9 / Imperial Cults, Persecution, and the Apocalypse of John

Introduction

The evidence I have discussed so far points to positive dimensions of group-society interactions among some synagogues and some congregations in Roman Asia, drawing attention to similarities between these groups and other associations. This neglected evidence throws into doubt common sectarian readings of these groups, which do not adequately address this potential for positive interaction in the social and cultural conventions of civic life under Roman rule. But we must not forget to consider cases involving negative relations and to assess potential differences between associations, on the one hand, and synagogues and congregations, on the other.

The discussion so far shows that there were grades of participation in imperial-related practices within the Greek cities of Asia Minor. While some Judeans and Jesus-followers might pray for the emperors, dedicate a monument or building on their behalf, or honor Roman officials, others such as the author of the Apocalypse might reject any such imperial-related activity. Yet virtually all groups of Judeans and Christians, it seems, avoided participation in rituals aimed at worshiping the emperors as gods. We need to ask what was the significance of this difference in participation? To what degree was this lack of participation in imperial cults a factor in tensions between these groups and society, with society including civic inhabitants and civic or imperial authorities?

In re-assessing this subject, I argue that scholars have often exaggerated the significance of imperial cults for early Christians (as well as for Judeans) without recognizing the broader framework within which these rituals for the imperial gods were embedded. There is a tendency for scholars to overstate the importance of emperor-worship with respect to the persecutions in particular. In this regard, it is common for some to assume that hostilities towards empire as evidenced in John’s Apocalypse were naturally widespread since imperial rituals were at the centre of conflict. However, I argue that imperial cults were an issue for group-society tensions only insofar as these cults were part and parcel of honoring the gods in the cities generally. Failure to honor imperial gods specifically should be understood in relation to the broader issue of Judeans’ and Jesus-followers’ rejection of honoring any god other than their own (“monotheism”), which was sometimes taken as the equivalent of “atheism” (in the eyes of some outsiders on certain occasions). This was at the root of some inhabitants’ dislike for Christ-devotees, dislike which could occasionally lead to social harassment or more significant incidents of persecution, now and then reaching the attention of Roman authorities.

This issue concerning a failure to honor the gods or to participate fully in rituals for them provides a framework in which to further explain the sporadic character of persecution in Asia Minor (in the first two centuries) and the reasons for such persecution. Three main incidents will illustrate the nature of persecution and the relative significance of imperial cults specifically: (1) accusations before Pliny in Pontus, (2) the rescript of Hadrian concerning Christians in Asia, and (3) the martyrdom of Polycarp. I argue that disloyalty to empire (which is often seen as corresponding to non-participation in imperial cults) was neither the basis of persecutions against

Christians by inhabitants, nor the reason for convictions on those few occasions when such things reached the attention of Roman authorities. Overall, we should not exaggerate this potential source of tensions or the frequency of such persecutions, as though Christians were in a constant state of conflict with empire and with others in their daily lives.

This sets the stage for a re-consideration of the Apocalypse on three key points. First, John’s strategy and his anti-imperial stance are best understood in opposition to both the moderate position of other Christian leaders or authors (e.g. Paul, Acts, 1 Peter, Pastorals, Polycarp) and the actual practices among some congregations and synagogues. In contrast to this, John views Roman imperialism as an evil force and he calls on members of the assemblies to change the patterns of their participation within the civic setting. Secondly, John’s focus on the problem of imperial cults specifically arises not from the prominence of these cults in actual conflicts between Christians and society, but rather from John’s overall aim, which is to point out the blasphemous character of imperial rule. Imperial cults take on such a prominent role in the Apocalypse as part of John’s attempt to convince the assemblies in the seven cities of his particular view of empire. Finally, the evidence discussed throughout this study sheds light on John’s opponents (“Jezebel,” Nicolaitans), whose level of participation in occupational, imperial, and other aspects of life in the cities was among the main reasons for his attack on these antagonists. These opponents provide further evidence for the participation of Jesus-followers in the life of the Greek city under Roman rule.

Figure 49: Bust of the emperor Gaius Caligula, now in the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen

1 This chapter significantly develops and expands my earlier arguments in Harland 2000.
How Significant were Imperial Cults?

Scholars tend to exaggerate the significance of imperial cults—distinguished from cultic life generally—in connection with life in the Judean diaspora and, even more so, for early followers of Jesus. According to E. Mary Smallwood (1976, 137, 147), whose views are frequently repeated, the charter of Judean rights granted by the Romans made “Judaism” a legally recognized religion (*religio licita*) and this “automatically” included “the Judeans’ exemption from participation in the imperial cult,” an exemption which was “established universally.” This meant that Judeans, unlike others, could not be “forced” to participate in cultic honors for the emperors, though a ruler such as Gaius Caligula (see figure 49) might temporarily waver from Roman policy. A corollary of this view is that, as the Jesus movement became increasingly recognized as separate from “Judaism” in the decades around the turn of the second century, it no longer enjoyed protection and was susceptible to the “enforcement” of imperial cults.

Flowing from this line of thought is the common emphasis on the centrality of imperial cults specifically for our understanding of the relationship between congregations and society, particularly with regard to persecutions. And so we find frequent references within scholarship to the antagonism or “clash” between the cult of Christ and the cult of Caesar, the latter being singled out from cultural life generally. Donald L. Jones (1980, 1023), for instance, can begin his paper on Christianity and the imperial cult with the statement that: “From the perspective of early Christianity, the worst abuse in the Roman Empire was the imperial cult.” Similarly, Paul Keresztes (1979, 271) claims that “Christianity was engaged in a death battle with Imperial Rome.” A linchpin of this view is the assumption that we can take the hostile viewpoints and futuristic scenarios of John’s Apocalypse as representative of the real situations and perspectives of most followers of Jesus, or even as a reliable commentary on the nature of imperial cults themselves.

Along with such views comes a common, but highly questionable, depiction of imperial cults. One often reads of how “emperor worship” (particularly though not solely under emperors like Domitian) was “enforced” by Roman authorities or that there was considerable “pressure” or “demands” on Christians in their daily lives to conform to the obligational practices of imperial cults specifically. Moreover, in this perspective, Rome took an active role in promoting such cults in the provinces. Neglecting to participate could be taken as the equivalent of political disloyalty or treason, especially since imperial cults were merely political. Imperial cults stood out as a central factor leading to the persecution of Christians both by the inhabitants in the cities and by the imperial regime itself, especially in the time of Domitian when Christians were faced with death if they did not participate in such cults and acknowledge him as “lord and god.” Earlier I addressed the problems with a Domitianic persecution and the highly questionable portrait of Domitian after his *damnatio* (see chapter eight). For now it is important to note problematic assumptions

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3 Smallwood 1976, 244-45, 344-45, 348, 379-81.
4 Cf. Deissmann 1995 [1908], 338-78; Cuss 1974, 35.
concerning imperial cults which inform this view.

This traditional view regarding the significance of imperial cults for Judaism and Christianity falters on several inter-related points concerning the actual character of these cults in Asia Minor. Although imperial cults were among the issues facing Christians and diaspora Judeans, these cults were not in and of themselves a key issue behind group-society tensions, nor a pivotal causal factor in the persecution of Christians.\(^6\) First of all, we found that cultic honors for the emperors were not an imposed feature of cultural life in Roman Asia. Rather, they were a natural outgrowth and spontaneous response to imperial power on the part of civic communities and inhabitants. The local, grass-roots nature of such honors for the emperors as gods, which was well-illustrated in our study of associations, suggests that there was no need for emperors to take an active stance in enforcing imperial cults. Most emperors and officials were not concerned whether the living emperor was worshiped so long as they were shown respect and honor (in whatever form) indicative of a situation in which order and peace could be maintained in the provinces. In fact, quite often these cultic honors exceeded what the emperors themselves would desire, at least in the case of emperors who wanted to keep in line with some Republican and Augustan traditions (cf. Suetonius, *Divine Augustus* 52).

