The Roman Imperial Cult and Revelation

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ABSTRACT

The question of the relationship of the Roman Imperial Cult and Revelation has occupied the attention of scholars throughout the past one hundred years. During this time, major shifts have taken place both in the assessment of the Roman Imperial Cult in the context of the Roman Empire and in the interpretation of its role with respect to the book of Revelation. This article surveys and assesses these trends. It begins with a discussion of studies on the Roman Imperial Cult from the standpoint of classical studies. Next, texts within Revelation typically cited as indicating a response to emperor worship are introduced. The third and final section focuses upon studies on Revelation, with particular focus given to interpretive approaches, Christology, and the question of persecution under Domitian.

Keywords: imperial cult, persecution, Revelation, Roman Empire

Introduction

Within recent years, interest in the relationship between the Roman Imperial Cult and certain New Testament documents has produced a number of articles and monographs. While much of the current interest has focused upon the Pauline epistles and the Gospels, the book of Revelation has long been seen as a key text indicating the relationship of early Christianity to

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this institution of the ancient Greco-Roman world. Although certain strands of interpretation have emphasized purely future or spiritual/symbolic readings of Revelation, most modern critical studies have sought to link the book of Revelation to the larger context of the first century. Albeit with some major exceptions, many commentators have attempted to connect the book with the Roman Empire and the Roman Imperial Cult.

This present article is intended to serve as an introduction for researchers to these various studies on Revelation and the Roman Imperial Cult. The first section of this study will introduce major works in the field of classics that deal with Roman emperor worship. Next a brief introduction will be given to the evidence within Revelation seen as indicating the influence of Roman emperor worship. The third section will consider the major studies on Revelation and Imperial Cult.

Before moving to discuss classical studies on Roman emperor worship, a few words must be offered in way of definition. 'Roman Imperial Cult' and 'emperor worship' are used to refer to the honors offered to the Roman emperor, such as the construction of temples and altars, the offering of various kinds of sacrifice, the establishment of priesthoods, the attribution of certain qualities, and the use of various titles, that may be seen as having religious overtones. As will be noted, the exact nature and meaning of these honors have been greatly contested in the past hundred years. Next, the terms 'provincial' and 'municipal' will be used to distinguish between the honors given in the wider provincial context that were negotiated with Rome and the honors granted by individual cities largely apart from Roman authority. Finally, attention will be directed primarily to the context of Asia Minor. Studies focusing upon other regions will be noted, but priority will be given to the context addressed in the book of Revelation. Comparison with other regions within the empire will indicate features and nuances unique to each context.

1. Classical Studies on the Roman Imperial Cult

As may be expected, the secondary literature in the classics discipline related to Roman emperor worship is rich and immense. The following discussion is not intended be exhaustive; rather, it will seek to introduce a number of significant sources in the discussion so as to aid those considering the relationship between the Roman Imperial Cult and the book of Revelation. By way of organization this section will consist of three portions: First, major interpretative approaches to the Roman Imperial Cult will be examined. Next, studies focused upon particular regions will be

considered, with preference given to the context of Asia Minor. Finally, specialized studies related to particular aspects of the Roman Imperial Cult will be introduced.

a. Evaluation of the Roman Imperial Cult

Within the field of classics, the various works related to the evaluation of the Roman Imperial Cult prove to be the most significant in assessing the nature of the situation faced by John's readers. In many ways, one may observe two divergent approaches to the nature of the Roman Imperial Cult. First, one approach makes a strong distinction between politics and religion, with the Roman Imperial Cult falling into the former category. Religious elements, according to this approach, are merely the garb in which this institution is dressed. Second, another more recent group of scholars would challenge such a distinction and would situate emperor worship within the wider religious context. In many ways, the publication of Price's *Rituals and Power* (1984b) may be seen as the dividing point in the history of research. As such, sources prior to 1984 will be considered first before evaluating Price and the sources published in the last twenty-five years.

i. Politics and religion During the first part of the twentieth century and up until the early 1980s, the question of whether the emperor cult should rightly be considered 'politics' or 'religion' dominated the conversation. In this approach, scholars drew upon statements from certain ancient sources, such as Tacitus's characterization of it as 'flattery' (Ann. 6.18), as well as from theories about the function which it served in providing benefits for both Rome and the provinces. In addition, certain differences were noted between emperor worship and the cults for the traditional gods, such as an emphasis upon sacrifices for the emperor, the lack of votive offerings, and the subservient place occupied by the emperor when honored within the temple of another god.

Amongst these works on the Roman Imperial Cult, Kornemann's 'Zur Geschichte der antiken Herrscherkulte' (1901) and Sweet's *Roman Emperor Worship* (1919) provide good starting points. Kornemann surveys the precedents from the time of Alexander and the Diadochi (1901: 52-95) before moving to consider developments in the Roman Empire (1901: 95-142). Sweet's work assesses emperor worship with an eye toward Christian responses to emperor worship and thus serves as an important early twentieth-century work on the relationship between the two. His assessment of the Imperial Cult as the 'final and supremely characteristic product' of paganism (1919: 129) gives some indication of the contrast which he drew

with Christian thought. The 1930s and 40s produced a number of significant works on emperor worship. Among these, the works of L. Taylor (1931), Charlesworth (1935), and Nock (1928; 1930; 1947) are worth consulting. L. Taylor focuses primarily on the beginnings of the empire in her work and includes relevant discussion regarding the nature of emperor worship as it first took shape. Charlesworth attempts to situate emperor worship in the context of benefactor cults (1935: 8-13). The ruler cult, then, was primarily a political institution that served to increase loyalty between the provinces and Rome (1935: 27-28). Finally, Nock stands as a significant voice. He, in particular, has emphasized the Roman Imperial Cult as a political organization in the guise of a religion. In addition to the aforementioned articles, his views have been collected in the two-volume *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World* (1972). Following, at least initially, in Nock's stead has been Adcock (1959: 86-102) and Bowersock. Prior to the publication of Price's *Rituals and Power* (1984b), Bowersock's various writings, such as 'Greek Intellectuals and the Imperial Cult in the Second Century A.D.' (1973) and 'The Imperial Cult: Perceptions and Persistence' (1982), have highlighted the political dimensions of the Imperial Cult and reactions (or lack thereof) to emperor worship. Cerfaux and Tondriau's *Un concurrent du christianisme* surveys the development of the Imperial Cult and provides a discussion of the comparison of emperor worship with Judaism and Christianity (1957: 441-56). Several treatments of religion in the Roman Empire, such as Ferguson (1970: 88-93), Liebeschuetz (1979: 984-99), and Veyne (1976: 501-513) contain sections worth consulting.

