichrist, is one in which the Holy Spirit will bring about a reformed and purified monastic church. He did not teach that this new age would last a literal thousand years, but he did reintroduce millenarianism by predicting a coming perfect age of indefinite duration.

The book of Revelation was frequently read and intensely debated in England during the period of the Reformation. Truly millenarian readings revived in radical Puritan circles in the seventeenth century and often

included the idea of England as an elect nation. In the nineteenth century, American and British heirs of the apocalyptic Puritan tradition continued to produce treatises and commentaries giving apocalyptic interpretations of the American and French Revolutions and the activities of Napoleon I and Napoleon III.

In modern times, the issues have been analogous to those debated in the early church. In the twentieth century the old debate between the chiliasts and the allegorists has gone on in controversies between fundamentalists and modernists or between premillennialists and amillennialists. Those who expect a literal reign of Christ on earth for a thousand years believe that they hold the historic faith of the church. As a movement, they have more proximate roots in the teaching of John Nelson Darby, who founded the Plymouth Brethren in England, and in various movements in nineteenth-century America, such as the Millerites. Today such believers call themselves "premillennialists" because they believe that Christ will return before the thousand year reign on earth. They oppose the official eschatological teaching of the major denominations, which is rooted in Augustine, and describe it as "amillennial" because it does not include an earthly reign of Christ between the second coming and the final state.

In the United States in the twentieth century, several points of view on the question of the end may be distinguished. The position that has attracted the most attention and caused the most concern is that which combines premillennial faith with imminent expectation. This point of view sometimes includes calculations of various periods in history and a more or less specific prediction of the date of the second coming. One of its fundamental principles is the literal interpretation of scripture. Its adherents accuse "amillennialists" of being inconsistent, because they interpret other parts of scripture literally, but have a special hermeneutic for prophecy. The books of Daniel and Revelation are important resources for this point of view.

The modern premillennial position may be seen as a contemporary analogue to ancient chiliasm. A contemporary version of the spiritual or allegorical point of view is characterized by commitment to the scientific method and thus by considerable skepticism and agnosticism with regard to the actual events of the beginning and end of our universe. From this point of view, Daniel and Revelation suggest the inner meaning of our universe or of the human experience of its processes. The biblical apocalypses are viewed not as forecasts of what is to be but as interpretations of how things were, are, and ought to be. Their purposes are to inform and influence human life by means of the values and insights expressed in symbolic and narrative form.

## CONCLUSION

For the historically minded critical reader, the book of Revelation is not a cryptic summary of the history of the church or the world. It is not primarily a prediction of the timing of the end of the world. Rather, it is a work of religious poetry, inspired by the prophets of Israel and by the cosmic and political myths of the author's time. The author, an early Christian prophet by the name of John, believed himself authorized by God and his Messiah to interpret the times for his contemporaries. His message was harsh and demanding, both for insiders and outsiders. Insiders were to avoid compromise with the corrupt and idolatrous culture of the hellenized and romanized cities of Asia Minor, no matter what the cost. Some chance for the repentance and conversion of outsiders was envisaged (Rev. 11:13). But, for the most part, outsiders were expected to continue doing evil and to be condemned to eternal torment in the lake of fire (20:15; 22:11). The book of Revelation is also a work of religious rhetoric, intended to shape the beliefs and lifestyle of its audience. Its impact is far different from that of the teaching of Jesus as expressed in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7), which calls for love of enemies and turning the other cheek. Historically speaking, however, the book of Revelation may have contributed to the survival of a Christian perspective that could not simply take its place as one ancient cult among many. Theologically and ethically speaking, it is a work that expresses the anguish of those who live on the margins. It expresses a vision of hope for the marginalized themselves and makes vivid and intelligible for the comfortable how the world of power relations looks from a perspective on the margins.

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## 12

## Early Christian Apocalypticism: Literature and Social World

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THROUGH THE GRECO-ROMAN PERIOD AND ESPECIALLY IN THE later first century C.E. with the book of Revelation, we see a widespread and pronounced interest in apocalyptic texts, otherworldly revelation in general, and the whole notion of a book as medium of otherworldly gnosis. At the same time, we see widespread evidence of apocalyptic movements—groups organized around an expectation of the end of the world and a conviction in their own sainthood. Many of these texts and many of these movements seem also to have embraced one or another form of Christian ideology.

When we contemplate apocalypticism over the last two thousand years we think above all of beliefs or states of anticipation emphasizing the destruction of the world—or, more precisely, the world as culturally conceived—a culmination of some cosmic battle between good and evil taking place in that world, and a decisive purification of the old and polluting world to make way for a new and ideal cosmos. Thus we find versions not only in western religious traditions but also in ancient Mesoamerican and Indo-European mythologies as well. But when we go back to the beginning of Christian apocalypticism—to the time of Jesus, to the author of the book of Revelation, and to the spate of end-time tracts that emerge with the dawn of the Christian movement—we find ourselves dealing not with an eschatological literary tra-



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