Secondly, in contrast to a popular tradition within scholarship, we found that imperial cults in Roman Asia were not in fact solely political phenomena. If imperial cults were indeed merely political then we could understand the Christians’ non-participation as the equivalent of disloyalty or treason, in which case this would be a central cause of persecution. However, G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, Fergus Millar, and others show the inadequacies of such political explanations of the persecutions, which had more to do with broader though interconnected cultic and social issues. That is, persecution was often linked to the failure of Christians to fully participate in activities (especially sacrifice) in honor of Greco-Roman deities generally.

Thirdly, far from being totally distinct phenomena in the eyes of most inhabitants in Asia Minor, imperial cults were thoroughly integrated within cultural and cultic life at different levels of civic and provincial society. Groups and communities representing different social strata integrated the emperors and imperial power within their cultural framework. The forms of honors or rituals addressed to “the revered gods” (*Sebastoi* / *Augusti*) were not fundamentally different from those offered to traditional deities. This integration is a key to understanding the actual significance of the imperial cults for both Judeans and Christ-devotees in the diaspora.

Imperial cults and the deities they honored were an issue for group-society relations only insofar as they were part and parcel of cultural life in the cities. Failure to fully participate in appropriately honoring the gods (imperial deities included) in cultic contexts was one of the sources of negative attitudes towards both Judeans and followers of Jesus among some civic inhabitants. Judean and Christian “atheism” could then be perceived by some as lack of concern for others (“misanthropy”) and, potentially, as a cause of those natural disasters and other incidents that the gods used to punish individuals, groups, and communities that failed to give them their due (cf. Tertullian, *Apology* 40.1-5). This is why we find inhabitants of western Asia Minor, on one occasion, protesting that “if the Judeans were to be their fellows, they should worship the Ionians’

This issue which is broader than, though inclusive of, imperial cults is also a key to understanding sporadic outbreaks of persecution against followers of Jesus in Asia Minor.

**Persecution and Imperial Cults: Pliny, Hadrian and Polycarp**

Three particular incidents will help to clarify both the modest role of imperial cults and the actual nature of persecution in Asia Minor: the trials of Christians by Pliny in Pontus (ca. 110 CE), Hadrian’s rescript to the proconsul of Asia concerning accusations against Christians (ca. 123 CE), and the martyrdom of Polycarp at Smyrna (ca. 160 CE). These episodes show that the reasons for accusations by inhabitants and convictions by Roman authorities are to be sought somewhere other than in the realm of disloyalty to empire or failure to participate in imperial cults specifically. Christians were not, in effect, martyred for refusing to worship the emperor.

The reasons for Christians being accused in the first place and the reasons for convictions by authorities were often different. Intermittent accusations by some inhabitants were rooted in dislike of Christ-devotees due to their failure to fully participate in honoring the gods (their “atheism”), which could be perceived as a threat to the well-being of the civic community, particularly when natural disasters, famines or plagues struck.

The rationale for Roman officials’ convictions of those brought before them, although not always clear, seems to pertain primarily to the maintenance of order and the prevention of further civil unrest. Christians could be perceived as trouble-causers and officials felt a need to satisfy the crowds. Appeasement was more of an issue than disloyalty to empire. Imperial cult rituals along with rituals for other gods were brought in to trials by Roman officials only as a test to determine whether or not someone was indeed a follower of Christ, not to establish loyalty to Rome.

The reason for discussing these incidents of the second century before addressing John’s Apocalypse, written in the late-first century, is that these incidents set the stage for a re-assessment of John’s critique of imperial cults as “worship of the beast.” This is especially important because the Apocalypse’s emphasis on imperial cults has often been taken as an indication that these cults (more so than others) were a central factor in a confrontation between Christianity and Roman society generally. On to the first episode.

**1. Pliny the Younger’s Letter to Trajan**

In governing the province of Bithynia and Pontus as a specially appointed legate around 110-112 CE, Pliny regularly consulted the emperor, Trajan, regarding his approach to the problems in this region. We have already come across some of this correspondence in connection with associations and imperial authorities (see chapter 6). While visiting the coastal region of Pontus (ca. 112 CE)—perhaps at Amisos or Amastris—Pliny wrote to Trajan regarding accusations (one of them anonymous) against so-called Christians “of every age and class, both men and women,” who were

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being brought to trial by local inhabitants of the region (Epistles 10.96–97 [LCL]).

The actual reasons for the accusations in Pontus are not clearly stated. Still, it seems likely that, as in the martyrdom of Polycarp, it is failure to honor the gods or participate in related activities (“atheism”), not imperial cults specifically, that is a key issue in the perception of the accusers. This central factor seems to have interconnected social, cultic, and economic dimensions in this case. That it is the accusers’ dislike of Christ-devotees because they do not fully participate in cultural life generally is suggested by Pliny’s allusion to rumors concerning the Christians’ “crimes” (flagitia), which he ultimately finds to be untrue (e.g. “food of an ordinary and harmless kind” [96.7–8]).

It is worth mentioning that Tacitus alludes to rumors of a similar kind when he suggests that Nero chose to blame the fire on the Christians at Rome because they were “hated for their crimes (flagitia)” (Annals 15.44). The alleged crimes in the Pliny case may well have been similar to those attributed to Christians in later years, such as those aimed at the Christians at Lugdunum in Gaul who were accused of engaging in “Thystean feasts,” cannibalism (Eusebius, H.E. 5.1).

As M. J. Edwards argues, rumors along the lines of human sacrifice and cannibalism apparently derive less from a misinterpretation of what Christians did (e.g. a distortion of the Lord’s supper or attribution of supposed Gnostic practices to all Christians) than from what Christians (and their Judean counterparts) did not do. They abstained from sacrifices to the gods and goddesses, the central rites of antiquity. This failure to honor the gods together with its implications with respect to disregarding fellow human beings could lead some outsiders to fill in the gap with alternative, stereotyped rituals which inverted all that was “good” and “holy”, such as human sacrifice or infanticide (now see Harland 2009, 161–181). This general situation underlying the accusations before Pliny, but not necessarily actual court trials, seems to coincide with what we find in 1 Peter. The addressees of 1 Peter were faced with verbal abuse (katalalein, blasphēmein, oneidizein, epereazo, loidoria) and viewed by others as wrongdoers (kakopoioi) primarily due to the fact that they no longer engage fully in “lawless idolatry” (see 1 Peter 2:12; 3:9, 13–17; 4:3–5, 14–16).

Another clue as to the accusers’ motivations comes towards the end of Pliny’s letter. In an exaggerated fashion, he refers to increased activity in the sale of sacrificial meat and in the attendance at temples “which had been almost entirely deserted for a long time.” As A. N. Sherwin-White (1966, 709) notes, this may imply a connection between the accusations against Christians and the sale of sacrificial meat, perhaps alluding to the fact that some merchants or temple functionaries were among the main accusers in these cases.

