

THE INFLUENCE OF THE EMPEROR CULT ON THE BOOK OF REVELATION

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Among the courses I took from Ian Fair, his course on Revelation illustrates the various ways that he impacted my future studies. Broadly speaking, I have applied myself to the field of NT studies. More narrowly, social historical questions, often answered through the use of Greek, dominate my interests. Thus with gratitude and congratulations I offer this study on Revelation to Ian Fair.

Scholars disagree about the importance of the emperor cult for the interpretation of Revelation. On the one hand, G. E. M. Ste. Croix can say, "In fact, emperor-worship is a factor of almost no independent importance in the persecutions of the Christians."¹ On the other hand, Donald L. Jones argues for the significance of the emperor cult and the spread of persecutions connected to it:

Deification of the emperor was now obligatory and used as a test to identify Christians. Offerings of incense, prayers, and vows were expressions of loyalty to the state, and nonconformists were considered disloyal and punished. The Domitianic persecution extended into Asia Minor, including several cities mentioned in Revelation 1–3 which were, at this time, important centers of emperor worship.²

Which of these views better describes the role of the emperor cult? This investigation proceeds in three stages: (1) the evidence for the emperor cult, (2) the nature of the emperor cult, and (3) the exegetical significance of the emperor cult for the interpretation of Revelation.

The Evidence for the Emperor Cult

¹ G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, "Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?" in *Studies in Ancient Society* (ed. M. I. Finley; Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), 216. Ste. Croix puts "no weight" on the theory that under Domitian "emperor worship was enforced in Asia Minor, and that the Christian sect was proscribed when Christians refused to take part in it, the charge being really political disloyalty."

² Donald L. Jones, "Christianity and the Roman Imperial Cult," *ANRW* 2.23.2 (1034).

Before exploring how the text of Revelation can be illuminated by social-historical research, we will first examine the data for the emperor cult in the cities of the Apocalypse and then detail what can be said about the actual practices in the emperor cult. According to S. R. F. Price, evidence exists for the emperor cult during or before the reign of Domitian in four of the seven cities mentioned in Revelation 2–3 (viz., Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, and Laodicea).³ This section presents and evaluates the evidence for this claim.

Ephesus

In many respects, the evidence regarding Ephesus provides the best point of departure. The sources are varied, from archeological and epigraphic evidence to literary texts. In addition, up to five temples are represented.

The temple of Roma and Julius Caesar is one of the few temples attested by literary evidence. Dio Cassius (fl. ca. A.D. 200) describes the honors Octavian granted Julius Caesar and Roma in 29 B.C.:

Caesar (i.e., Octavian), meanwhile, besides attending to the general business, gave permission for the dedication of sacred precincts (τεμένη) in Ephesus and in Nicaea to Rome [i.e., Roma] and to Caesar, his father, whom he named the hero Julius. These cities had at that time attained chief place in Asia and in Bithynia respectively. He commanded that the Romans resident in these cities should pay honour to these two divinities (παρ' αὐτοῖς . . . τιμᾶν); but he permitted the aliens, whom he styled Hellenes, to consecrate precincts (τεμενίσαι) to himself, the Asians to have theirs in Pergamum and the Bithynians theirs in Nicomedia. This practice, beginning under him, has been continued under other emperors, not only in the case of the Hellenic nations but also in that of all the others, in so far as they are subject to the Romans. For in the capital itself and in Italy generally no emperor, however worthy of renown he has been, has dared to do this; still, even there various divine honours are bestowed (ἄλλαι τε ἰσόθεοι τιμαὶ δίδονται) after their death upon such emperors as have ruled uprightly, and, in fact, shrines are built to them (ἡρώα ποιεῖται).⁴

A number of salient details require discussion. First, one notices the mention of “sacred precincts” to Roma and Julius Caesar in Ephesus. The presence of these “sacred precincts” is supported by archeological data: “This podium, formerly known as the state altar, has now been identified as a podium with two small prostyle temples built by Augustus in 29 B.C. for the Divus Iulius and Dea Roma; it was destroyed in the fourth century A.D.”⁵

³ S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 252–64.

⁴ Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, 51.20.6–8 (E. Cary, LCL 6.56–59).

⁵ V. Mitsopoulou-Leon, “Ephesos,” *Princeton Encyclopedia of Classical Sites*, 307. For the location of the temple area, see #9 on the map between 760 and 761 (for discussion, see 815–16) in “Ephesos vom Beginn der römischen Herrschaft in Kleinasien bis zum Ende der Principatszeit” (Dieter Knibbe and Wilhelm Alzinger, *ANRW* 2.7.2).

Second, Octavian consecrates “precincts to himself” in Pergamum and Nicomedia, a practice that “has been continued under other emperors.” However, Dio indicates that such a practice has not occurred “in the capital itself and in Italy generally.” This information suggests that the existence of multiple imperial temples in Asia Minor is likely. Third, Dio’s testimony also informs us that the bestowal of “divine honours” came from Rome (i.e., the Senate) and occurred after the death of the emperor. The reliability of all this information from Dio is another question. Although Dio is variously regarded as a historian,⁶ the existence of the temple to Roma and Julius Caesar in Ephesus seems relatively certain, given the dual attestation (literary and archaeological) of the evidence.