ii. Trends of the past twenty-five years Within the past twenty-five years, a shift has taken place regarding the evaluation of the Roman Imperial Cult. The chief proponent in this regard has been Price (1984b). Brief consideration will be given to Price's work before moving to more recent studies building upon his approach.

One of the chief contributions of Price's work is the assessment of the underlying presuppositions of earlier studies on the Roman Imperial Cult. In his estimation, previous studies of the Roman Imperial Cult proceed from certain presuppositions, namely those of a Judaeo-Christian framework (1984b: 11-15). These 'Christianizing assumptions' betray a 'deep-rooted ethnocentric desire to play off Greek and Roman cults against Christianity so as to define its standing' (1984b: 14). The Roman Imperial Cult, in this way, is assessed within categories derived from Christianity. In response to these tendencies, Price attempts to approach the question by building upon the work of Geertz, an American anthropologist (1966). Geertz's work,

in this regard, deals with ritual as a cognitive system. Price attempts to apply this model to the Roman Imperial Cult by focusing upon the rituals and symbols of the cult as a way of defining the position of the emperor (1984b: 8). Rather than impose categories from Christianity or assume the viewpoint of the Romans toward the Greeks, Price attempts to interpret the position of emperor based upon the structure of the rituals themselves. Price's work, in this regard, has set the stage for much of the research up until the present day. In addition to his *Rituals and Power*, Price has also published helpful articles on the meaning of sacrifice in the Imperial Cult (1980) and the significance of the application of divine terms, such as theos (god), to the emperor (1984a). As a whole, his arguments are largely accessible in his 'The Place of Religion' (1996) and *Religions of Rome* (Beard, North, and Price 1998). With regard to Revelation, Price suggests that Revelation should be seen as responding to increased pressure as a result of the establishment of the provincial cult of Domitian at Ephesus (1984b: 197-98).

Although the reception of Price's approach has not been universal, his work has influenced a number of subsequent works and still serves as a key text in the field. Bowersock, for example, has revised his aforementioned views in light of Price's arguments (1985: 36). Writing in the wake of Price's work, Friesen's *Twice Neokoros* (1993) has served to advance the state of the discussion as well. Friesen focuses upon the particular case of Ephesus under the Flavians, but his work advocates a greater perception of the religious nature of the Imperial Cult. In his view, by the end of the first century the Imperial Cult was no longer an attempt to accommodate Roman power; rather, the Imperial Cult was fully integrated into the larger religious landscape. Among other sources, *Imperial Cult in the Latin West* (1987) by Fishwick contains a nuanced discussion of the nature of emperor worship. Although not accepting entirely the approach of Price, Fishwick is more appreciative of the integration of emperor worship within the religious structures than many of the previous studies of the early twentieth century.

In addition to these major works, several other surveys and studies prove useful in assessing the nature of the Roman Imperial Cult. In addition to its essays on various locales in the Roman Empire, Small's *Subject and Ruler* is worth consulting on larger interpretative issues. The essays by Turcan (1996: 51-62) and G. Alföldy (1996: 254-61) are particularly helpful in this regard. Alongside of Turcan's essay, Millar's 'State and Subject: The Impact of Monarchy' (1984) helps to provide discussion of the role of the Imperial Cult in the local context. Finally, the essays by Ferguson (1987) and Fears (1988) give helpful summaries of relevant developments in emperor worship.

b. Regions

As one moves to consider the various geographic regions throughout the Roman Empire, it becomes apparent that the Imperial Cult did not develop in the same manner or at the same rate in the various provinces of the Roman Empire. In some places, such as Asia Minor, the Imperial Cult developed earlier and was integrated within the religious landscape more easily. In other regions, such as the Latin West, the impetus for its development appears to have stemmed more from Rome and from the reputation of the East rather than primarily local interest. In this section, priority of attention will be directed first to the context of Asia Minor before considering briefly other geographic regions. Before proceeding, Deininger's *Die Provinziallandtage der römischen Kaiserzeit* (1965) should be mentioned as helpful introduction to the larger provincial context. Small's volume *Subject and Ruler* (1996) also provides a selection of studies from various cities and provinces that engage questions related to emperor worship.

i. Greek East As one considers the prevalence of emperor worship within the wider Roman Empire, it becomes clear quite quickly that the Imperial Cult was particularly significant in the context of the Greek East. In some cases, as recorded by Tacitus (Ann. 6.18), worship of the emperor was connected with the approach of the Greeks. With regard to the book of Revelation, the Greek East is particularly significant as the original recipients of the book were ostensibly inhabitants of seven cities in Asia Minor.