Now that we have some idea of the background leading to the accusations before Pliny, I look

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9 Henrichs (1970, 21) thinks that it is Pliny who initially suspected the Christians of “crimes,” but it seems more likely, especially in light of the following discussion, that it was the accusers who raised such issues. Nor do I think that Pliny necessarily has in mind the crimes associated with the Bacchanalian affair of 186 BCE specifically (contra Grant 1948; Wilken 1984, 16–17; see Sherwin-White 1966, 692).


at the modest place of imperial cults in the trials. Pliny’s letter begins with the following statement regarding his unfamiliarity with what procedure to follow in the case of Christians:

I have never been present at any examination (cognitio) of the Christians. Therefore, I do not know what are the usual punishments given out to them, or the extent of those punishments, or how far an examination should go. Nor am I sure . . . whether the name of Christian itself should be punished, even though otherwise innocent of crime, or only the crimes that associated with the name (Epistles 10.96.2 = AGRW L40).

Pliny clearly states that he had not been present at an examination of Christians at any time before these incidents, and this is probably because so few, if any, such trials had been held previously in Asia Minor. Considering the fact that Pliny spent most of his career at Rome as quaestor (ca. 90 CE), tribune of the people (ca. 92 CE), praetor (ca. 93 CE), and consul (100 CE), before being sent to the province as legate (ca. 110 CE), it is also very unlikely that any substantial, official trials of Christians took place at Rome in this period, namely, during and following the principate of Domitian.

Lacking any precedents to follow, Pliny adjudicated differently depending on the response of the accused, and convicted based not on crimes (flagitia) but simply on whether one was a Christian (nomen), even though he expressed some doubt on this method. First of all, those “stubborn” and “obstinate” persons who were asked repeatedly and admitted to being Christians were either led off to execution or, if Roman citizens, sent to Rome for trial, without any need for a test involving the gods.

The second category were those who denied the charge and the third were those who had been, but were no longer, Christians. In both of these cases, rituals associated with images of the gods, but also of emperors, became the test simply to determine whether or not one was really a Christian. Those who denied the charge, Pliny states, “called upon the gods with the usual formula,” “offered incense and wine before your image (which I had ordered to be brought forward for this purpose, along with the regular statues of the gods), and, furthermore, cursed the name of Christ, which it is said genuine Christians cannot be induced to do” (10.96.5). At no point is the issue of political disloyalty brought up, and imperial cult rituals appear, not as the reason why Christians were accused by inhabitants or condemned by the Roman official, but simply as part of a test along with rituals addressed to the gods more generally. Trajan’s response approves of testing whether the accused is a Christian by simply having him or her offer “prayers to our gods” (10.97). He also cautions that Christians “must not be hunted” down and that anonymous accusations must not be permitted, sentiments similar to those repeated in Hadrian’s rescript about ten years later.

2. Hadrian’s Letter to the Proconsul of Asia

Very little is known concerning the emperor Hadrian’s (see figure 50) stance on the early Christians beyond one letter. Hadrian’s letter to the proconsul of Asia (ca. 123 CE) concerning accusations against Christians was recorded by Justin Martyr and subsequently copied and translated into Greek

This rescript is not nearly as informative regarding the nature of accusations, the procedure of trials, and the role (if any) of imperial cult rituals as is the Pliny correspondence. Still, it is worth at least quoting here in order to make a few observations.

Hadrian to Fundanus. I have received a letter addressed to me by your illustrious predecessor, Serenus Granianus, and his report, I think, ought not to be passed over in silence, lest innocent people be molested and an opportunity for hostile action be given to malicious accusers. If the provincials plainly wish to support this petition of theirs against the Christians by bringing some definite charge against them before the court, let them confine themselves to this action and refrain from mere appeals and outcries. For it is much more than just that, if anyone wishes to bring an accusation, you should examine the allegations. If then anyone accuses them and proves that they are doing anything unlawful, you must impose a penalty in accordance with the gravity of the crime; but if anyone brings such accusations simply by way of blackmail, you must sentence him to a more severe penalty in proportion to his wickedness (trans. by Bruce 1971, 429).

Once again, in this case it is clearly on the initiative of inhabitants in the province that accusations were brought against Christians. The letter gives no details as to why these inhabitants had petitioned the proconsul of Asia (Granianus), but it is plausible to suggest that similar factors to those involving Christians in Pontus and Polycarp at Smyrna were at work. Like Pliny, Granianus wrote the emperor to ask his opinion on how to deal with the accusations, but, by the time Hadrian responded, Granianus had been succeeded by Fundanus, who is the addressee. Hadrian’s concern is not with protecting Christians per se, but with ensuring proper legal procedure: accusations lacking sufficient evidence are not to be accepted and persons bringing false accusations are to be punished. Christians found guilty of doing something unlawful are still to be punished, but little more is said with respect to whether it is for the name or for crimes that Christians are to be punished. Hadrian says nothing to suggest that disloyalty to empire or failure to participate in imperial cults were the principal issues here.

Figure 50: Bust of the emperor Hadrian, now in the Naples Archaeological Museum.

13 Justin Martyr, Apology 1.68; Eusebius, H.E. 4.9.1-3. Also see Barnes 1968, 37 and 1971, 154; Bickerman 1968; Benko 1980, 1079-81.
3. The Martyrdom of Polycarp

This brings me to a third episode indicative of the character of persecution and the modest role of imperial cults: the martyrdom of Polycarp at Smyrna (under Antoninus Pius or Marcus Aurelius; ca. 155-167 CE). Many aspects of this story—preserved as a letter from the assembly of Jesus-followers at Smyrna to those in Philomelion in Phrygia—can cautiously be taken as historical, keeping in mind its author(s)’ imposition of the pattern of Christ’s arrest and trial onto Polycarp’s situation, including a key role for “the Judeans” (see Schoedel 1993, 349-58).

The temporary nature of this persecution is clearly indicated when the senders of the letter state that Polycarp “put an end to the persecution by his martyrdom as though adding the seal” (Mart.Poly. 1.1 [LCL]). In fact, to the time of Polycarp (about one hundred years after the beginnings of Christianity in Roman Asia and seventy or so years after the writing of the Apocalypse), it seems that there had been only a total of twelve Christian “witnesses” (some from Philadelphia) killed in Smyrna, including those in this particular outburst (Mart.Poly. 19.1; cf. Origen, Against Celsus 3.8). Although praising Polycarp as a “witness” par excellence, Smyrna’s letter is written, in part, to actually discourage others (like the drop-out “Phrygian,” Quintus) from “voluntarily” presenting themselves to authorities in order to seek martyrdom (Mart.Poly. 4). An incident that similarly involves voluntary martyrdoms in this region is related by Tertullian (To Scapula 5): “When Arrius Antoninus was driving things hard in Asia, the Christians of the province, in one united band, presented themselves before his judgment-seat; on which, ordering a few to be led forth to execution, he said to the rest, ‘O miserable men, if you wish to die, you have precipices or halters.’” Discouraging voluntary martyrdom may be a response to the Phrygian (or Montanist) movement, which was known for its emphasis on being a “witness.” As with the Pliny incident, the prime instigators of the persecution are not civic or imperial officials, but inhabitants in the city.

The Polycarp account does not reveal the precise circumstances which transformed dislike of Christians into mob violence in this case, but recent natural disasters, plagues or famines sent by the gods as punishment may have played a role. There was a failure of harvests and ensuing famine around this time (160s CE); furthermore, Roman troops returning from the victory over the Parthians brought with them a disease which resulted in epidemics in several regions, including Asia.14 Several oracular responses from Apollo at Klaros to cities of Asia pertain to a “deadly plague” which may well relate to this same time period. Apollo’s response to Hierapolis states that “you are not alone in being injured by the destructive miseries of a deadly plague, but many are the cities and peoples which are grieved at the wrathful displeasures of the gods” (trans. by Parke 1985, 153-54). Unpredictable events like this might well spark off violence against Christians, who failed to honor these same deities.

