

HONOURING THE EMPEROR OR ASSAILING THE BEAST:
PARTICIPATION IN CIVIC LIFE AMONG ASSOCIATIONS
(JEWISH, CHRISTIAN AND OTHER) IN ASIA MINOR
AND THE APOCALYPSE OF JOHN*

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Introduction

Scholars with a social-historical interest in Christianity or Judaism in the Graeco-Roman world have increasingly recognized the value in studying other social-religious groups, associations or guilds in that same setting.¹ Wayne A. Meeks, for example, is among those who acknowledge

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1. Most recently: A.J. Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2nd edn, 1983 [1977]), pp. 88-91; H.-J. Klauck, *Hausgemeinde und Hauskirche im frühen Christentum* (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1981), pp. 83-98; S.C. Barton and G.H.R. Horsley, 'A Hellenistic Cult Group and the New Testament Churches', *JAC* 24 (1981), pp. 7-41; J.S. Kloppenborg, 'Edwin Hatch, Churches and Collegia', in B.H. MacLean (ed.), *Origins and Method: Towards a New Understanding of Judaism and Christianity* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), pp. 212-38; J.S. Kloppenborg and S.G. Wilson (eds.), *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World* (London: Routledge, 1996), esp. P. Richardson, 'Early Synagogues as Collegia in the Diaspora and Palestine', pp. 90-109. My doctoral dissertation deals extensively with associations in connection with early Christianity and Judaism: 'Claiming a Place in *Polis* and Empire: The Significance

some similarities between Jewish and Christian groups on the one hand and associations on the other, drawing attention to the fact that both were small, voluntary groups which gathered together on a regular basis.² To an outsider, a Jewish or Christian group could initially appear to be just another association, *thiasos* or *collegium* within the *polis* (city).³

Yet for Meeks and others, although there are similarities between such groups at first glance, there are fundamental differences between them which make associations a less than satisfactory analogy, particularly regarding group–society relations. Most importantly here, Jewish or Christian groups were utterly exclusive of other loyalties and they were ‘sects’ in a sociological sense of the word. Other scholars who focus on the Apocalypse, 1 Peter or other literature from Asia Minor, including John H. Elliott and Harry O. Maier, also characterize Christian groups in general as sectarian in their strict separation from most, if not all, facets of society.⁴

This depiction of Christianity or diaspora Judaism as a largely uniform set of exclusive and sectarian groups is often over-stated and serves to obscure rather than explain other evidence that suggests more complex scenarios for group–society relations.⁵ Some recent studies of diaspora Judaism are beginning to draw a more complicated picture of how Jewish groups fit within the *polis*. There is a growing recognition among some scholars that social groupings in the ancient context, especially associations, can serve as helpful analogies in understanding some of the dynamics of group–society relations among Jewish or Christian groups.⁶

of Imperial Cults and Connections among Associations, Synagogues, and Christian Groups in Roman Asia’ (PhD dissertation, University of Toronto, 1999).

2. W.A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), pp. 35, 77-78.

3. Cf. Pliny, *Ep.* 10.97; Lucian, *Peregrinus* 11; Tertullian, *Apol.* 38-39; Josephus, *Ant.* 14.215-16, 235; Ignatius, *Eph.* 12.2; 19.1.

4. J.H. Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless: A Social-Scientific Criticism of 1 Peter, its Situation and Strategy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2nd edn, 1990 [1981]); H.O. Maier, *The Social Setting of the Ministry as Reflected in the Writings of Hermas, Clement and Ignatius* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 1991).

5. Cf. P. Borgen, ‘“Yes,” “No,” “How Far?” The Participation of Jews and Christians in Pagan Cults’, in T. Engberg-Pedersen (ed.), *Paul in his Hellenistic Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), pp. 30-59.

6. Esp. Malherbe, *Social Aspects*, pp. 88-91; Kloppenborg, ‘Edwin Hatch’, pp. 229-30.

Giving special attention to inscriptions from Roman Asia,⁷ this paper compares the involvements of guilds and associations ('pagan', Jewish and Christian) in imperial dimensions of civic life, especially honours for the emperors. This comparison illustrates the complexity of group-society relations and provides a useful context in which to consider specific aspects of the Apocalypse of John.

Clearly, John disapproves of Christians participating in social, religious and economic practices of society. He advocates a sectarian perspective, drawing sharp and exclusive boundaries around the Christian groups, especially when it comes to honouring the emperor and participating in imperial-related activities. Yet this is only one side of a conversation, for a significant number of the Christians in the cities of Asia, it seems, were more open towards participating in some aspects of the *polis*, including commonplace activities such as honours for the emperors and affiliations with fellow-workers in occupational associations.

Scholarship's Portrayal of Christian and Jewish Groups as 'Sects'

Meeks's contention that associations do not serve as a very useful analogy for comparison with Christian or Jewish groups rests on several supposed key differences between them.⁸ The most important one here is that, like Jewish groups, 'Christian groups were exclusive and totalistic in a way that no club nor even any pagan cultic association was'. While he admits that 'the boundaries of the Pauline groups were somewhat more open than those of some other early Christian circles', he nonetheless stresses that *all* Pauline groups involved a 'thoroughgoing resocialization, in which the *sect* was intended to become virtually the primary group for its members, *supplanting all other loyalties*'.⁹

Meeks's portrait of Christian groups as entirely exclusive and associations as entirely lacking in exclusivity is problematic. Although many associations were not exclusive, some could have exclusivistic tendencies (cf. *NewDocs* I 3 [Sardis]; *PLond* 2193 [Egypt]). In regard to Chris-

7. Abbreviations for inscriptional collections throughout this paper follow the new standard outlined in G.H.R. Horsley and J.A.L. Lee, 'A Preliminary Checklist of Abbreviations of Greek Epigraphic Volumes', *Epigraphica* 56 (1994), pp. 129-69.

8. For problems with the other supposed differences, see Kloppenborg, 'Edwin Hatch', pp. 234-36; R.S. Ascough, 'Translocal Relationships among Voluntary Associations and Early Christianity', *J ECS* 5 (1997), pp. 223-41.

9. Meeks, *Urban Christians*, p. 78 (cf. pp. 35-39, 77-80, 85).

tian groups, Meeks categorizes participation in other social groupings or banqueting contexts at Corinth as the exception rather than the rule. In the service of maintaining his focus on sectarianism, Meeks obscures the more varied nature of the evidence for Pauline and other groups: while Paul praises the Thessalonian Christians for turning from idols to God (1 Thess. 1.9-10), for example, Paul knows and does not disapprove of the practice among the Corinthians of joining with their fellow civic inhabitants at communal meals in some contexts, including an idol's temple (1 Cor. 8-10; see 9.19-23). This evidence for dual affiliations or 'loyalties' (to use Meeks's term) on the part of Christians should not be passed off as an exception.