In assessing the role of emperor worship in the Asia Minor, certain sources prove to be particularly important. Although the chief contribution of Price's *Rituals and Power* (1984b) lies in its approach to assessing the nature of the Imperial Cult, it nevertheless provides a wealth of material examining the local context in Asia Minor. Magie's *Roman Rule in Asia Minor* provides detailed discussion of developments in Asia Minor (see 1950: 566-92 on the time of the Flavians, in particular). For the city of Ephesus, Friesen's *Twice Neokoros* offers an in-depth look at the development of the emperor cult under the Flavians. His work also includes a lengthy discussion of the priestly roles in Ephesus (see 1993: 76-113) as well as the development of the use of 'neokorate' language with respect to the Imperial Cult (1993: 50-59), a development that would later become a chief term in the competition between various cities in Asia Minor (see also 1995a). Harland's work has likewise focused upon Ephesus but with a concern for the role that associations played with respect to the Imperial Cult (see 1996; 2003). For the cities of Sardis and Smyrna, Ascough gives a brief discussion of emperor worship within the larger religious landscape (2005: 40-52). Although not focusing on the Imperial Cult in particular,

Mitchell's *Anatolia* contains a section that focuses upon the integration of emperor worship into the civic context (see 1993: 103-113).

ii. Other regions Although the focus of this article is upon the context of Asia Minor, certain other works prove to be helpful in assessing the overall portrait of emperor worship in the Roman Empire more broadly. For the context of Roman Judaea, J. Taylor's article on 'Pontius Pilate and the Imperial Cult in Roman Judaea' (2006) should be consulted. Likewise, Huzar provides a helpful discussion on Egypt (1995). For the Latin West, the works of Fishwick should be consulted. In particular, his *Imperial Cult in the Latin West* (1987) provides not only interaction with the development on the Imperial Cult in the Latin West but also a thoughtful discussion of the origins and developments leading to the provincial cult in the western context (see I.1.3-93 in particular; see also Fishwick 1978). Although Fishwick tends to maintain the distinctions between politics and religion that limited earlier studies of emperor worship, his insight and discussion regarding the western context prove helpful in assessing the eastern context and illustrating differences between the two. Finally, Gradel's *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion* (2002) focuses upon the relationship between emperor worship and traditional Roman religion in the context of Rome and the surrounding area. While most studies have maintained a focus upon the official state cult in Rome, Gradel attempts to assess practices among the general populace. In doing so, Gradel helps to illustrate the function of emperor worship in Rome and highlight areas of continuity and discontinuity with the Greek East.

c. Aspects

In addition to studies focusing upon particular regions or the assessment of the nature of emperor worship as a whole, a number of studies have been published that address certain facets of the Imperial Cult.

First, a number of works assess particular emperors or imperial families and their impact upon the Roman Imperial Cult. For the practices of Julius Caesar, Weinstock's *Divus Julius* provides a helpful entry into the discussion (1971). Although the discussion has progressed significantly since its publication, the work of L. Taylor (1931) remains one of the best sources for the time of Julius Caesar and Augustus. For the time of Augustus, the works of Bowersock (1965) and Hammond (1933) should be consulted for their consideration of his reign and developments in emperor worship. Although heavy emphasis is placed upon the political elements, both provide some analysis of important changes during Augustus' reign. As the first provincial temple for the Imperial Cult was established in

Pergamum during the time of Augustus, particular features of his reign as they pertain to Asia Minor are discussed more fully in sources addressing the context of Asia Minor. Charlesworth also provides an evaluation of the particular language used by Augustus in navigating the honors granted him by the Greeks (1939). For Tiberius's reign, L. Taylor's 'Tiberius' Refusals of Divine Honors' (1929) and Rostovtzeff's 'L'empereur Tibère et le culte imperial' (1930) provide discussions of precedents established following the death of Augustus.

For those who posit a strong relationship between Roman emperor worship and the situation addressed by the book of Revelation, the time of the Flavians is particularly important. Although the particular issue of the nature of Domitian's approach to Christians (and persecution) will be considered separately in turn, a few sources may be noted at this point. For research into the Imperial Cult and the Flavians, Scott's *Imperial Cult under the Flavians* should be consulted (1936). More recently, Griffin's 'The Flavians' (2000a) provides a helpful summary. Although focusing more on the context of Asia Minor, Friesen's *Twice Neokoros* (1993) provides an engaging discussion of developments in Asia Minor under the Flavians, such as the founding of a provincial cult center and the development of the neocorate language.

Next, several scholars have focused upon the use of Imperial Cult language in various ancient authors. For the time of Domitian, the writings of Martial and Statius provide some indication of the type of language applied to the emperor. For these two authors, see Scott (1933), Sauter (1934), and the more recent work of Newlands (2002). Scott has also examined the writings of Ovid and Plutarch (on Ovid, see Scott 1930; on Plutarch, see Scott 1929). For the writings of Seneca, see Altman (1938) and Fishwick (1991). Scott (1932) and Bowersock (1973) have examined reactions to the Imperial Cult on the part of intellectuals and philosophers. For the apologists and the Imperial Cult, see Beaujeu (1973).

The deification of the Roman emperor is likewise an important consideration as it provided the means by which, in the Latin context, the emperor was formally considered to be part of the state cult. Bickerman (1929) and Cumont (1922: 112-13) both provide discussion of the development of the concept of the apotheosis of the Roman emperor in the Latin context, with a particular view toward Hellenistic influences. Kreitzer (1990) has also provided a discussion of this in relationship to early Christianity.

Although descriptions of the particular rituals and practices of various imperial cults are not prevalent amongst ancient sources, several secondary sources have provided assessments related to certain descriptions that

help to clarify the nature of the cult. Nilsson's 'Pagan Divine Service in Late Antiquity' (1945) provides a brief description of the sacrifices and hymnsingers associated with the Imperial Cult. Pleket's 'An Aspect of the Emperor Cult: Imperial Mysteries' gives evidence for the incorporation of mysteries into the Imperial Cult. The evidence cited indicates that certain acts were modeled after the traditional mysteries (1965: 345-46) and may indicate that the religious elements in the Imperial Cult should not be quickly disregarded.

On a final note before moving to discuss textual evidence in the book of Revelation, the cult dedicated to the goddess Roma should be considered as well. Though it does not appear to have enjoyed the level of significance in Asia Minor during the first century as the Imperial Cult, it is nevertheless part of the history and developments related to emperor worship. Additionally, some suggest that the cult of Roma may have lingered in the mind of John as he wrote of the woman on the scarlet beast in Rev. 17. For an investigation into the cult of Roma, Mellor's *Thea Rōmē (Goddess Roma): The Worship of the Goddess Roma in the Greek World* (1975) should be consulted.