The story of Polycarp’s martyrdom clearly indicates one of the most important motivating factors for the crowds’ actions: the Christians did not join others in honoring the gods, they were “atheists” (Mart. Poly. 3.2; 9.2; cf. Eusebius, H.E. 5 = Musurillo 1972, 64-65). This is most clearly evident when, at a climactic point after the proconsul’s hearing and Polycarp’s proclamation that he

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was indeed a Christian, the crowds: “cried out with uncontrollable wrath and a loud shout: ‘This is the teacher of Asia, the father of the Christians, the destroyer of our gods, who teaches many neither to offer sacrifice nor to worship’” (12.2).

As in the Pliny incident, imperial cult practices come into the picture only as a test by the authorities, though they are certainly more visible in this account than they were in Pliny’s letter. (In fact, of the earliest martyr acts, imperial cult practices play the most evident role in that of Polycarp, albeit still a modest one.) After acquiescing to the crowds who called for the arrest of Polycarp, the civic police-chief (eirēnarchos), Herod, and his father attempt to persuade the bishop saying, “what harm is it to say, ‘Caesar is lord (kyrios kaisar),’ and to make an offering, and so forth, and to be saved?” (Mart.Poly. 8.2). Again, when Polycarp is brought to the stadium, the proconsul attempts to persuade him to perform a more specific test as to whether he was a Christian or not, and thereby save his life: “Swear by the genius (tychēn) of Caesar, repent, say: ‘Away with the atheists’” and “revile Christ” (9.2-3). Polycarp refused. The practice of taking an oath on the genius (guardian spirit) of the emperor became a common practice, especially by the time of Antoninus Pius (138-161 CE). It seems that such oaths were considered unacceptable by many Christians for two apparent reasons: Jesus’ teaching against taking oaths (Matt 5:34-37) and, perhaps more importantly, the implications associated with the emperor’s guardian spirit (see Grant 1970, 15-17; cf. Origen, Against Celsus 8.65).

It becomes quite clear that the purpose of swearing on the genius of Caesar, which is also accompanied in the narrative by accusations of “atheism,” is simply to confirm that the accused is a Christian, not to assert treason as the basis of the judgement. And so when Polycarp gets fed up with the officials’ offers he states: “If you vainly suppose that I will swear by the genius of Caesar, as you say, and pretend that you are ignorant who I am, listen plainly: I am a Christian” (Mart.Poly. 10.1). It is after this clear identification and final refusal that the proconsul tells Polycarp to persuade the people to change their minds. The bishop then actually makes reference to the usual Christian approach to authorities: “You I should have held worthy of discussion, for we have been taught to render honor (timēn) in a fitting manner, if it does not harm us, to officials (archais) and authorities (exousiais) who are appointed by God” (10.2 [LCL, with adaptations]; cf. Polycarp, Phil. 12.3). In this instance, as in the cases held by Pliny, it is simply the fact of being a Christian that is enough for a negative verdict, not an accusation of treason or disloyalty.

Evidently, failure to honor the gods set Judeans and Christians apart in some respects from other inhabitants, including the members of other associations. On occasion differences along these lines, together with other specific circumstances (e.g. natural disasters), increased the potential for disturbances or persecutions, which might result in intervention by civic and, less often, imperial authorities. Even so, it can be argued that Christian martyrdom itself was in some respects “solidly anchored in the civic life of the Graeco-Roman world” and can actually be viewed as participation

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15 When, in the account of their martyrdoms, Karpos, Papylos, and Agathonike are brought before the proconsul at Pergamon (ca. 161-69 CE), there is no reference to imperial cult rituals specifically, simply a command to “Sacrifice to the gods and do not play the fool” (Musurillo 1972, 23-29). The accusations and trials at Lugdunum (Lyons) do not involve imperial cults.

G.W. Bowersock (1995) shows how Christian martyrdoms, as public spectacle, were rooted both in sophistic traditions of public critique (e.g. the critique of the crowds by the “distinguished teacher,” Polycarp) and in notions of gaining honor (and fame) through participation in public spectacle or competition. Within this framework, the martyr’s fame “was far closer to that of the great athletes and gladiators” (Bowersock 1995, 52). Those exceptional persons who endured to the point of death for Christ’s sake were especially honored and “spoken of by ‘pagans’ everywhere (hypo tōn ethnōn en panti topō laleisthai)” (Mart.Poly. 19.1).

Yet it is very important to put such tensions in perspective. It is important to not exaggerate these intermittent conflicts, imagining that all Christians were in a constant state of tension with their fellow civic inhabitants in everyday life. In many respects, both Judeans and Christians in Asia Minor could live and work peaceably alongside others despite their distinctive practices and world views in this particular area. This was something that some Christian intellectuals (“apologists”) were sure to point out in their literary attempts to claim a place for Christianity within the empire (especially from the mid-second century on). The author of the Epistle of Diognetus (ca. 150-225 CE), for instance, states the following:

Christians are not distinguished from the rest of humanity by country, language, or custom. For nowhere do they live in cities (poleis) of their own, nor do they speak some unusual dialect, nor do they practice an eccentric lifestyle (oute bion parasēmon askousin). This teaching of theirs has not been discovered by the thought and reflection of ingenious men, nor do they promote any human doctrine, as some do. But while they live in both Greek and barbarian cities, as each one’s lot was cast, and follow the local customs in dress and food and other aspects of life, at the same time they demonstrate the remarkable and admittedly unusual character of their own citizenship (politeias). They live in their own homelands (patridas), but only as aliens (paroikoi; cf. 1 Peter 2:11-12); they participate in everything as citizens (politai), and endure everything as foreigners (xenoi). Every foreign country is their homeland, and every homeland is foreign (Diognetus 5.1-5; trans. by Holmes 1992, with adaptations).

This expression of Christian identity in terms of being at home yet distinctive in the Greco-Roman world was often accompanied by a critique of polytheism (the worship of “ordinary utensils”) and praise of honoring the “one true God” (“Christians are not enslaved to such gods”; Diognetus 2).

New Perspectives on John’s Apocalypse

The evidence I have discussed in this study provides a new vantage point from which to view and understand several aspects of the Apocalypse and the situation it addresses concerning John’s strategy, imperial cults, and the opponents. Before going on to look at each of these three issues, it is important to briefly outline evidence from the Apocalypse, evidence which demonstrates just how pervasive anti-imperial sentiment is in this writing. For it is over against this particular stance that we can begin to map out the range of other Judean and Christian perspectives and practices as discussed earlier, including those of 1 Peter and the Pastorals. The Apocalypse provides a very

different stance towards empire to those we have already discussed, and this has implications regarding actual practices within congregations. Yet there are also affinities here with the sentiments of some other Judean apocalyptic writers discussed earlier.

Although the implied contrast between honoring God (and the Lamb) and honoring Satan (and the beast from the sea) is an element throughout the work, the main anti-imperial viewpoints come to the fore in chapters 13 and 17-18. John relates futuristic visions which presuppose antagonism between God’s people and an evil empire. As in the Judean oracular and apocalyptic literature, there are cultic, military, and economic aspects to the anti-imperialism of the Apocalypse.