Similar sectarian-focused depictions of Christianity are evident among scholars of the Apocalypse. The traditional view of the Apocalypse is that the author's references to martyrdoms in the futuristic visions are in fact references to the actual, current situation faced by most Christians involving a substantial and official persecution under Domitian, who forced inhabitants to worship him as 'lord and god'.¹⁰ Following the proponents of a substantial Domitianic persecution, most recently Marta Sordi and Paul Keresztes,¹¹ Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, for example, argues that the author's invective against Rome and the emperors is a fitting response to this social-political situation; that is, many of the recipients of the Apocalypse were faced with a real threat of martyrdom if they did not worship Domitian and would have identified with the Apocalypse's hostile and sectarian viewpoint.¹²

10. Cf. I.T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John: Studies in Introduction with a Critical and Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1967 [1919]); R.H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1920); C.J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in Their Local Setting* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986), pp. 86-87; E. Schüssler-Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), pp. 192-97.

11. P. Keresztes, 'The Imperial Roman Government and the Christian Church: I. From Nero to the Severi', *ANRW*, II.23.1, pp. 257-72; Marta Sordi, *The Christians and the Roman Empire* (trans. A. Bedini; London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986), pp. 43-54. The view is based primarily on Eusebius's statement that Domitian was 'the second to organize persecution against us' (*H.E.* 217), the reference to 'calamities' in *1 Clement* 1.1 and Dio's account of Domitian's execution of members of the imperial elites for 'atheism' (Dio 67.14).

12. Schüssler-Fiorenza, *Justice*, pp. 6-8, 181-203. Cf. D.A. DeSilva, 'The "Image

Such an understanding of the Apocalypse and, by implication, of the situation of most Christian groups in Roman Asia suffers from several problems. The most important problem is the lack of clear evidence for any Roman-initiated, official persecution of Christians in Asia Minor in the first two centuries, including the reign of Domitian, as G.E.M. de Ste. Croix's study shows. Recent studies on Domitian, including those by Pat Southern and Brian W. Jones, question the basis of the traditional view, pointing to the ambiguity of the evidence often cited as support for the persecution and to the fact that portrayals of Domitian after his death and *dannatio* by friends of a new emperor are less than reliable measures of his actual reign.¹³

Many scholars now convincingly argue that persecution of Christians in the first two centuries in Asia Minor is better characterized as local and sporadic, relating to social harassment and verbal abuse by some inhabitants that could occasionally lead to physical abuse or martyrdom.¹⁴ Pliny's correspondence with Trajan regarding the Christians in Pontus (as well as Hadrian's rescript a decade or so later regarding those in Asia) shows that there were occasions when some inhabitants might bring charges against Christians before Roman officials; but nothing suggests any *active* persecution of Christians by Pliny or other Roman officials or emperors before him in the provinces, or any precedents to follow in the matter.¹⁵ To suggest that the author of the Apocalypse was

of the Beast" and the Christians in Asia Minor: Escalation of Sectarian Tension in Revelation 13', *TrinJ* 12 (1991), pp. 185-208.

13. G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, 'Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?', *Past and Present* 26 (1963), pp. 6-38. P. Southern, *Domitian: Tragic Tyrant* (London: Routledge, 1997), esp. pp. 45-46; B.W. Jones, *The Emperor Domitian* (London: Routledge, 1992), esp. pp. 196-98. Cf. A. Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), pp. 70-75; L.L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 95-115; J.C. Wilson, 'The Problem of the Domitianic Date of Revelation', *NTS* 39 (1993), pp. 587-605.

14. On verbal abuse as a form of 'suffering', see 1 Pet. 2.12; 3.9, 15-17; 4.3-5; 5.9. Cf. W.C. van Unnik, 'The Teaching of Good Works in I Peter', in *Sparsa Collecta: The Collected Essays of W.C. Van Unnik* (NovTSup, 30; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1980 [1954]), pp. 95-96; Elliott, *Home*, pp. 78-82; Thompson, *Apocalypse and Empire*, pp. 95-115; P.J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), pp. 33-36.

15. Pliny, *Ep.* 10.96-97 and Hadrian's rescript in Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 68-69 and Eusebius, *H.E.* 4.8. Also see F.G. Downing, 'Pliny's Prosecutions of Christians: Revelation and 1 Peter', *JSNT* 34 (1988), pp. 105-23, though I do not

not addressing Christians facing imperial persecution or enforced worship of the emperor does not mean that he was completely distanced from the realities of life in the cities or the churches;¹⁶ he was responding to realities concerning imperial dimensions of civic and group life in Asia, some of which I describe shortly, but he perceived such things in a very different way than other inhabitants, including many Christians.

Some scholars who accept the revised understanding of the nature of persecution nonetheless argue for a sectarian understanding of Christianity in Asia Minor on other grounds, often employing Bryan R. Wilson's sociological typology. His typology was first developed from studies of divergent Christian religious movements in Western cultural contexts, but he later broadened its use for cross-cultural study of developing countries in his *Magic and the Millennium* (1973).¹⁷ According to Wilson, a sect is a 'deviant' religious movement primarily characterized by tension with society, and he suggests there are seven types based on their 'response to the world' and a corresponding soteriological perspective. Most importantly for present purposes is the 'conversionist' type of sect, for whom the world and those in it are corrupt and can only be changed through the 'supernaturally wrought transformation of the self' that takes place through an 'emotional transformation-conversion experience'.¹⁸

Elliott and Maier broadly categorize Christian groups in Asia Minor as conversionist sects in this sense, stressing the fundamental separation and conflict between such groups and the society in which they lived. In reference to 1 Peter, Elliott states that the 'sectarian features of the movement [in Palestine] continued to characterize the Christian communities

agree that 1 Peter 4.12ff. should be interpreted as a reference to official court trials.

16. The provincial imperial cult as it existed in John's time, past events such as Nero's brutal execution of Christians in Rome following the fire (Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44) and perhaps the Jewish war do nonetheless inform or serve as models for some of his description of the future. Cf. R. Bauckham, 'Nero and the Beast', in *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies in the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993), pp. 384-452, esp. pp. 441-50.

17. For B.R. Wilson's studies, see, for example, *Patterns of Sectarianism: Organisation and Ideology in Social and Religious Movements* (London: Heinemann, 1967); *Magic and the Millennium: A Sociological Study of Religious Movements of Protest among Tribal and Third-World Peoples* (London: Heinemann, 1973).