2. Textual Evidence in the Book of Revelation Pertaining to Emperor Worship

Before moving to consider studies on the relationship of the Roman Imperial Cult to Revelation, a brief survey of the textual evidence from Revelation will be offered. Although not all commentators have agreed on their assessment of the texts, these key passages have provided the basis of the discussion. Consideration in this section will be given primarily to the texts found in Revelation, and some general conclusions drawn by secondary sources will be presented.

a. Revelation 1–3

Generally speaking, the presence of emperor worship can be observed throughout the Roman Empire during the first two centuries AD. By the end of the first century in Asia Minor in particular, provincial Imperial Cult temples may be found in at least three of the cities ostensibly addressed in the first three chapters of Revelation: Pergamum, Smyrna, and Ephesus. Regardless of one's dating of the book of Revelation, two of these were established in the cities of Pergamum and Smyrna prior to the earliest typical dating of the book of Revelation (during the time of Nero). If one accepts a later dating for the book (during the time of Domitian, Trajan, or Hadrian),

the presence of additional provincial cult centers may be observed. Beyond these provincial cult forms, evidence of local forms of emperor worship, such as altars and priesthoods, within the seven cities may be found.

In addition to this general context, the reference to the 'throne of Satan' has often been seen as a reference to the provincial Imperial Cult in Pergamum (Rev. 2.13; this has also been connected to the great altar of Zeus and the general pagan environment in the city).

Finally, the various opponents mentioned in Rev. 2–3 have often been interpreted as advocating accommodating approaches to emperor worship or as aiding in the persecution of Christians in relation to the Imperial Cult. Such connections, though possible, are based upon reconstructions in light of other potential references to emperor worship rather than explicit statements in the text itself.

b. Revelation 13

One of the chief passages cited as evidence is Rev. 13. Within this chapter the two beasts from the land and the sea are introduced. These two figures are featured prominently in the ongoing narrative of the opposition directed toward those who follow Jesus (see Rev. 13.1-18; 14.9-11; 15.2; 16.2, 12-14; 17.3, 7-14, 16-17; 19.19-20; 20.4, 10). The first beast from the sea is depicted as a ruler with both charismatic appeal and political authority (Rev. 13.3-4, 7, 16-17; 16.14; 17.8, 12-14; 19.19-20). Although 'wounded', the recovery of the beast provides the occasion for the astonishment of the people, and the power of this beast causes the people to wonder.

In addition, this beast has power over the military and the economy. This beast is violently opposed to the Lamb and his followers (Rev. 13.7; 16.5-6; 17.14; 19.19-20; 20.4). One feature of this opposition that forms a line of demarcation between followers of the Lamb and followers of the beast of the sea is the offering of worship (Rev. 13.3-4, 8, 12-15; 14.9-11; 16.2; 19.20; 20.4). In the narrative of Revelation, followers of the Lamb are identified by their unwillingness to participate in the worship of the beast from the sea (Rev. 14.9-11; 20.4).

This figure of the beast from the sea is generally regarded as reflecting the influence of the traditions from Daniel and other writings related to the antichrist as well as traditions pertaining to Leviathan and Behemoth (see Beale 1999: 680; Peerbolte 1996: 127, 142, 153). Although this beast stands as a literary character in the book of Revelation, a number of scholars have regarded this beast from the sea as representing either the Roman emperor or imperial power. If this figure is intended to represent the Roman emperor, the connection with the worship of the image of the beast suggests an intended reference to the Roman Imperial Cult.

The second beast functions within Revelation as a supporter of the power and rule of the first beast. Within the context of Rev. 13, the beast from the land is said to exercise the authority of the first beast as well as cause all people, with the exception of the followers of the lamb, to worship it. In leading this worship, the beast from the land performs signs and wonders, such as calling down fire from heaven and causing the image of the beast to speak (vv. 13-15). With this primary role related to the worship of the first beast, many have suggested a connection with the local priests of the Imperial Cult. With respect to its authority, the beast from the land causes people to receive the mark of the beast and exclude those who refuse from participating in buying and selling (vv. 16-17).

c. Revelation 17 and 18

Revelation 17 and 18 depict the fall of Babylon. Although not directly related to the Imperial Cult, several key elements have been seen as indicating that a reference to Rome was intended on the part of John. First, the image of 'Babylon the Great' (Rev. 14.8; 16.19; 17.5; 18.2, 10, 21) is often seen as a veiled reference to Rome. Originally denoting the Mesopotamian power responsible for the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, the name 'Babylon' was later connected with the opponents of the people of God. During the first century, 'Babylon' was used with reference ostensibly to Rome (see 1 Peter 5.13, where the variant in 2138 reads Romē; Sib. Or. 5.143, 159; 4 Ezra 3.1-2, 28-31; 15.44, 46, 60; 16.1; 2 Bar. 10.2; 11.1; 67.7). This depiction of 'Babylon' as a woman seated on the beast, dressed in purple and scarlet and with a name written on her forehead, has also been seen as reflecting Roman prostitutes or the goddess Roma.

Secondly, the reference to the 'seven hills' in Rev. 17.9 could be taken as a reference to the 'Seven Hills' of Rome (see Cicero, *Att*. 6.5; Pliny, *Nat.* 3.66-67; Martial 4.64). It should be noted that this particular reference is not conclusive on its own, as the seven hills are interpreted symbolically within the text as representing seven kings.

Thirdly, the trade described in Rev. 18 has been seen as reflecting trade during the first-century Roman Empire. Coupled with statements about the mark of the beast and commerce (13.16-17), some have seen Revelation as depicting the economic implications of the Imperial Cult as connected with the wider trade of Rome (studies in this regard will be considered in the following section).

d. Roman Imperial Cult and Revelation

For those attempting to find first-century referents for images used in the book of Revelation, the Roman Imperial Cult has provided a likely target

for a number of the symbols used by John. Certain other features in Revelation, such as the cultic and throne-room imagery, may likewise be seen as drawing from features of emperor worship and Roman Imperial practice. These features will be considered in the following section. Although not universally accepted, the Roman Imperial Cult has played a major role within interpretations of Revelation in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It is to these studies that attention will now be turned.