Chapter 13 focuses on the interconnected cultic and military pretensions of Rome. John characterizes the Roman emperor or imperial power as a beast rising from the sea with seven heads, and this beast derives its authority from the great red dragon, the Devil or Satan himself (Rev ch. 12). In light of the mention of the mortal wound previously suffered by the beast (13:3) and the references to his death and subsequent return (17:8-11), which I discuss below, John probably has a returning Nero in mind here. The beast utters “haughty and blasphemous words” and it makes “war on the saints.” “And authority was given it over every tribe and people and tongue and nation, and all who dwell on the 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” (13:5, 7-8 [RSV]).

A second beast, this one from the earth, “exercises all the authority of the first beast in its presence, and makes the earth and its inhabitants worship the first beast” (Rev 13:12). Using miraculous signs, it deceives the inhabitants into worshipping the first beast and causes “those who would not worship the image of the beast to be slain” (13:15). It also marks everyone with its number, without which it is impossible to buy or sell. Ultimately, “if any one worships the beast and its image . . . he also shall drink the wine of God’s wrath . . . and he shall be tormented with fire and sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb” (14:9-10). In this way, the Roman empire and its leaders are portrayed as hostile to followers of Jesus and vice versa.

In chapters 17-18, John’s condemnation of the Roman empire turns to related economic aspects. Here he brings in the image of “Babylon the great, mother of harlots and of earth’s abominations,” perhaps a play on the goddess Roma, who rides upon the first beast. This is the great harlot, the city of Rome, whose attire in purple, scarlet, gold, and jewels speaks of great wealth (Rev 17:4). She is “drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses of Jesus” (17:6). John then goes on to portray the forthcoming fall of Babylon/Rome, relating the angel’s condemnation of those who associated with this harlot: “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! . . . [F]or all nations have drunk the wine of her impure passion, and the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth have grown rich with the wealth of her wantonness” (18:2-3). Another voice within the vision calls from heaven “Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues; for her sins are heaped high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities” (18:4-5). John then goes on to portray the great mourning of those kings, merchants, and others who associated with the Roman imperial power. This has sketched out the main anti-imperial elements of the Apocalypse.
1. Rhetorical Situation and Strategy

The findings of this study help to put the Apocalypse’s sectarian stance and especially its anti-imperial dimensions in proper perspective as a minority opinion within a spectrum of other viewpoints within Judean and Christian circles in the cities of Asia Minor.\(^{18}\) Using the imagery of harlots and beasts, John, like some other Judean authors of his time, draws on the Hebrew prophetic tradition to criticize the social, political, economic, and cultural manifestations of the Roman imperial presence in the cities.\(^{19}\) For him, contacts with, or honors for, emperors and imperial representatives in any form are intertwined and dichotomous to honoring and worshiping God and the Lamb. Hence involvement in such things is “fornication” or idolatry in its most blatant form.\(^{20}\) Yet John’s hostile perspective and its practical implications for the actual lives of the groups it addresses is only one side of a conversation.

To clarify the rhetorical situation of the Apocalypse it is important to ask who were the general recipients of the Apocalypse and at whom was this anti-imperial “propaganda” aimed? Certainly there was variety in the situations of congregations in western Asia Minor. Overall it seems that the congregations drew their membership from both Judean and non-Judean (gentile) backgrounds; some of the gentiles may also have been previously associated with synagogues (as God-fearers).\(^{21}\) Some of these might have been or still were members in other sub-groups, guilds or synagogues within the city.

When we remember this, the evidence discussed earlier with regard to the typical activities of numerous associations, synagogues, and congregations takes on added significance. For in many, perhaps most, of these groups honoring the emperors or other officials in some form was a normal and acceptable part of life, and this included cultic honors and related commensal activities in the case of associations. Some synagogues in Asia and elsewhere engaged in monumental honors for emperors, as well as participating within social networks of benefaction that by nature entailed affiliations with imperial-connected individuals. Likewise within other Christian circles in Asia Minor honors the emperors (though not as deities) or praying for them was not only acceptable, it was advocated, as in 1 Peter and the Pastorals. Some degree of participation in this aspect of group practice in the cities was one way in which such assemblies and synagogues could resemble other associations within the Greek city, thereby helping to diminish tensions between group and society.

There are some similarities between the world views evident in these Judean and Christian circles and the world view of the Apocalypse, but there are more significant differences. John shares in common with others a rejection of active participation in rituals for Greco-Roman deities,

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19 Cf. Isa 13, 34; Jer 51; Ezek 26-27. Also see the discussion of Judean Sibylline Oracles and apocalyptic literature in chapter eight.
21 The prominence of issues concerning the eating of food sacrificed to idols in the letters suggests that a good number of John’s opponents, at least, were gentiles. Considering the presence of Judeans in the cities addressed by the Apocalypse and the presence of some Judeans within the congregations in Asia (e.g. Priscilla and Aquila), there is a strong likelihood that there were Judeans among the Christian assemblies addressed by John (who was himself Judean).
including the Augustan gods, which most Judeans and Christians also considered “idolatry”. However, John’s definition of idolatry or “fornication” expands to include many activities that others (including the Nicolaitans and followers of “Jezebel”) would deem acceptable. The distinction made by many Judeans and Christians between non-cultic forms of honor, on the one hand, and conscious or active participation in imperial cults, on the other, is not accepted within John’s perspective. For many Judeans and Christians the emperor held a very prominent and, most often, positive position within the cosmic order of things, deserving of honor and respect. To the contrary, in John’s symbolic universe the emperor’s position was also quite high, but at the height of evil. These differences in practices and world views also correspond to differing notions on where and how strongly to draw boundaries between group and society, and these differences help to elucidate John’s rhetorical strategy.

Scholars are increasingly recognizing the functional characteristics of apocalyptic literature and the deliberative character of John’s rhetoric specifically. Addressing the Christian assemblies and using a visionary framework, John seeks to persuade others to adopt or reject particular viewpoints and practices in the present, not only in the letters to the seven congregations but also throughout the work. Among John’s purposes was to convince his recipients that it was his more radical perspective involving separation from various aspects of civic life and complete avoidance of honoring imperial figures which should be followed, not the normative practice within many associations, synagogues, and assemblies. John tries to persuade his readers that what at first appears to be normal practice is, in fact, at a more profound, cosmic level, an utterly unacceptable compromise with evil. He does so by expounding a symbolic universe in which any form of honors for the emperors and even social, economic, or cultural affiliation with imperial aspects of society were inextricably bound up in the evils of Satan. John also makes practical exhortations concerning withdrawal from such contacts. The angel concretely calls for followers of Jesus to remove themselves from contact with Rome, the harlot, echoing Jeremiah’s exhortation to the Israelites in Babylon (Jer 51:6, 45; cf. Isa 48:20; 52:11): “Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues; for her sins are heaped high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities” (Rev 18:4).

Practically speaking, John’s call to withdrawal from Babylon means that Jesus-followers living in the cities of Asia should distance themselves from any direct or indirect support of an evil empire whose demise is near. It means the rejection of the politically moderate position that characterized a more prominent trajectory of Christianity in the region, and this also has implications regarding participation in economic life in the cities. While many Christians in Asia Minor did not perceive a problem with such participation in imperial aspects of civic life, John did, and it seems that his was a minority opinion. To say that John’s is a minority opinion is not to say that his views of empire, though extreme, are totally without reason. When we consider the actual reasons why John condemns the empire, it becomes clearer how participation in imperial dimensions of civic life by members of the Christian

assemblies (that is, association-like behavior) could be interpreted as a threat. John, like some other Judean authors discussed earlier (e.g. Sibylline Oracles), chooses to focus on the negative characteristics of imperialism and criticizes the empire based on inter-related military, economic, and cultic factors. These factors, although selective, do have some basis in the reality of Roman rule.