18. Wilson, *Magic*, pp. 22-23 (also cited by Elliott, *Home*, p. 76). Many aspects of this definition of sects clearly reflect the modern, Western, individualistic context.

of Asia Minor and *determine the nature of their interaction with society*'.¹⁹ The Christian 'community', like the diaspora Jewish one, 'drew firm social and religious boundaries between its members and all "outsiders"'.²⁰ The recipients of 1 Peter, who were literally aliens of the lower classes faced with dire social-economic conditions (according to Elliott), had terminated all previous familial, social and religious ties or loyalties in order to form 'a community set apart and *disengaged from the routine affairs of civic and social life*'.²¹ 1 Peter's social strategy in addressing these sectarian groups, Elliott stresses, was to emphasize the identity of the Christians as the elect of God and the suffering they faced in order to further *heighten* their separation from the Graeco-Roman context.²² Maier makes similar points regarding Christian groups in the cities of Asia addressed by Ignatius (many of which overlap with those addressed in the Apocalypse), which Maier suggests had a strong sense of separation from the world.²³

There are several difficulties with this sectarian-focused approach to the social history of early Christianity, only some of which can be discussed here.²⁴ The term 'sect' has come to be used in a variety of ways and there is little reason to question its applicability to many early Chris-

19. Elliott, *Home*, p. 74. For a discussion of the difficulties in applying the same model to Christian groups in the diaspora, see L.M. White, 'Shifting Sectarian Boundaries in Early Christianity', *BJRL* 70.3 (1988), pp. 7-24.

20. Elliott, *Home*, p. 79.

21. *Home*, p. 79 (italics mine). The lower-class portrait of early Christianity has been challenged by many scholars (cf. Malherbe, *Social Aspects*, pp. 29-59; Meeks, *Urban Christians*, pp. 51-73). Elliott's portrait of social-economic conditions under Roman rule is also overly negative (*Home*, pp. 70-73; contrast Thompson, *Apocalypse and Empire*, pp. 146-67).

22. Elliott, *Home*, pp. 107, 148; cf. J.H. Elliott, '1 Peter, its Situation and Strategy: A Discussion with David Balch', in *Perspectives on First Peter* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1986), pp. 61-78. Achtemeier sides with Elliott rather than Balch in this overall debate (*1 Peter*, pp. 52-55).

23. Maier, *Ministry*, pp. 163-68. Cf. M.Y. Macdonald, *The Pauline Churches: A Socio-historical Study of Institutionalization in the Pauline and Deutero-Pauline Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), concerning the Pastorals (esp. pp. 163-66) and other Pauline writings.

24. For further theoretical discussions, see White, 'Sectarian Boundaries'; B. Holmberg, *Sociology and the New Testament: An Appraisal* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), pp. 77-117; S.C. Barton, 'Early Christianity and the Sociology of the Sect', in F. Watson (ed.), *The Open Text: New Directions for Biblical Studies?* (London: SCM Press, 1993), pp. 140-62.

tian groups in the general sense that they were 'deviant' or 'divergent', 'minority religious movements within the context of [other] dominant religious traditions'.²⁵ The problem is not with sect typologies as such, but with how scholars such as Elliott have applied them, over-emphasizing exclusivity, separation and tensions with 'the world' or society while obscuring other evidence, such as that concerning imperial-related activities. Only *after* Elliott categorizes the Christian groups as sects does he consider the evidence for 1 Peter's apparently positive view of Roman authorities and of the 'secular model' of the household, for instance, which are then taken as secondary. James A. Beckford makes a similar criticism of how some sociologists employ sect typologies, pointing out how the approach often involves categorizations based on limited contrasting dualities or oppositions—protest or accommodation, exclusivity or inclusivity—which fail to do justice to the subtleties of social realities.²⁶

Other scholars interpret literary evidence for Christianity in Asia Minor quite differently and draw a more complex picture of group–society relations. Unlike Maier, for example, Bruce J. Malina and William R. Schoedel both suggest that Ignatius's letters reveal a positive outlook with respect to the place of Christians *within* broader civic life.²⁷ Writing about thirty years before Elliott, W.C. van Unnik states this about the social strategy of 1 Peter: 'In every respect the relation with fellow-men is central, not retreat from the world, but a life in the given conditions'.²⁸ Adopting some Hellenistic values, such as those pertaining to 'good works' or benefaction, was a means by which tensions with outsiders were to be lessened, but 1 Peter did not advocate an openness to all other aspects of that same society or culture, least of all the 'futile ways inherited from your fathers' (1.18), that is, a lifestyle of

25. Wilson, *Magic*, p. 11.

26. J.A. Beckford, 'Religious Organization', *Current Sociology* 21 (1973), pp. 94–104.

27. Cf. Ignatius, *Eph.* 9.2; 10; *Trall.* 2.3; 3.2. W.R. Schoedel, 'Theological Norms and Social Perspectives in Ignatius of Antioch', in E.P. Sanders (ed.), *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition. 1. The Shaping of Christianity in the Second and Third Centuries* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), pp. 46–52; B.J. Malina, 'The Social World Implied in the Letters of the Christian Bishop-Martyr (Named Ignatius of Antioch)', in Paul J. Achtemeier (ed.), *Society of Biblical Literature 1978 Seminar Papers Vol. II* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1978), pp. 71–119, esp. p. 87.

28. Van Unnik, 'Good Works', p. 101.

'passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing, and lawless idolatry' (4.3).²⁹ Similarly, David Balch convincingly challenges Elliott's portrait of the social situation and strategy of 1 Peter, arguing instead that it represents some degree of acculturation in order to lessen group–society tensions.³⁰

Insights from the social sciences (other than just the popular sect typologies) including anthropological studies of acculturation, for example, may help to provide a more nuanced approach to the complexity of group–society relations. Balch writes,

Instead of the assumption that 'all Gentile modes of behaviour' are sinful, anthropologists studying acculturation emphasize that there is a 'selection' by the receiving culture among cultural traits of the donor culture. Some foreign traits are accepted and/or adapted; others are rejected.³¹

I would suggest that a similar scenario should be imagined for various Jewish and Christian groups (or individuals) within the *polis*: while particular groups (or individual members or leaders) might firmly reject certain aspects of the values, conventions and institutions of surrounding culture and society, they might also maintain, accept or adapt others, without necessarily undermining their own identity as a group or community. This is something we shall see presently in regard to Jewish groups in Asia and, more specifically, with respect to imperial aspects of civic life.

The Revised View of Jewish Groups in the Diaspora

Until recently, it was common for scholars to depict Jewish groups of the diaspora as isolated communities living in a hostile environment; their exclusivity ensured their identity over against 'syncretism', serving as a 'barrier against the influence of the alien environment', as

29. See van Unnik, 'The Critique of Paganism in 1 Peter 1:18', in E.E. Ellis and M. Wilcox (eds.), *Neotestamentica et Semitica: Studies in Honour of Matthew Black* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1969), pp. 129-42. Cf. L. Goppelt, *A Commentary on 1 Peter* (ed. F. Hahn; trans. J.E. Alsup; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993 [1978]), pp. 161, 154-61; B.W. Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), esp. pp. 11-40.