3. Studies on the Roman Imperial Cult and the Book of Revelation

Within the past one hundred years, a number of studies have been published that focus upon the relationship between the Roman Imperial Cult and Revelation. Contributions by various scholars to the discussion as well as major trends in interpretation will be surveyed in this portion of this study. The initial portion of this section will focus upon major approaches to the relationship between Revelation and the Roman Imperial Cult. Second, specialized studies focusing on particular features of the presentation in Revelation will be discussed. Within the next section, studies assessing the relationship of the Imperial Cult to the presentation of Christ will be addressed. Finally, the question of persecution and the Roman Imperial Cult will be considered.

a. Major Approaches to Imperial Cult

Within the earlier part of the twentieth century, studies on the Imperial Cult and Revelation drew largely from studies in the classics that assessed the Imperial Cult as a primarily political institution. In addition, theories of persecution during the time of Domitian are also commonly found. Several key studies may be cited in this discussion. Lohmeyer's *Christuskult und Kaiserkult* (1919) provides a good starting point in its consideration of the Roman Imperial Cult and Christianity more broadly. In his estimation, the Roman Imperial Cult was primarily a political measure (1919: 2-5, 17-20). He discusses some possible links to the imagery in Revelation (1919: 33-37). Brun (1927) argues against spiritual approaches that fail to handle the historical context appropriately, an endeavor necessitated by the reference to the seven kings in Rev. 17 (1927: 129-33). He dates the composition of the book during the time of Domitian (1927: 129). Schütz likewise situates the book of Revelation in the time of Domitian and in a context involving persecution (1933: 14-18). Additionally, he provides a discussion of connections between the hymns in Revelation and the language

applied to Domitian (1933: 33-38). Touilleux (1935), beyond focusing upon the Imperial Cult under Domitian, also suggests possible connections to the Cult of Cybele. Among these sources, mention of Stauffer's *Christ and the Caesars* (1955) should also be made. Further consideration of the work in its relationship to the Christology of Revelation will be explored in turn, but it may be noted here in its depiction of a struggle during the time of Domitian related to divine claims made by the emperor. Cuss focuses primarily on the use of divine titles by the emperors and concludes that the difficulties for Christians arose due to their estimation that these titles should be given to God alone (1974: 51). Finally, D. Jones (1980) provides a survey of the development and features of the Imperial Cult throughout the first four centuries CE. In his estimation, emperor worship, in the eyes of early Christians, was the worst abuse in the empire (1980: 1023). Revelation reflects a response to persecution connected with the Roman Imperial Cult (1980: 1033).

Within recent decades, as noted in the earlier section on the classical studies on the Imperial Cult, a major shift has taken place in the assessment of the nature of the Imperial Cult. As a result, in New Testament studies, there is a greater interest in the Imperial Cult's religious elements. Additionally, a greater emphasis has been placed on local pressures rather than on an empire-wide persecution connected with emperor worship. Several authors have been particularly important in the discussion.

First, Thompson has been a significant voice regarding the likelihood of persecution lying behind the book of Revelation. The findings of his earlier 'Domitianus Dominus' (1984) and 'A Sociological Analysis of Tribulation in the Apocalypse of John' (1986) can be found in his *The Book of Revelation* (1990). Thompson has challenged the traditional view of Domitian as a tyrant and has argued for an ideological conflict between two different symbolic universes.

Secondly, A. Yarbro Collins's *Crisis and Catharsis* has argued that, rather than responding to persecution, the book of Revelation overcomes the tension between what is and what should be through the author's literary imagination (1984: 141). This tension is identified and connected with the Imperial Cult (1984: 74), and catharsis is provided for the readers. The conflict in Revelation largely deals with the appropriate response to cultural accommodation in a context where Christians still struggled with issues of group identification. Her assessment of this question may also be found in 'Insiders and Outsiders in the Book of Revelation and its Social Situation' (1985) and 'Vilification and Self-Definition in the Book of Revelation' (1986).

Thirdly, Schüssler Fiorenza has attempted to pave an intermediate route between persecution theories and approaches that deny any sort of crisis. Although she accepts certain aspects of Thompson's evaluation of Domitian, she concludes that his assessment fails to listen to the experiences reflected by the text (1985: 8). In her estimation, Revelation does not reflect actual persecution; rather, the Christian community faced social pressures that the author anticipates may lead to persecution (1993: 54, 126-27). In her analysis of the book, she provides a discussion of some of the ways in which John makes use of imperial imagery in certain aspects of his writing (1993: 59, 85-86, 123).

Finally, Friesen has published several studies focused both on the Imperial Cult (1993) and on the relationship between the Imperial Cult and Revelation (2001; 2003; 2005). Friesen's work has centered upon the city of Ephesus, but he has attempted to advance the discussion beyond the analysis of Price. He has done so by arguing that the Imperial Cult was integrated into the larger religious landscape and therefore illustrates its significance for the individual cities. The latter portion of *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John* (2001: 133-217) deals with the ideological conflict between Revelation and the Roman Imperial Cult.