Several reasons for John’s negative posture in relation to the Roman empire are discernible. Although not explicitly stated in the Apocalypse, it is the power of Rome and the emperor which recently manifested itself in the slaughter of Christians following the fire at Rome (under Nero) and in the destruction of God’s temple at Jerusalem. In John’s visions, it is the military might of Rome and its apparent indestructibility that misleads people into treating Rome and its emperors as though they are deserving of honors on a par with God himself. “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?’” (Rev 13:4). It is this power that allows Rome, the harlot, to hold sway over all the kings of the earth and to profit economically from its exploitation of the provinces, even with the help of provincials who are portrayed as ignorant of this overall system of exploitation (chs. 17-18; cf. Sibylline Oracles 3.350-57). In light of the abusive and blasphemous actions of the Roman power which were often disguised (according to John), the practice of honoring the emperor could be viewed as unconscious participation in an evil system. It is the potential for deception of Jesus-followers that John is worried about. They are in danger of buying into what is, in his view, a false imperial ideology. Moreover, living within a context where inhabitants regularly honored the emperors as gods and where the benefits of imperialism were praised could mislead God’s people into accepting similar ways of perceiving and acting. The potential threat to congregations, then, is that they would become indistinguishable from others who were deceived by the false pretensions of Roman imperial power in the cities of Asia Minor.

With this in mind, it is possible to see association-like behavior among congregations as a problem, as did John. Yet many others did not; other members and leaders of Jesus groups living in Asia Minor and elsewhere did not focus on these same factors regarding imperialism. Instead, they sought to find ways to claim a place for themselves within city and empire without engaging fully in honors for gods and goddesses, including the emperors as deities.

25 It is possible that the Phrygian movement (Montanism) of the mid- to late-second century can be placed within this same trajectory of Christianity. The movement clearly made use of John’s Apocalypse with its concept of the “New Jerusalem”—immanently to arrive at Pepuza in Phrygia, according to some—and the movement’s emphasis on being a witness or martyr. But we know too little regarding the actual stances of the movement’s leaders regarding Roman imperialism to assess this fully. Papias, bishop of Hierapolis in the second century, was also known for his apocalyptic views; but we know even less about him.

2. Imperial Cults: Rhetoric and Reality

In the process of persuading his readers that they need to remove themselves from such involvements in civic life, John also speaks, in chapter 13, of “worshiping the beast” or its image (εἰκών) and, in the process, draws on symbolism from the book of Daniel. According to John’s vision of the future, the great red dragon, Satan, gave the first beast from the sea “his power and his throne and great authority” and people “worshiped the beast, saying, ‘Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?’” (Rev 13:1-4 [RSV]). The second beast, who is also a “false-prophet,” promoted the worship of the first beast, causing “those who would not worship the image of the beast to be slain” and marking those who did with the number of the beast, which was required to engage in buying and selling (13:11-18). Those who worship the beast and receive the mark, John emphasizes, will ultimately “drink the wine of God’s wrath,” being tormented forever (14:9-11).

To the contrary, those who refuse to do so and face death will have their names written in the book of life.

Scholars most often recognize John’s depiction of the beasts as some kind of allusion to rituals in honor of the imperial gods, or imperial cults. Yet they differ on how they would evaluate the relation between rhetoric and reality, between John’s apocalyptic imagery here and the actual characteristics of imperial cults in Roman Asia and their importance with respect to the contemporary situation of Jesus-followers there. In light of what we found earlier, the traditional approach which gives priority to the Apocalypse and reads imperial cults and persecution in light of the book is not plausible, even for the time of Domitian. Furthermore, the influences of Judean scripture on the details of John’s futuristic scenarios, especially episodes such as Nebuchadnezzar’s command that all should “fall down and worship the gold statue” or else be “thrown into a furnace of blazing fire” (Dan 3), should also caution us in assuming a direct relation between what John describes in chapter 13 and the realities of imperial cults or persecution as faced by Christians in Asia. John’s focus on the emperor’s demands to be worshiped as a god together with the religio-economic critique of empire in chs. 17-18 also derives, in part, from parallels with Ezekiel’s religio-economic critique of Tyre, whose prince boasts: “I am a god; I sit in the seat of the gods, in the heart of the seas” (Ezekiel 26-28, esp. 28:1-10).

Instead of asking what chapter 13 of the Apocalypse tells us about imperial cults, then, we need to ask: in light of what we know about imperial cults and the actual persecution of Christians, how does John’s futuristic, apocalyptic scenario relate to them? There are indeed aspects of imperial cults or other historical events around John’s time which did inform his depiction of the future. In some ways, John’s cult of the beast is modeled on aspects of imperial cults. The first beast from the sea is the emperor. It seems probable, though, that John has the myth of Nero returning from the dead (redivivus) in mind when he speaks of this first beast. This suggestion is based, in part, on the reference to the beast’s “mortal wound” which was healed (Rev 13:3) and, more importantly, the interpretation of phrases in 17:9-11:

The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is to ascend from the bottomless pit and go to

27 On John’s economic critique and Hebrew scripture, see Bauckham 1991 and Provan 1996. The latter challenges Bauckham’s views, but perhaps overstates the distance between Roman realities of trade and John’s description in ch. 18.
perdition. . . . This calls for a mind with wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on
which the woman is seated; they are also seven kings, five of whom have fallen, one is, the
other has not yet come, and when he comes he must remain only a little while. As for the
beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to perdition.
This is not the place to engage in a full discussion concerning the identification of the heads with
specific emperors, nor to explain related passages in chapter 13 (including the meaning of the
number 666). 28 Here it is sufficient to point out that the phrases emphasized above would suggest
that, when he records his visions, John has in mind the widespread myth (among Judeans,
Christians, and others) that the emperor Nero would return from the dead. 29 A passage in the
Judean-Christian Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah, which probably dates to the late-first century,
also envisions a similar role for the returning Nero: Beliar will come “in the form of that king [i.e.
Nero] . . . and all men in the world will believe in him. They will sacrifice to him and will serve
him, saying ‘This is the Lord, and besides him there is no other’” (4:4-10; trans. by M.A. Knibb in
Charlesworth 1983-85, 2.161-62). Considering the futuristic element in the depiction of the first
beast, John may or may not have a particular contemporary figure in mind as a model when he
speaks of the second beast. But since the second beast “exercizes all the authority of the first beast”
and plays a key role in promoting the worship of the image of the first beast (13:12-18), some
scholars suggest that John may be thinking of provincial figures associated with imperial cults, such
as high-priests of the provincial cult or the League of Asia itself.30 Yet these identifications are not
certain.

There are further possible connections between John’s rhetoric and contemporary realities.
John’s references to the attractiveness of worshiping the beast / emperor (e.g. Rev 13:4) do reflect
the nature of imperial cults as a spontaneous response on the part of civic inhabitants to the power
of the emperor and Rome. But he also envisions that worship of the emperor will be enforced in
the future with the threat of death. Regarding the latter, it is possible (though not likely) that John
was familiar with the test which some Christians brought to trial faced,31 namely, ritual acts in
honor of the emperor alongside other gods. If so, John has clearly magnified the role of imperial
cults specifically, for I have argued that these cults played only a modest role in actual persecutions
by and beyond the time of Trajan, and there is, in fact, no evidence of such tests before Pliny’s time
(ca. 110 CE). The worship—or—die aspect of John’s portrait may well have been influenced by
biblical sources, especially the book of Daniel (see esp. Dan 3).