30. D.L. Balch, *Let Wives Be Submissive: The Domestic Code in 1 Peter* (SBLMS, 26; Chico: Scholars Press, 1981), and 'Hellenization/Acculturation in 1 Peter', in *Perspectives on First Peter*, pp. 79-101.

31. Balch, 'Hellenization', p. 86; cf. J.W. Berry, 'Acculturation as Varieties of Adaptation', in A.M. Padilla (ed.), *Acculturation: Theory, Models and Some Findings* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1980), pp. 9-25.

Victor Tcherikover puts it.³² The depiction of Jewish groups as sectarian in this sense has continued to influence depictions of Christian groups in the same setting, including those of Meeks and Elliott. However, recent studies are beginning to challenge this view; instead, the emergent picture shows a diversity of Jewish groups, many of which could be at home as participants in the *polis* despite their distinctive self-understandings and identities.³³ Paul R. Trebilco's study of Jews in Asia Minor, for example, finds that 'the Hellenistic *polis* accommodated considerable diversity of population without demanding uniformity' and that 'a degree of integration did not mean the abandonment of an active attention to Jewish tradition or of Jewish distinctiveness'.³⁴ This revised understanding of the relation between many Jewish groups and the *polis* (along with evidence concerning other associations) provides an analogy for how we should view the spectrum of possibilities for group–society relations among Christian groups.

Participation in civic life is attested in several ways, some of which seriously undermine scholars' contentions that Jewish groups were fundamentally sectarian or utterly exclusive in terms of membership. There is clear evidence from Roman Asia (especially epigraphical evidence)³⁵ that being a member in a Jewish group did *not* mean the dissolution of all participation in the practices, institutions and constituent groups of the *polis*. First, Jews could be present in the central social-cultural institutions of the *polis*: the theatre at Miletos included reserved seating for the 'Jews and god-fearers' alongside other guilds such as the 'emperor-loving goldsmiths'.³⁶

32. V. Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews* (trans. S. Applebaum; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1966 [1959]), p. 296. Also see P.R. Trebilco, *Jewish Communities in Asia Minor* (SNTSMS, 69; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 186, 263 nn. 1-3.

33. Cf. A.T. Kraabel, 'Judaism in Western Asia Minor under the Roman Empire, with a Preliminary Study of the Jewish Community at Sardis, Lydia' (PhD dissertation, Harvard University, 1968); Trebilco, *Jewish Communities*, pp. 167-85; F. Blanchetière, 'Juifs et non juifs: Essai sur la diaspora en Asie-Mineure', *RHPR* 54 (1974), pp. 367-72.

34. Trebilco, *Jewish Communities*, p. 187

35. For the standard epigraphical abbreviations used here see n. 7.

36. G. Kleiner, *Das römische Milet: Bilder aus der griechischen Stadt in römischer Zeit* (Sitzungsberichte der Wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaft an der Johann

Second, some Jewish groups, like other associations, actively participated within civic networks of benefaction, which could also involve interaction with the principal civic institutions. An inscription from Smyrna in the reign of Hadrian, for example, lists donations to the *polis* by several individuals and groups including an imperial cult high-priest, theologians, hymn-singers, and οἱ ποτὲ Ἰουδαῖοι, most likely to be understood as the ‘former Judaeans’, that is, a group of Jews that had immigrated to Smyrna from Judaea.³⁷ In a decree recorded by Josephus the civic institutions of Sardis provide the Jewish group with a place to meet (*Ant.* 14.259-61; c. 49 BCE); by the third century, the Jewish synagogue in Sardis was contained within the bath-gymnasium, right next door to the imperial cult hall of the complex. Such evidence of positive relations does not, of course, preclude incidents when Jewish groups’ relations with civic inhabitants or institutions or even Roman officials were rocky, some of which Josephus also records.³⁸

Third, despite the limited nature of epigraphical evidence, there are indications that members of Jewish groups could continue to maintain important connections—for social, business or other purposes—with individuals and groups in the *polis*, including affiliations with other guilds or associations. Jews could participate in the activities of the gymnasium, even forming age-group associations or joining those that already existed.³⁹ The evidence we do have for the occupational status of Jews represents an array of occupational activity comparable to the known guilds, and there are clear signs of Jews who did maintain affiliations

Wolfgang Goethe-Universität Frankfurt/Main, 8.5; Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1970), pp. 18-20.

37. *ISmyrna* 697 = *CIJ* 742. This should *not* be translated as ‘the former Jews’, meaning apostates, which was previously a common translation of the phrase. See R.S. Kraemer, ‘On the meaning of the term “Jew” in Greco-Roman Inscriptions’, *HTR* 82 (1989), pp. 35-53; Trebilco, *Jewish Communities*, pp. 174-75.

38. See his record of rocky relations at Parium in the Troad (*Ant.* 14.213-16) and at Miletos (*Ant.* 14.244-46), for example (mid-first century BCE). Cf. C.D. Stanley, ‘“Neither Jew nor Greek”: Ethnic Conflict in Graeco-Roman Society’, *JSNT* 64 (1996), pp. 101-24, though he over-emphasizes anti-Roman sentiment among Gentiles in the cities of Asia Minor.

39. There was an association of Judaeans youths at Hypaipa, Jews among the epebes at Iasos, and Jews (or perhaps Christians) as members of the local elders’ associations at Eumeneia (*CIJ* 755; L. Robert, ‘Un corpus des inscriptions juives’, *Hellenica* 1 [1946], pp. 100-101, and ‘Epitaphes d’Eumeneia de Phrygie’, *Hellenica* 11-12 [1960], pp. 436-39; all second-third century CE).

with guilds.⁴⁰ At Hierapolis, Publius Aelius Glykon made provisions for members of the guilds of purple-dyers and carpet-weavers, which probably included some Jews as members, to take care of his grave on particular Jewish holidays; Julius was the chief-physician at Ephesus, and hence leader of the association of physicians, who had the Jewish group there take care of his family grave.⁴¹ Though moving out of the geographical bounds of the present paper, evidence in Philo shows that Jews at Alexandria were involved in trade as shippers, merchants and artisans, and that some also participated in associations and clubs in the city, as Torrey Seland demonstrates.⁴² We also find similar dual affiliations in the case of Christians, such as the member of a shippers' guild at Ostia and, as I discuss below, apparently some of the opponents of the Apocalypse.⁴³ But before turning to the Apocalypse, I address another important yet neglected aspect of civic life in which some Jewish and Christian groups, like other associations, could be involved.