In addition to these major works, a number of articles and essays have been published within the past twenty years that are important to note. Giesen provides a brief introduction to Roman emperor worship as a political and religious institution (1996: 2503-2522) before moving to a lengthier discussion of the opponents in Rev. 2–3 and the evidence for imperial imagery in Rev. 13 and 17–19. Botha (1988) provides a helpful discussion of both the Imperial Cult and the response in Revelation. His discussion reflects interaction with recent investigations of the religious nature of the Roman Imperial Cult and the local significance of emperor worship (1988: 90-92). De Jonge (2002) discusses the numerous factors that may have led to the writing of Revelation. In his view, persecution may have been a minor factor (2002: 129-31), but the 'vigorous propagation' of the cult, the connection with Roman power, and the public nature of the cult provided the primary factors (2002: 129). Frey (2006) surveys various points of contact between emperor worship and Revelation and emphasizes the cultic elements at the foundation of John's reaction (2006: 253).

b. Specialized Studies on Revelation and Roman Imperial Cult

Several authors have addressed elements related to the social impact of John's response to Roman emperor worship. In several articles, deSilva has examined the way in which John's response to emperor worship served

to define group identity (see 1991; 1992a; 1992b). In his estimation, the Imperial Cult served a central function in society of providing order, and, by opposing the Imperial Cult with Christian values, John was able to define the Christian community's uniqueness (1991: 187, 201). In a similar vein, de Jonge argues that Revelation was intended to confirm the religious identity of the 'insiders' rather than to persuade those on the outside (2004: 285). Finally, Coutsoumpos focuses upon the issue of idolatry and concludes that the rejection of the Imperial Cult amounted to a radical critique of the wider religious culture (1997: 26).

Studies have also focused upon the economic connection between Roman imperial power and the Imperial Cult. Although not focusing upon the Imperial Cult, Bauckham's study on the economic critique in Revelation (1991; reprinted in 1993: 338-83) provides connections between Rev. 18 and the trade associated with Rome. Moving beyond the general economic critique, Kraybill's *Imperial Cult and Commerce in John's Apocalypse* (1996) focuses more directly upon the relationship of emperor worship and economic advantages of participation. In slightly different fashion, Harland (2000; 2003) has addressed the connection between emperor worship and local associations. These studies help to highlight the ways in which Christian abstention from emperor worship would have created difficulties regarding participation in other social organizations. Stevenson's *Power and Place*, although focusing upon temple imagery more broadly, also contains some reflection of the role played by Imperial Cult temples (see 2001: 83-95).

As the Imperial Cult was expressed locally through temples, altars, and priests in the seven cities addressed by Revelation, several studies are of note in their focus upon these local contexts. In this regard, the works of Ramsay (1904) and Hemer (1986) should still be consulted, although with certain cautions in light of more recent studies. Friesen's 'Revelation, Realia, and Religion' (1995b) offers a corrective to certain methodological shortcomings of these two studies. Longenecker's 'Rome, Provincial Cities and the Seven Churches of Revelation 2–3' (2004), though brief, offers some reflection upon the provincial context and the role played by the Imperial Cult in inter-city relations. Cukrowski likewise offers a brief survey of the evidence for emperor worship in the seven cities (2003: 56-61) before offering an assessment of its nature. For the city of Ephesus, the works by Friesen (1993; 1995a) are notable for their detail and depth of interaction. Bigluzzi's 'Ephesus, its Artemision, its Temple to the Flavian Emperors, and Idolatry in Revelation' (1998) attempts to set the Imperial Cult in the wider context of idolatry. For the city of Pergamon, A. Yarbro

Collins's 'Pergamon in Early Christian Literature' (1998) deals with both Imperial Cult and the wider cultic context in Pergamum. For Sardis and Smyrna, *Religious Rivalries and the Struggle for Success in Sardis and Smyrna* (Ascough [ed.] 1995) provides a good introduction to the various religious movements, including emperor worship (see 1995: 40-52).

The imagery of Rev. 12, although not displaying evidence of direct connection with Roman emperor worship, has often been seen as part of a response to wider imperial ideology. Due to the prevalence of the Apollo-Leto-Python form of the combat myth (generally taken to be the form lying behind Rev. 12) and the frequent association of the emperor with Apollo, scholars have often seen Rev. 12 as anti-imperial in its orientation. On the combat myth in Revelation, A. Yarbro Collins's *Combat Myth* (1976) provides a good discussion of the various options related to the background of Rev. 12. Van Henten's 'Dragon Myth and Imperial Ideology in Revelation 12–13' (2006) investigates the connections between imperial ideology and the imagery of chapters twelve and thirteen. Balch's essay (2006) investigates the popularity of the imagery lying behind Rev. 12. Finally, Barnett takes a slightly different approach and examines Rev. 12 as history cast in apocalyptic form (2004: 300) as it illustrates the persecution of Christians connected with the arrival of the imperial temple in Ephesus under Domitian.

Scholars have also seen reflections of certain cultic practices in Rev. 13. Scherrer, in his 'Signs and Wonders in the Imperial Cult: A New Look at a Roman Religious Institution in the Light of Rev 13:13-15' (1984), has argued that the cultic phenomena portrayed in Rev. 13 may reflect actual practice in the Imperial Cult. Evidence of the use of 'wonders' in other cults may be seen in the evidence cited by Poulsen (1945). As noted previously, Pleket's 'An Aspect of the Emperor Cult' (1965) is also helpful in this regard.

Although not directly related to the Roman Imperial Cult, scholars have long suggested a connection with Roman emperors in Revelation's use of the mark of the beast and *Nero redivivus* imagery. While these features may further confirm the use of imperial imagery more broadly, the history of this discussion lies beyond the scope of the present article. For helpful introductions to the discussion, see Beale (1999: 718-28), Bauckham (1993: 384-452), and Aune (1998a: 737-40; 771-73).

In recent years, scholars have also applied certain interpretative approaches in assessing the relationship of Revelation and the Roman Imperial Cult. Several studies, such as those by Ruiz (2003), Moore (2006: 99-122), and Rieger (2007: 28-31) have approached the question from the

perspective of postcolonialism. From a political perspective, Friedrich (2002) examines the political environment of the first century. Finally, deSilva's work has considered the rhetorical tools employed by John in his response to emperor worship (see 2008: 101).

Although he has examined a slightly later period in church history, several works by Brent have helped to indicate trajectories that may have begun even in the latter portion of the first century. In his 'John as Theologos', Brent examines evidence for the use of mysteries in the Imperial Cult and suggests that the later identification of the author of Revelation as a 'theologos' may be due to the similarity of his role to the 'theologos' in other cults (1999b: 87-88; for later developments, see also 1998; 1999a).

c. Emperor Worship and Christology

Another key intersection between Revelation and Roman emperor worship is the Christology of the book. Even a cursory examination of the language and imagery of the book reveals an approach that stands as unique within, though not incompatible with, the other New Testament documents. Although many of the images may be seen as having been derived from Old Testament texts, certain aspects of the presentation of Jesus have often been seen as functioning with respect to Roman emperor worship.