Regarding John’s depiction of the mass slaughter of those who follow God and not Satan,
Nero’s brutal execution of Jesus’ followers after the fire at the city of Rome may also have been fresh
in John’s memory, but the mass slaughter envisioned in the book certainly does not (nor does it
claim to) reflect actual persecution in Asia Minor in the late-first century. If John was in fact
writing after the Romans’ destruction of Jerusalem, we can better understand why he, like the
Judean authors of 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch, might tend to portray the imperial power taking brutal

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28 On these issues, see Court 1979, 122-53; Bauckham 1993, 384-452; Beale 1999, 872-75.

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actions against God’s people.

Despite these possible connections between rhetoric and reality, we need to realize that the Apocalypse is not, nor does it claim to be, a historical commentary on the actual situation in Asia Minor, nor is it a response to imperial cults of the time specifically. Recent work by scholars such as Adela Yarbro Collins and Leonard L. Thompson make similar observations. Rather than history, it is an apocalyptic portrayal of the forthcoming final confrontation between the forces of good (God, the Lamb, angels, those in the book of life) and the forces of evil (Satan, the beast, fallen angels, those who worship the beast) whose purpose is, in part, to persuade followers of Jesus in the seven cities of Asia to take certain oppositional stances towards society in the present, especially its imperial dimensions. This does not mean that the Apocalypse was out of touch with reality, so to speak, for as I discussed earlier there are several reasons why John chooses to portray the futuristic confrontation of those devoted to Christ and the imperial power in this manner. Writing in an apocalyptic tradition, John employs common biblical imagery used in criticism of ruling powers, placing the Roman imperial power, with its claims to be god, on the side of evil in the final eschatological battle. Within this framework, involvements in imperial facets of civic life, which John epitomizes as worshiping the beast (Rev ch. 13) or fornicating with the harlot (chs. 17-18), is among the most dangerous forms of idolatry. These two themes, idolatry and fornication, are also prominent in the opening letters of the Apocalypse.

3. John’s Opponents in the Letters: Nicolaitans and Others

A third way in which the evidence discussed throughout this study sheds light on the Apocalypse concerns the opponents that John identifies. Once again drawing on biblical language and imagery, John accuses the Nicolaitans and the followers of “Jezebel” and “Balaam” of eating idol-food and of committing “fornication,” a traditional metaphorical reference to involvement in specific aspects of surrounding society and its cultural practices. These adversaries are noteworthy at Ephesus, but their influence on the congregations is most threatening, in John’s view, at Pergamon and Thyatira (Rev 2:6, 14-17, 19-23). As several scholars note, the activities of these opponents most likely included imperial dimensions, which is further indicated in the prominence of anti-imperial themes,

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32 A.Y. Collins (1984, 73, 69-77, 104) considers imperial cults as an “incidental matter” “from the pagan point of view” and with respect to the real situation of Christians; but she does so, in part, based on a questionable characterization of these cults as non-genuine “flattery.” Thompson, who is more attuned to the actual nature of imperial cults in this region, points out that not much would have changed with regard to these cults during the reign of Domitian and that, therefore, the imperial cults play only a limited role with respect to Christians (cf. Thompson 1990, 158-64). He accepts Price’s view that the “emperor in the imperial cult was subordinated to the gods” and that the imperial gods were consequently not the recipients of the same cultic acts as other gods (Thompson 1990, 164), which is problematic.

33 The theme of ruling powers and their leaders claiming to be equal to a god is also common within the biblical sources familiar to John such as Ezek 28 (the prince of Tyre who claims “I am a god; I sit in the seat of gods”) and within other Judean apocalyptic writings (e.g. Sibylline Oracles 5.34, 140 [the returning Nero claims to be a god], 162-79 [Rome makes the divine claim that “I alone am”]).

as well as the continued use of the analogy of “fornication,” throughout the rest of the book.\textsuperscript{35} What, concretely, were these opponents doing and in what settings were they engaging in what John considers idolatry?

The largely neglected epigraphic evidence concerning associations in the seven cities provides some answers to this in two interrelated ways. First, the analogy of associations suggests a range of typical activities and practices, including honors for, and dedications to, the emperors, in which small groups in the civic setting did engage, including synagogues and assemblies. Honoring the emperors was a norm which John clearly opposes. It seems quite possible that John singles out the opponents for special castigation because their “fornication,” that is, their participation in such aspects of society, was more pronounced or explicit than in other Judean or Christian circles. Perhaps “Jezebel,” as a leader and/or benefactor of a Nicolaitan group, was a woman of relatively high standing in Thyatira (possibly a Julia Severa-type figure) who took honoring the emperors and other imperial representatives, as well as full participation in the economic life of the city, as appropriate activities for members of the congregations with whom she affiliated.\textsuperscript{36}

Second, one of the opponents’ compromises with society (according to John’s accusations) involved eating idol-food (\textit{eidōlothyta}), a hotly debated group-society issue in the early Jesus movements.\textsuperscript{37} Mary Douglas’ (1973 [1970]) anthropological studies demonstrate clearly that boundaries between the physical body and things in the external world are often symbolic of boundaries between a given cultural group and society. So the issue of what food one eats or does not eat can be indicative of group-society relations. As Paul’s letter to the congregations at Corinth indicates, a person might encounter idol-food or sacrificial meat (that had previously been offered to the gods) in a number of settings in cities of the empire, from the market-places, to temple dining-halls, to the private dinners held in the home of a friend. One of the most widespread social settings for banquets involving the consumption of food which had been sacrificed to the gods or emperors in Asia were the communal meals of associations and guilds.

We have seen that occupational and other associations were a widespread aspect in Asia Minor. At cities like Thyatira there were guilds of merchants, coppersmiths, bakers, linen-workers, dyers, clothing-cleaners, tanners, and leather-workers, among others. Furthermore, being a member in such groups was less than “voluntary” in the sense that, if one was a dyer or merchant, one would by default associate with one’s fellow-workers and would, therefore, belong in the guild of dyers or merchants. One’s occupation was in many ways a determining factor in social and economic affiliations. Both Judeans and Christians engaged in occupations reflecting the spectrum of known guilds, and there are signs of multiple memberships or affiliations among some Judeans (see chapter seven). There is a sense in which we should be surprised if a person were to cut off contacts with

\textsuperscript{35} Schüssler Fiorenza 1985, 195–97; Hemer 1986, 83–94; Klauck 1992; Kraybill 1996, 16 and throughout. A.Y. Collins (1985, 214), for example, suggests that the Nicolaitans “were advocating Christian participation in the imperial cult.” However, it is not necessarily the participation of Christians in imperial cults specifically, but rather the involvement in specific aspects of civic life, including honors for the emperors and participation in guilds (where imperial cult activities could take place), which may be the issue.

\textsuperscript{36} It is also worth mentioning the possibility that John’s references to the “synagogue of Satan” at Smyrna and at Philadelphia (Rev 2:9; 3:9) may pertain to similar involvements within society on the part of these groups (perhaps, but not necessarily, Judean), but there is even less evidence to work with in this case.

fellow-workers once affiliated with another group such as a congregation devoted to Christ or the local synagogue. For removing oneself would sever the network connections necessary for mercantile activity, thereby threatening one’s means of livelihood. Paul himself, who seems to have considered his occupation as a craftsman an important component of his identity, found the workshop or guild-hall a key setting for his missionary activity.  

In light of this, it is quite plausible to suggest that some opponents of John were continuing in their occupational affiliations and sustaining memberships in other local guilds, where they would encounter sacrificial food and meat. Several scholars, following the lead of William M. Ramsay, also make the suggestion that some of these Christians were participating within local guilds, especially at Thyatira. Still, these scholars do not fully discuss the extensive epigraphic evidence outlined throughout this study specifically concerning imperial and other dimensions of association-life.