Associations and Imperial Facets of Civic Life

Recent studies of Roman rule in Asia Minor emphasize the degree to which aspects of imperialism permeated the social-cultural landscape of the cities, and this impacted the lives of social-religious groups in that setting (as I also argue in another article concerning Ephesus).⁴⁴ Honouring the emperors and imperial representatives—which could take a variety of forms—was a normal feature of small-group life in the cities

40. See P.W. van der Horst, *Ancient Jewish Epitaphs* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1991), pp. 99-101.

41. *IHierapJ* 342 = *CIJ* 777 (c. 190–220 CE); *IEph* 1677 = *CIJ* 745. Cf. *CIJ* 793 (Moses, head of the goldsmiths' guild at Korykos in Cilicia). For further discussion see Harland, 'Claiming a Place in *Polis* and Empire', pp. 228-37.

42. For the former see Philo, *Flacc.* 57; on the latter see T. Seland, 'Philo and the Clubs and Associations of Alexandria', in Kloppenborg and Wilson (eds.), *Voluntary Associations*, pp. 110-27.

43. See Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York: HarperSan-Francisco, 1986), p. 295.

44. Cf. S.R.F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); S. Friesen, *Twice Neokoros: Ephesus, Asia and the Cult of the Flavian Imperial Family* (RGRW, 116; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993); P.A. Harland, 'Honours and Worship: Emperors, Imperial Cults and Associations at Ephesus (first to third centuries C.E.)', *Studies in Religion* 25 (1996), pp. 319-34. Harland, 'Claiming a Place in *Polis* and Empire', pp. 121-93.

of Roman Asia, both for associations and, in some important ways, for certain Jewish and Christian groups. The involvements of these groups in imperial dimensions of civic life illustrate some of the ways in which they fit within the framework of the *polis*.

It is useful to distinguish between two interrelated and sometimes inseparable types of imperial-related activities possible among associations: participation within civic networks of benefaction, including honours for emperors or elites with imperial connections, and cultic activities in honour of the emperors or imperial family as gods. Regarding the former, it was common convention to dedicate inscriptions, statues and altars to emperors: associations in the cities of Asia took part in these honours, both as dedicators and as dedicants. Groups of Dionysiac initiates (μύσται) in both Ephesos and Smyrna, for example, honoured the emperor Hadrian with an inscription.⁴⁵ When the association of fishermen, together with their families, made contributions to build the fishery toll-office at Ephesos (c. 54–59 CE), they dedicated it to Nero, his mother, his wife, the Roman people and the Ephesian people (*IEph* 20 = *NewDocs* V 5; cf. *CIG* 3480 [Thyatira]). Associations could be the recipients of benefactions that were dedicated to the emperors and other institutions and gods, as when Kominia Junia dedicated a statue of Isis to Artemis, to the city of Ephesos, to Antoninus Pius, and to the workers in the above mentioned fishery toll-office (*IEph* 1503).⁴⁶

Involvement in honours and civic networks is further illustrated in the positive relations between associations (reflecting various social strata of society) and imperial officials. This evidence throws into question many scholars' emphasis on negative involvements of Roman emperors and governors in regard to associations. Negative intervention was only occasional—limited by the availability of a busy Roman governor—and related to broader civic or political disturbances.⁴⁷

Associations could have connections with important imperial officials of the equestrian or senatorial order including highpriests and -priestess-

45. *IEph* 275 (c. 119 CE); *ISmyrna* 622. Cf. *IEph* 293 (c. 180-192 CE); *CIG* 3485 (Thyatira).

46. Cf. *AnnEpiGr* (1984) 250, no. 855 (imperial era); *IGR* IV 468; *IPergamon* 84; *IEph* 586, 1506.

47. Harland, 'Claiming a Place in *Polis* and Empire', pp. 153-93. For examples of negative involvements in Asia Minor, see *IEph* 215 (cf. Acts 19); Pliny the Younger, *Ep.* 10.33-34, 92-93, 96-97. For Italy, see Suetonius, *Iul.* 42 and *Aug.* 32.1-2; Dio 60.6.6; Tacitus, *Ann.* 14.17.

es of provincial and civic imperial cults: the guild of clothing-cleaners at Akmoneia honoured T. Flavius Montanus, a high-priest of the temple in Ephesos (c. 102–112 CE).⁴⁸ Such connections in networks could even extend to the highest Roman provincial officials, including procurators and proconsuls. On separate occasions the Dionysiac association of ‘dancing cowherds’ and the young men’s association at Pergamon honoured C. Antius Aulus Julius Quadratus, a native Pergamene of consular rank and proconsul of Asia in about 109 CE; he was a relative (likely a second cousin) of Julia Severa, discussed below in connection with a Jewish group.⁴⁹

Another inscription from the mid-first century reads. ‘The merchants who are engaged in business in Ephesos set this up for their saviour and benefactor, the proconsul, Gaius Pompeius Longinus Gallus, son of Publius’.⁵⁰ The term used for the group in this inscription, ἔμποροι (‘merchants’), is that used by the author of the Apocalypse when he speaks of the merchants and shippers who will mourn when ‘Babylon’ (Rome) is destroyed (ch. 18).⁵¹

The second main type of evidence concerns cultic honours for the emperors. Rituals that encompassed the emperors or *Sebastoi* (‘revered ones’) as gods alongside traditional deities were an integrated element within the social-religious life of cities in Asia, and associations reflect

48. *IGR* IV 643; re-edited by W.M. Ramsay, *The Social Basis of Roman Power in Asia Minor* (Amsterdam: Hakkert, 1967), p. 33. Other imperial cult high-priests and -priestesses: *IEph* 425 (late first century CE); *IGR* IV 468 (Pergamon); *ILydiaKP* I 42 (Philadelphia; second century CE); *ISardBR* 46 (c. 96 CE); *ILydiaKP* II 74 (first century CE), *CIG* 3495 and 3504 (Thyatira). Other officials: *IEph* 738 (first century CE; Roman businessmen honour a legate of Caesar); *AnnEpigr* (1977) 227, no. 802 (Miletos; fullers honour a prefect).

49. For the former, see A. Conze and C. Schuchhardt, ‘Die Arbeiten zu Pergamon 1886–1898’, *Mitteilungen des deutschen archäologischen Instituts (Athenische Abteilung)* 24 (1899), p. 179, no. 31 (also revising *IPergamon* 486); for the latter see *IPergamon* 440. The physicians at Ephesos (*IEph* 719; early second century CE) and the guild of purple-dyers at Hierapolis (*IGR* IV 816) each honoured a procurator.

50. *AnnEpigr* (1968) 153 (no. 485); cf. *IEph* 800.