With regard to the relationship of John's presentation of Jesus and the Roman Imperial Cult, a number of scholars have provided studies of varying length that focus on this relationship in two primary ways.

First, some scholars have suggested that the Roman Imperial Cult provided fertile ground for the development of Christological themes. Mastin, although looking more specifically at the occurrence in John 20:28, has suggested that the application of theos to Jesus more likely arose from confrontation with the emperor cult than from reflection upon the LXX (1973: 353, 364). For Schmeller, emperor worship provided both categories of competition and non-competition (1993: 63). Christology could be seen as drawing from the Greco-Roman category of the divine man (1993: 61, 63), but, for Christians, Jesus would occupy a unique position to the exclusion of other figures (1993: 63). In her essay 'The Worship of Jesus and the Imperial Cult' (1999), A. Yarbro Collins suggests that emperor worship, as an external factor in the cultural environment, helped to facilitate the worship of Jesus. Finally, Moore (1996) provides a stimulating discussion of the nature of the imagery in Revelation. In his view, the manner in which John challenges Roman imperial power runs the risk of crafting God in the image of the emperor (1996: 134). Finally, with respect to the deification of the emperor, Kreitzer suggests that the Imperial Cult notion of

apotheosis may have helped to facilitate the synthesis of Christian views of the incarnation with the Greco-Roman religious environment, as both incarnation and apotheosis deal with the relationship between the divine and the human (1990: 216).

Secondly, and more prominently, scholars have argued for an approach to the book of Revelation that highlights the polemic present, following the suggestion of Deissmann: 'So begins a polemical parallelism between Caesar-cult and Christ-cult…' (1923: 290). Deissmann noted in this regard that the use of terms and images in Christian literature paralleled certain elements found in the Imperial Cult. These terms had arisen independent of Roman emperor worship, and, when early Christians encountered these in Roman emperor worship, they responded polemically against the use of these terms for the Roman emperor. A number of scholars have followed this line of reasoning in application to the book of Revelation, and, among these, Stauffer's *Christ and the Caesars* (1955) is perhaps the prime example. Although highlighting possible ways in which John shaped his presentation to confront the emperor's divine claims, Stauffer's choice to not identify all sources can cause great difficulty for those intending to utilize his study. More recently, the works by Barnett (1989) and Meggitt (2002) have attempted to affirm the nature of this relationship between emperor cult and Christianity as essentially polemical.

Several studies are important to note while assessing the influence of emperor worship and imperial imagery on particular elements of the presentation of Jesus in Revelation. Janzen has advocated the need to consider the relationship of the symbolism of the coinage under Domitian to the language of Revelation (1994). Some scholars have also suggested that certain themes may have helped to shape the literary presentation of Jesus in Revelation. Two of Aune's earlier works help to demonstrate possible connections with Revelation in this way. His 'The Form and Function of the Proclamation to the Seven Churches (Revelation 2–3)' (1990: 199-204) indicates the possible role imperial edicts may have played in shaping the seven messages in Rev. 2–3. In this way, Jesus' messages to the seven churches contrast with the authority exercised by the emperor. Aune's 'The Influence of Roman Imperial Court Ceremonial on the Apocalypse of John' (1983) builds upon the work of A. Alföldy (1934) in illustrating the influence of imperial court imagery in Rev. 4–5 and sets up the contrast between the authority of Jesus and the emperor. Charles (1993) and Morton (2001; 2007) have followed a similar approach in assessing the use of imperial themes in Rev. 4–5. Borgen (1996) has suggested possible parallels between Philo's writings and Revelation in their responses to emperor

worship. Finally, Slater's *Christ and Community* presents the Christology of the book as a pastoral response to the situation faced by Christians during the time of Domitian (1999: 18-46, 190-91; it should be noted that Slater has more recently revised his viewpoint; see Slater 2003). Although not focusing on particular themes from the Imperial Cult, Slater nevertheless regards the Christology of the book as a response to pressures faced by Christians. In regard to these approaches, Barr has counseled caution lest John's confrontation of Roman power be allowed to transform his portrait of Jesus to look more like the dragon than a lamb (2006: 217-18, 220).

d. Imperial Cult and the Persecutions

One of the key interpretative questions related to the Roman Imperial Cult and Revelation is the issue of persecution. This question is important both for the dating of the composition of Revelation as well as the *Sitz im Leben* of the book as a whole. With some exceptions, such as Slater (2003), Giet (1957: 113-45), and de Jonge (2002: 128), most commentators who connect Revelation and conflict with the Imperial Cult date the composition of the book to the time of Domitian. This section will introduce the ancient evidence and the views common to the first part of the twentieth century regarding the composition of the book. Next, discussion will be given of the arguments in favor of revising the standard depiction of both Domitian and the background to the book of Revelation. Finally, recent attempts to balance the two positions will be considered.

Within the traditional literary sources, the start of Domitian's reign is typically viewed as moderate (see Southern 1997: 34). As one comes to the latter part of Domitian's reign, the literary sources tend to characterize his actions as moving toward madness and tyranny (see Suetonius, *Dom*. 10.11; see also Syme 1983: 123). Dio's reference to the murder of Agricola (66.20.3; 67.13.4) and several key treason trials taking place near the end of 93 CE are often seen as evidence of this shift (see Dio 67.14.1-2; Rogers 1960: 19-23). With regard to emperor worship, Friesen (1993: 41-49) and Deininger (1965: 38) both date the building of a third provincial Imperial Cult temple in Ephesus to the time of Domitian. Additionally, there is the use of the terms 'Lord and God' in reference to Domitian (Dio 67.4.7; Suetonius, *Dom*. 13.1, 2; cf. Rev. 4:11). Following his death, Domitian was subjected to *damnatio memoriae*, which resulted in the removal of his name from a number of inscriptions. Flower's recent study (2006) addresses the evidence and issues involved in the act of *damnatio memoriae*.