The suggestion that John is objecting, in part, to Jesus-followers joining in the activities of guilds and taking part in commercial networks associated with the imperial presence corresponds well with other economic dimensions of his book. John criticizes those at Laodicea who are wealthy, probably due to involvement in mercantile activities: “I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot . . . For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked” (Rev 3:15-18). John also links involvement in trade with worship of the beast in his futuristic portrayal of society. For only those who have the mark of the beast, that is, those who associate with Rome or “worship the beast,” will be able to “buy and sell” (13:16-18).

Perhaps most telling is John’s condemnation of those merchants (emporoi), shippers (nautai), and craftsmen (technitai) who “fornicate” with the harlot, Babylon (Rome), and mourn at her ultimate demise (Rev 18). John writes:

The merchants . . . who gained wealth from her will stand far off, in fear of her torment, weeping and mourning aloud, ‘Alas, alas, for the great city that was clothed in fine linen, in purple and scarlet, bedecked with gold, with jewels, and with pearls! In one hour all this wealth has been laid waste.’ And all the shipmasters and seafaring men, sailors and all whose trade is on the sea, stood far off and cried out as they saw the smoke of her burning, ‘What city was like the great city?’ And they threw dust on their heads, as they wept and mourned (18:15–19 [RSV]).

As both Richard Bauckham (1991, 84) and J. Nelson Kraybill (1996, 100–101) suggest, it seems

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38 Cf. 1 Thess 2:9; 4:9–12; 1 Cor 2:12; 4:8–13; 9:12–15, 19; 2 Cor 11–13; Hock 1980; Malherbe 1983 [1977], 89–90.
39 My suggestions do not rest on the interpretation of klinē in 2:22. Besides its reference to a “sick-bed,” though, it may also allude to the commensal context and social world of associations connected with the opponents’ activities, as Ramsay (1901, 103–105) also points out. For the term was often used to refer to the “couch” on which one reclined to eat at banquets and sometimes as a metonymy of the “banquet” (cf. P.Oxy 110, 1484, 1755, 3693, 4339; NewDocs I 1) or of an “association” (cf. IG X.2 192 from Thessalonica; Philo, Against Flaccus 136–37).
probable that these merchants included at least some Christians in their number. Groups of merchants and shippers, Italian or otherwise, played a key role in the local economic life of the cities in Asia, also actively participating in honors for emperors and officials within civic networks. So, for instance, merchants in the slave-market at Ephesos honored the proconsul, C. Sallustius Crispus Passienus in the forties (IEph 3025), and other associations of Roman merchants there set up statues of the emperor Claudius around the same time (IEph 3019; IEph 409). Merchants at Thyatira dedicated some newly built structures to “the Augustan (Sebastoi) gods” (TAM V 862), and workers in the slave-market at Sardis set up honors for T. Julius Lepidus, a high-priest in the imperial cult (SEG 46 [1996], no. 1524 = AGRIV 124). The well-attested association of Roman businessmen at Apameia (east of Laodicea) joined with the civic institutions and a guild of workers to honor P. Manneius Rhuso, the city’s benefactor and ambassador to the emperors (IGR IV 791; 1 CE).

John calls on Christians to distance themselves from such aspects of civic life, but it is not always clear what, practically speaking, John expected these people living in the cities of Asia to do. He certainly wanted them to avoid sacrificial food that had been offered to imperial and other gods within any social context, including the communal meals of guilds. He also would want them to avoid the guilds altogether since imperial rituals and other practices he considered idolatrous took place in them. This would require that Christians limit social and business contacts with fellow-workers and other merchants and traders. He also certainly did not approve of involvement in the production and trade of goods which contributed, in his view, to the well-being of an evil empire whose ultimate demise was imminent.

How, then, did John expect Christians to make a living? Were they to live in isolation from others? What occupations were acceptable? How would a local Christian merchant or dyer continue in his or her occupation without maintaining at least some friendly contacts with both fellow-workers and with wealthier customers or patrons? How was one to totally avoid any contacts with an imperialism that was embedded within many aspects of life in the cities? The Apocalypse does not provide clear answers to such questions, and we are left wondering.

The opponents of John who participated in such settings and practices were not likely to perceive their own behaviors as unsuitable compromise or idolatry, as did John. Instead, they would view this as a normal or necessary part of living and working within cities in Asia Minor. Perhaps one of the Nicolaitans or followers of “Jezebel” might have offered, if questioned, an (ideological) justification of such participation in the communal meals of associations in a manner similar to those of the Corinthians who knew that “an idol has no real existence” and that “there is no God but one” (1 Cor 8:4). However, it may be that the average Nicolaitan Christian would not have understood the question, since participation in such social and economic contexts had been and apparently continued to be a normal and significant part of their lives. Total separation and exclusivity in relation to all such facets of civic life would not have entered their minds. John, whose apocalyptic and sectarian outlook led him to perceive things differently, tried to convince them otherwise. Between these views and practices of John and the Nicolaitans lies a spectrum of possibilities regarding interaction with, involvement in, or separation from imperial, occupational and other aspects of society.
Conclusion

As this case study shows, an oversimplified categorization of all synagogues and congregations as sects in a modern sociological sense tends to obscure many aspects of group-society interactions. A comparison with other models or social groupings from the ancient world, chief among them associations and guilds, does provide new insights into certain areas of group life, including imperial-related activities. Some synagogues and congregations did involve themselves in imperial honorary activities that are paralleled within many associations, including special honors for Roman authorities. In some respects, Judeans and Jesus-followers could also incorporate the emperors or imperial officials within the internal life of the group, at least in the form of prayers for these figures. Such similarities draw attention to one of the neglected ways in which these groups, like other associations, found places for themselves within the sociocultural framework of the polis, simultaneously lessening the potential for tensions between the group and society. This crossover in practice also suggests at least some commonalities in the relative position of the emperors within the world views of some Judeans, Christ-devotees, and other civic inhabitants.

Yet there was also a range of opinions on the matter within both Judean and Christian circles, reflecting differing notions on where and how starkly the lines between group and society were to be drawn or on how permeable those boundaries would be. In contrast to many others, the Apocalypse clearly opposed any form of honoring the emperor (the “beast” in his view) or affiliating with the imperial presence. John sought to persuade others who were more involved in imperial and other dimensions of civic life to adopt his sectarian stance.

Unlike other associations, participation among Judeans and Christians stopped short of conscious or active involvement in honors or rituals for the emperors and imperial family as deities. This notwithstanding the fact that some Judeans and Jesus-followers could find themselves within social settings, such as associations, where these rituals did take place and where sacrificial food was consumed in the setting of communal meals. Yet failure to engage in cultic honors for the imperial gods should be understood within the broader context of Christians’ and Judeans’ avoidance of full participation in honoring Greco-Roman gods and goddesses generally, since rituals for the imperial gods were embedded within the cultic life of the Greek city under Roman rule.

Following from the latter point is that imperial cults in and of themselves were not a principal causal factor of occasional conflicts between civic inhabitants and either Judeans or Christians, nor of the intermittent persecution of Christians specifically. Instead, the principal source of sporadic tensions between these groups and others in the civic setting often pertained to Judean and Christian “atheistic” practices and world views. Yet acknowledgment of this potential source of tensions should not lead us to exaggerate its effects on the everyday lives of Judeans and Christians in Asia Minor. They could in many respects live and work peaceably alongside others within the cities and, as groups, participate in some aspects of life in the city.