51. Associations of Roman or Italian merchants are attested, for example, at Apamea (*IGR* IV 788–90; *MAMA* VI 177, 183–84), Ephesos (*IEph* 738), Smyrna (*IGR* IV 1484), Pergamon (*IGR* IV 294), Thyatira (*IGR* IV 1209), Philadelphia (*IGR* IV 1644) and both Laodicea (*IGR* IV 864 + 873) and Hierapolis (*IGR* IV 818).

this context.⁵² Various associations and guilds adopted members of the imperial family as patron deities alongside other gods and engaged in celebrations, sacrifices and other rituals including mysteries in honour of the emperors or *Sebastoi*.⁵³ The Demetriasts at Ephesos, for example, had ‘mysteries and sacrifices’ which they performed each year ‘to Demeter...and to the *Sebastoi* gods’ (*IEph* 213; 88–89 CE), and the association of hymn-singers at Pergamon engaged in imperial mysteries and accompanying feasts that lasted for several days (*IPergamon* 374; c. 120–38 CE). Sacrifices were made to the emperors alongside other gods within other associations too, as indicated in the name of the Ephesian association of ‘physicians who sacrifice to the ancestor Asklepios and to the *Sebastoi*’ (*IEph* 719). It was customary for a communal meal to follow such sacrifices in which some of the foods offered to the gods would be consumed, a point to which I return in connection with the opponents of the Apocalypse.

Far from being consistently subversive groups on the margins of society, the evidence shows that many associations in the cities of Asia were positively involved in imperial dimensions of the *polis*. This evidence has been largely ignored by most scholars of the Roman empire and of early Christianity, who (focusing primarily on literary or legal sources to the neglect of inscriptions) often draw a predominantly negative view of associations within civic life.⁵⁴ Paul J. Achtemeier, for example, although correctly looking to associations for understanding the social context of Christianity, oversimplifies his portrait of these groups in stating that they were a ‘constant problem to the governing authorities’; he, like other scholars, says little or nothing of evidence concerning positive dimensions of group–society relations.⁵⁵

Some of the typical imperial-related activities of associations have counterparts within Jewish and Christian groups in these same cities of Asia. As a passage in Josephus’s apology against Apion shows, granting special honours to the emperors was the norm among many dias-

52. Cf. Price, *Rituals*, pp. 101–31; Harland, ‘Claiming a Place in *Polis* and Empire’, pp. 121–52.

53. See H.W. Pleket, ‘An Aspect of the Emperor Cult: Imperial Mysteries’, *HTR* 58 (1965); Harland, ‘Honours and Worship’, pp. 328–33.

54. Cf. G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), pp. 273, 319–20.

55. Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, pp. 25–26; cf. Balch, *Wives*, pp. 65–80; Stanley, ‘Ethnic Conflict’, p. 120.

pora Jewish groups, though this understandably stopped short of cultic honours and the setting up of images or statues (*Apion* 2.68-78). Groups of Jews in Asia, like associations, could proclaim honours for the emperors. In a document recorded by Josephus (*Ant.* 16.162-165; c. 12 BCE), Augustus refers to an earlier 'decree which was offered by [the Jews of Asia] in my honour concerning the piety which I show to all men, and on behalf of Gaius Marcius Censorinus' (16.165). Interestingly, Augustus orders that copies of his own decree and the Jews' honorary decree for himself and Censorinus (who was proconsul of Asia at one point) be set up in a prominent spot in the provincial imperial cult temple of Asia.⁵⁶ Similar honorary practices are attested elsewhere in the empire too: at Rome one synagogue called itself the Augustesians and another the Agrippesians; and, in Egypt the Jewish groups commonly followed the practice of other associations in dedicating their buildings on behalf of rulers or setting up various other types of honours for the emperors, including inscriptions, crowns and shields, but not images, as Philo mentions.⁵⁷

Some groups of Jews in Asia, like other associations, had contacts with local elites or patrons who had imperial connections. Julia Severa, a non-Jewish descendant of Galatian royalty and relative of Julius Quadratus, was not only a benefactor of the local elders' association (γερονσῖα) at Akmonia; she also built the synagogue for the Jews there in the mid-first century. Along with others who later renovated the building, including P. Tyrronius Cladus, Severa was honoured by the Jewish group with a golden shield (*MAMA* VI 264 = *CIJ* 766; cf. *Lk.* 7.1-5). What is noteworthy here is that the families of the Tyrronii and the Severi held important civic and provincial positions: a relative of Cladus (C. Tyrronius Rapon) was a high-priest, and Julia Severa herself was a high-priestess in the civic imperial cult (*MAMA* VI 263, 265; *IGR* IV 656).

56. A fragmentary Hebrew inscription found in the synagogue at Sardis, which reads *BEROS*, may be part of an honorary inscription set up for Lucius Verus when he visited the region about 166 CE (see Trebilco, *Jewish Communities*, pp. 44, 176; *BASOR* 187 [1967]; George M.A. Hanfmann, 'The Ninth Campaign at Sardis [1966]', *BASOR* 187 [1967], pp. 9-62, esp. p. 25).

57. *CIJ* 365, 425, 503 (Agrippesians), 284, 301, 338, 368, 416, 496 (Augustesians). See P. Richardson, 'Augustan-Era Synagogues in Rome', in K.P. Donfried and P. Richardson (eds.), *Judaism and Christianity in First Century Rome* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 17-29. Cf. Philo, *Gaius* 133; *Flacc.* 49-50, 97-103.

There is important and neglected evidence that Christian groups in Asia Minor could, in significant ways, also participate in imperial facets of civic life in a manner comparable to some of the involvements of associations and Jewish groups. In contrast to the perspective of the Apocalypse, many Christian leaders in Asia, including the author of the Pastorals and Polycarp of Smyrna encouraged their followers to adopt the common conventions of praying for or honouring civic or imperial officials and emperors.⁵⁸

1 Peter explicitly encourages Christians to 'honour the emperor' and to engage in activities that may be perceived by rulers and other outsiders as good and worthy of praise (2.11-17). He maintains a distinction, however, between honours, on the one hand, and cultic honours or rituals, on the other, the latter being idolatry in his view (cf. 1.14-19; 4.3-5). This exhortation for Christians to honour the emperor has not been sufficiently explained or contextualized by scholars, who often speak as though 1 Peter is merely referring to inner attitudes rather than actual concrete behaviours.⁵⁹ Yet as Bruce J. Malina and others point out, the ancient Mediterranean personality was a dyadic one embedded within social groupings; what mattered most was what, concretely, others perceived one to be *doing*, not what one thought internally, though certainly one's actions might reflect inner attitudes.⁶⁰

Moreover, the practice of honouring the emperor which 1 Peter advocates appears to have a concrete basis that finds analogies in some of the non-cultic practices of associations and Jewish groups within the *polis*. The fact that the author links his suggestions with lessening tensions with outsiders suggests that it is concrete demonstrations of

58. 1 Tim. 2.1-2; Titus 3.1; Polycarp *Phil.* 12.3; *Mart. Pol.* 10.2; cf. Melito in Eusebius, *H.E.* 4.26.7; Justin Martyr, *First Apol.* 17; Rom. 13; *1 Clem.* 60-61; Tertullian, *Apol.* 30.4; 32.1. Prayers for the imperial household and the emperors were common in the cities of Asia and in associations (cf. *TAM V* 225 [first century CE]; Pliny, *Ep.* 10.13, 100; Apuleius, *Met.* 11.17).