A number of scholars have built upon these pictures of Domitian and the references in Christian sources, such as Eusebius (*H.E.* 3.17-20; quoting

Melito in 4.26.8-9) and Tertullian (*Apol.* 5.4), in developing their understanding of the background of conflict between the Christian community and the Imperial Cult. The statement by Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.* 5.30.3; also quoted in Eusebius, *H.E.* 3.18.1-3) is also often cited in support of a date under Domitian (the weight of his testimony does not hinge upon the issue of persecution under Domitian; see Newman 1962). For some, such as Keresztes (1973: 23; 1989: 99-100) and Harris (1979: 22-23), there is evidence of growing hostility with some persecution under Domitian. Smallwood, although viewing certain statements in later church fathers as exaggerations, posits that these traditions are most likely based upon fact (see 1956: 1-2). For others, Revelation is clearly written in response to persecution taking place in the Roman Empire. Ramsay (1904: 91, 93-113), McFayden (1920), and Sordi (1983: 44) may be considered as representative of this approach. Most strongly, D. Jones argues that, in the eyes of Christians, emperor worship was the worst abuse (1980: 1023) and concludes that there can be no doubt of a persecution of Christians under Domitian (1980: 1033).

In recent years, however, scholars have begun to question the presentation of Domitian in many of the literary sources and have attempted to rehabilitate his image. Although studies by Milburn (1945), Pleket (1961) and Water (1964) began to question the traditional depiction of Domitian, the works of B. Jones (1979; 1992) and Thompson (1984; 1990: 95-115) have played a particularly important role in advocating a reassessment of the sources. These scholars have alleged a strong bias in the historical sources against Domitian for the benefit of the subsequent rulers. Many of the sources may be seen simply as propaganda crafted to highlight the benefits of the new dynasty and to win favor for the authors (so also Flower 2006: 236, 266; Griffin 2000a: 55). In addition, the widespread persecution of Christians does not seem to be verifiable (so argued by Magie 1950: I, 577; Moreau 1956: 38; Downing 1988: 108; Warden 1991). Millar argues that the role played by the Roman Imperial Cult was relatively minor with regard to the persecution of Christians (1973: 146). Some scholars, such as Bell (1979) and J. Wilson (1993) have rejected the dating of Revelation to the mid 90s CE on the grounds that the persecution theory cannot be sustained. As a result of these considerations, Thompson and others have strongly challenged the notion of a persecution lying behind the book of Revelation.

In response to these studies, a number of recent commentators have sought a more moderate position between the two alternatives. On this issue of persecution, it has generally been accepted in recent years that

a full-blown, empire-wide persecution directed against Christians under Domitian is unlikely. The notion of persecution lying behind Revelation has not been fully abandoned, however, as local, sporadic persecution is still possible (Osborne 2002: 7-9; Beale 1999: 12-15; Witherington 2003: 6-8). Barnard (1964: 253-54) and Peerbolte (2002: 240, 254) argue that, although a mass persecution is not likely under Domitian, a few deaths may have led to greater sensitivity on the part of Christians with respect to emperor worship.

Secondly, scholars have not abandoned the possibility of the use of 'lord' and 'god' by Domitian. Although evidence of the use of these titles may be observed elsewhere (see Parker 2001), sufficient evidence exists of the acceptability of their use with respect to Domitian (so Nauta 2002: 383; see Martial 4.67.4; 5.2.6; 5.5.1, 3, 4; 5.8.1; 6.64.14; 7.5; 7.8.2; 7.12.1; 7.34.8; 7.40.2; 7.45.7; 7.99.8; 8.1.1; 8.8.6; 8.31.3; 8.82.1-4; 9.20.2; 9.23.3; 9.24.6; 9.28.7-8; 9.65.2; 9.66.3; 9.101.23-24; but see also 10.72.3; Statius, *Silvae* 1.1.54, 62; 1.6.46-48, 81-84; 3.3.103, 110; 3.4.19-20, 101; 4 pref; 4.2.6; 4.3.128-129; ; 5.1.42, 74, 94, 112, 261; 5.2.170; Quintilius, *Inst.* 4 prooemium 5; Dio Chrysostom, *Def.* 1).

Finally, while some bias may be observed in the historical sources, the full-scale revision suggested by Thompson and B. Jones has not been fully accepted. While stereotypes may be exploited for the sake of personal gain, it is more likely that ancient authors were drawing from pre-existing hatred than fabricating stories to court favor (see Beale 1999: 5-12; Griffin 2000a: 55; Southern 1997: 117). Wilson (2003: 525, 529) notes that some of the literary sources actually lose their power without the historical background. Saller (1990: 4-18) and Levick (1982) have also challenged the notion that Domitian's provincial policies were the reason for the opposition of the Senate.

Conclusion

Interest in the relationship between Roman emperor worship and the book of Revelation will no doubt continue in future years if the number of recent studies is any indication. Within the larger scope of New Testament studies at present, interest in the Roman Imperial Cult and imperial ideology in early Christian texts other than Revelation has risen in recent years. While it has often been assumed that Paul (in Rom. 13) and John (in Revelation) represent very different approaches to the Roman Empire (see Ruiz 2003: 132; A. Yarbro Collins 1986: 315; Laws 1988: 43) or at least different situations due to persecution (MacMullen 1967: 1034), in

light of recent studies on the Roman Empire and Imperial Cult, sharp distinctions between Revelation and the Pauline epistles may no longer be preferable. While studies in the first part of the twentieth century tended to regard emperor worship as a political institution that directed increased pressure and even persecution toward early Christians for their refusal to participate, more recent studies have focused on the integration of emperor worship into the larger religious and social environments. As a result, these studies help to indicate the various pressures faced by Christians in Asia Minor and suggest that the situation faced by John and his readers was more complex than simply official state persecution by Domitian and the authorities associated with the Roman Imperial Cult.

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