59. See, for example, F.W. Beare, *The First Epistle of Peter: The Greek Text with Introduction and Notes* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), pp. 113-19; Goppelt, *Commentary*, pp. 189-90; J.R. Michaels, *1 Peter* (WBC, 49; Waco, TX: Word Books, 1988), pp. 121-132.

60. Cf. B.J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), esp. pp. 51-93; B.J. Malina and J.H. Neyrey, 'First Century Personality: Dyadic, not Individualistic', in J.H. Neyrey (ed.), *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), pp. 67-96.

honour for the emperors that are encompassed by his exhortation; the possibilities for such honours were well illustrated above, including setting up an inscription, dedicating a structure or building or engaging in the practice of regular prayers for the emperor in the setting of group-worship.⁶¹ This concrete understanding of 1 Peter's exhortation to honour the emperor fits well with what scholars such as van Unnik and Bruce W. Winter observe (in contrast to Elliott) concerning the author's social strategy: the author exhorts Christians to engage in some civic practices, including 'good works' or benefaction (καλὰ ἔργα, ἀγαθοποιέω), which will receive 'praise' (ἔπαινος) from outsiders or authorities while also lessening group-society tensions.⁶²

A New Perspective on Aspects of the Apocalypse

The above evidence provides a new vantage point from which to understand two main aspects of the Apocalypse and the situation it addresses: the first general, concerning the normative practice among many social-religious groups and John's response to it, and the second more specific, regarding the opponents combatted in the letters. The evidence I have discussed puts the Apocalypse's sectarian stance and especially its anti-imperial dimensions in proper perspective as a minority opinion within a spectrum of other viewpoints among early Christian circles in the cities of Asia.⁶³ Using the imagery of whores and beasts, John, like some other Jewish authors of his time, draws on the Hebrew prophetic tradition to criticize the social, economic and religious manifestations of

61. The lack of physical remains is not surprising considering the nature of the survival of any Christian *realia* from antiquity; add to this the fact that Christians were such a proportionately insignificant part of the population in the first century or so (also see G.F. Snyder, *Ante Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life before Constantine* [Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985], pp. 133-40). For example, none of the many plaques, shields and inscriptions in honour of the emperors set up by Jews in Alexandria, which Philo mentions were very common, have survived. On prayers see n. 58.

62. Van Unnik, 'Good Works', pp. 91-92; Winter, *Welfare*, pp. 11-40. Unfortunately, few have picked up on van Unnik's suggestions (but cf. Goppelt, *Commentary*, pp. 182-90). Beare simply asserts that 'few Christians can have entertained any great hope of winning such public distinction... it seems likely that the words are a stock phrase taken over from some current formula of instruction in civic duty' (*First Epistle of Peter*, p. 117). Michaels (*1 Peter*, p. 126) takes 'good works' as a (vague) reference to 'doing the will of God'.

63. Cf. Thompson, *Apocalypse and Empire*, pp. 120, 132, 186-97.

the Roman imperial presence in the cities.⁶⁴ For him, honouring Roman emperors or representatives in any form is utterly opposed to honouring and worshipping God and the Lamb: the former is idolatry or 'fornication'.⁶⁵ It is important to note that the distinction mentioned earlier between (non-cultic) honours for the emperors within civic networks on the one hand and imperial cults or rituals on the other—a distinction apparent in the perspectives and practices of some other Jewish and Christian groups or leaders—is *not* recognized by John. Any type of honours for or affiliations with the emperors or other manifestations of imperialism in the cities (including commercial activity linked with Rome, for instance) is completely unacceptable, since these activities are by nature associated with the beast-emperor and Satan himself.⁶⁶ Yet this strongly hostile perspective with its practical implications is only one side of a conversation.

To clarify this point it is important to ask who were the recipients of the Apocalypse and at whom was this anti-imperial 'propaganda' aimed? Christian groups in the cities of Asia drew their membership from both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds, some of the Gentiles also being previously associated with Jewish synagogues. Many Gentiles and Jews would have been or still were associating with other sub-groups, guilds or synagogues within the civic context, where honouring the emperors or other officials in some form was often a normal and acceptable part of group life. Likewise, within other Christian circles honouring the emperors in a non-cultic sense was not only acceptable, it was advocated, as we saw with 1 Peter and the Pastorals. Limited participation in this aspect of group practice was one way in which such Christian and Jewish groups could find a place within the *polis*, thereby lessening tensions between group and society. The author of the Apocalypse criticizes any involvements in such facets of civic life to counter, in part, the normative practice within many associations and Jewish and Chris-

64. E.g. *Sib. Or.* 3.350-80 (first century BCE); 4.145-48 (first century CE); 8.68-72 (second century CE). See also R. Bauckham, 'The Economic Critique of Rome in Revelation 18', in L. Alexander (ed.), *Images of Empire* (JSOTSup, 122; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), pp. 47-90. Cf. Isa. 13, 34; Jer. 51; Ezek. 26-27.

65. Cf. 4.11; 5.12-13; 7.11-12; 13.4-8; 14.7; 14.9-11; 20.4-6; 22.8-9.

66. Cf. H.-J. Klauck, 'Das Sendschreiben nach Pergamon und der Kaiserkult in der Johannesoffenbarung', *Biblica* 73 (1992), pp. 153-82, esp. pp. 176-82; J.N. Kraybill, *Imperial Cult and Commerce in John's Apocalypse* (JSNTSup, 132; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), pp. 16, 27, 100-101.

tian groups. He attempts to convince 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.

A second, more specific way in which the evidence discussed above sheds light on the Apocalypse concerns the opponents. Once again drawing on the Hebrew Bible for his language and imagery, John accuses the Nicolaitans and the followers of 'Jezebel' and 'Balaam' of eating idol food and of committing 'fornication' (a metaphorical reference to idolatry or involvement in specific practices of society).⁶⁷ These opponents are noteworthy at Ephesos, but their influence on the churches is most threatening, in John's view, at Pergamon and Thyatira. 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 throughout the rest of the book, often with parallels in imagery and language to the sections concerned with the opponents.⁶⁸ But what, concretely, were these opponents doing and in what contexts were they engaging in what John views as idolatry?

The largely neglected epigraphical evidence concerning guilds and associations in the seven cities provides some concrete answers to this in two interrelated ways. First, as I have already suggested, the analogy of associations suggests a range of *typical* activities and practices, including honours for and dedications to the emperors, in which small groups in the civic setting did engage, including Jewish and Christian groups. Honouring the emperors in a variety of ways was the norm that John clearly opposes; but 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 (among other things), was more pronounced or explicit.

Second, the opponents' compromise with society (according to John's accusations) concerns eating idol food. As Paul's letter to the Corinthi-

67. Cf. Thompson, *Apocalypse and Empire*, pp. 121-124; Klauck, 'Sendschreiben', p. 165; Borgen, 'Participation', pp. 37-38. On Balaam, see Num. 22-25 (cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 4.126-51) and on Jezebel, see 1 Kgs 18.4, 13; 19.1-2.

68. Cf. A. Yarbro Collins, 'Insiders and Outsiders in the Book of Revelation and its Social Context', in J. Neusner, E.S. Frerichs and C. McCracken-Flesher (eds.), *To See Ourselves as Others See Us': Christians, Jews, and 'Others' in Late Antiquity* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), pp. 213-15; Schüssler-Fiorenza, *Justice*, pp. 195-97; Hemer, *Letters*, pp. 83-94; Klauck, 'Sendschreiben'; Kraybill, *Imperial Cult*, p. 16 and throughout.

an Christians suggests, a person might encounter idol food or sacrificial meat in a number of settings: market-places, temple dining-halls, private dinners and, most importantly here, group settings such as associations or guilds. Since occupational and other associations were a very prominent and widespread aspect of life in the cities of Asia,⁶⁹ and since being a member was less than 'voluntary' in the sense that, if one was a dyer or merchant, one naturally associated with one's fellow-workers in the guild of dyers or merchants, it is quite possible that the opponents were continuing in their occupational affiliations and sustaining memberships in other local guilds. There these Christians could encounter sacrificial food which had been offered to the gods (including emperors), as well as other common group practices such as honours for emperors and imperial officials. Several scholars, following the lead of W.M. Ramsay, make a similar suggestion, especially concerning Thyatira; yet these scholars do not fully address the extensive epigraphical evidence outlined earlier.⁷⁰ There is a sense in which we should be surprised if a person were to sever all such contacts with fellow-workers once affiliated with another group such as the Christians or the local synagogue; for removing oneself would sever the network connections necessary for business activity, thereby threatening one's means of livelihood. Paul himself, who seems to have considered his occupation as a craftsman an important component in his identity, found the workshop or guild-hall a key setting for his missionary activity, and we have already encountered affiliations with guilds among Jews and Christians in Asia and elsewhere.⁷¹

The suggestion that John is objecting, in part, to Christians participating in guilds corresponds well with other economic dimensions of the book: his criticism of the Laodicean Christians who are wealthy, probably also due to involvement in commercial activities (3.15-18); his fu-

69. For the guilds of Thyatira see *TAM* V 862, 914, 924, 932, 933, 935, 936, 945, 965, 966, 972, 978, 986, 989, 1002, 1019, 1029.

70. See W.M. Ramsay, 'Historical Commentary on the Epistles to the Corinthians', *Expositor* 6.3 (1901), pp. 93-110, esp. pp. 103-105; and, *The Letters to the Seven Churches* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2nd edn, 1994 [1904]), pp. 253-58. Cf. Beckwith, *Apocalypse*, pp. 464-65; Charles, *Revelation*, pp. 69-70; Collins, *Crisis*, p. 88; Schüssler-Fiorenza, *Justice*, p. 117; Hemer, *Letters*, pp. 117, 120-23; Kraybill, *Imperial Cult*, throughout.

71. See 1 Thess. 2.9-12; 4.9-12; 1 Cor. 4.12; Acts 18.3. Cf. R.F. Hock, *The Social Context of Paul's Ministry: Tentmaking and Apostleship* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980); Malherbe, *Social Aspects*, pp. 89-90.

turistic portrayal of a society where only those who have the mark of the beast (i.e. those who associate with Rome or 'worship' the emperor) will be able to 'buy and sell' (13.16-18); and, of course, his depiction of the mourning merchants, shippers and craftsmen (ch. 18), which likely included Christians and Jews in their number, as both Richard Bauckham and J. Nelson Kraybill suggest.⁷²

The Christian opponents of John who participated in such practices, however, were not likely to view their own behaviours as unsuitable compromise or idolatry, as did John, but rather as a necessary part of living and working within the *polis*. 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 Corinthian Christians who knew that 'an idol has no real existence'.⁷³ Perhaps, however, the average Nicolaitan Christian would not have understood the question, since participation in such social and economic contexts continued to be a normal part of their lives. But John, whose apocalyptic outlook steeped in the Jewish prophetic tradition led him to perceive things differently, tried to convince them otherwise. Between the 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 life in the *polis*.

Conclusion

As the present study shows, an oversimplified categorization of Jewish or Christian groups as sects in the modern sociological sense does less to explain and illuminate some dimensions of group–society relations than does a comparison with other models or social groupings from the ancient context, chief among them associations and guilds. In the case of honouring the emperors and other imperial facets of civic life we saw that some of the typical activities among associations found their counterpart in many Jewish and Christian groups; these groups nonetheless maintained their distinctive identities. The Apocalypse's sectarian condemnation of honouring the emperor (the 'beast') or affiliating with things imperial—both very real and concrete aspects of life

72. Bauckham, 'Economic Critique', p. 84; Kraybill, *Imperial Cult*, pp. 100-101.

73. Cf. Schüssler-Fiorenza, *Justice*, pp. 117-20; H. Räisänen, 'The Nicolaitans: Apoc. 2; Acta 6', *ANRW*, II.26.2, pp. 1633-37.

in any *polis* within Asia—contrasts to the practices and perspectives of others who considered honouring the emperor within the group normal and at least some of whom continued to maintain previous affiliations outside the group within local guilds.

Overall, I hope that this article demonstrates the value in studying on their own terms the *realia* or artifactual remains concerning specific civic contexts in which Jewish and Christian groups lived and developed. In so doing, we might provide new perspectives on the social and religious history of various groups and communities in specific localities of the Graeco-Roman world.

ABSTRACT

It is customary for scholars to depict Christian and Jewish groups as 'sects' in a sociological sense, stressing conflict with and separation from society. But this approach often obscures other evidence concerning a variety of possibilities in the involvements of some of these groups in certain facets of civic life, involvements that are comparable to those of other 'pagan' associations in the same context. In this paper, a comparison of associations (Jewish, Christian and other) with respect to particular dimensions of society in Roman Asia—especially imperial aspects of the *polis*—illustrates the complexities of group–society relations. Viewing the Apocalypse in light of such evidence helps to locate John's sectarian perspective within the range of 'pagan', Jewish and Christian viewpoints and practices in Asia, shedding further light on the opponents addressed in the opening letters.