The second temple associated with Ephesus is the temple of Augustus at the Artemision. An inscription in the British Museum (#522) records “the rebuilding of the peribolos of the Artemision by order of Augustus, B.C. 6.”⁷

The Emperor, Caesar, Son of God, Augustus; (in) the 12th consulate, the 18th tribunate power; from the revenues of the god was provided to build a wall for the temple and the Sebasteion; in the proconsulship of Gaius Asinius Gallus, in the care of Sextus Lartidius, ambassador [trans. mine].

A debate exists whether the Artemision and the Sebasteion shared the same precincts.⁸ Whatever the case, the inscription describes the building of a wall that served both the Artemision and the Sebasteion. More importantly, the inscription provides evidence of an imperial temple for Augustus while he was still alive.

⁶ In *OCD* (s. v. “Dio Cassius,” 345), Alexander McDonald writes, “Unreliable about republican institutions and conditions, from Caesar onwards he used his constitutional experience, at first colouring events with his ideas of imperial absolutism, but later handling his material with full knowledge.” A similar sentiment is echoed by H. Koester, “The value and reliability of this work (Dio’s *Roman History*) is debated. Dio Cassius was largely dependent upon Latin annalists, inserted numerous long speeches, and showed independent judgment only in the treatment of his own period” (*History, Culture, and Religion of the Hellenistic Age*, [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982], 350).

⁷ *The Collection of Ancient Greek Inscriptions in the British Museum*, Part 3—Section 2, *Ephesos* (ed. E. L. Hicks; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1890), 177.

⁸ A. D. Nock argues, “it should be remembered that two distinct τεμένη, or precincts, can have a common wall and make a sacred enclosure like the Acropolis of Athens. This is not temple-sharing” (*Essays on Religion and the Ancient World* [ed. Zeph Stewart; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972], 225). According to Price (*Rituals*, 254), Jobst (“Zur Lokalisierung des Sebasteion-Augusteum in Ephesos,” *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Abteilung Istanbul* 30 [1980]: 241–60) argues that the Sebasteion was not in the Artemision because the inscription was not found there.

The temple of Augustus in Ephesus, the third imperial temple, is attested by an inscription. The inscription (#902) is primarily a list of names, perhaps the names of priests.⁹ Thus only the first five lines are significant for our purposes.

Apollonius, son of Herakleidos,
son of Passalas, who provided for the
foundation of Augustus
and the dedication
of the precincts [trans. mine].

Although this temple and the second temple could be the same temple, no one makes this claim.¹⁰ Thus this inscription appears to point to a third imperial temple in Ephesus. A fourth piece of evidence is a fragmentary inscription (12 pieces) that reportedly attests the existence of a “royal portico” (βασιλι [κῆν στοᾶν) dedicated in part to the emperor.¹¹ Further evidence for imperial nature of the stoa are the statues of Augustus and Livia found *in situ*.¹² However, neither the stoa nor the statues prove the presence of an imperial cult temple.

Perhaps one of the most interesting pieces of evidence for the interpretation of Revelation is the existence of the temple of Domitian. Mitsopoulou-Leon indicates, “The temple was originally dedicated to Domitian by the Province of Asia (the first Neokorie of Ephesus) and after his *damnatio memoriae* rededicated to his father Vespasian.”¹³ As the first imperial neocorate of Ephesus, the temple dates A.D. 82–84.¹⁴ A number of inscriptions support the identification of this temple as the temple of Domitian. Many of the inscriptions have the name of Domitian partially erased, an erasure connected with the

⁹ *Die Inschriften von Ephesos*, Teil III (ed. H. Engelmann, D. Knibbe, and R. Merkelbach; Bonn: Rudolf Habelt, 1980), 203. Price (*Rituals*, 254) dates the inscription to ca. 27 B.C. The dating is based on the identification of some of the names in the list. See *Die Inschriften von Ephesos*, 203–4.

¹⁰ According to Price (*Rituals*, 254), one likely location is “in the centre of the upper square.”

¹¹ *Die Inschriften von Ephesos*, Teil II (ed. C. Barker and R. Merkelbach; Bonn: Rudolf Habelt, 1979), 132–33 (#404). A significant portion of this bilingual inscription is restored. The Latin does not appear to help to the degree of the restoration in Greek: βασιλι [κῆν στοᾶν Ἄρτ] ἔμι [δι Ἐφεσῖαι καὶ Αὐτοκράτορι Καίσαρι θεοῦ] υἱῶ [ι Σεβαστῶ καὶ Τιβερίῳ] Καίσαρι Σεβασ [τοῦ υἱῶ καὶ τῶ] ι δῆμ [ωι Ἐφεσίων κτλ.

¹² See W. Alzinger, “Das Regierungsviertel,” 264–65.

¹³ V. Mitsopoulou-Leon, “Ephesos,” 308. For the location of the temple, see #15 on the map in *ANRW* 2.7.2 (760).

¹⁴ W. Alzinger, s.v. “Nachträge—Ephesos,” *Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, Supp. 12 (Stuttgart: Alfred Druckenmüller, 1970), 1650.

damnatio memoriae.¹⁵ The archaeological evidence also supports the presence of the temple.¹⁶ In sum, we have evidence of the presence of a temple to Domitian in Ephesus dating from the early eighties.

Smyrna

In Smyrna is a temple dedicated to Tiberius, Livia, and the Senate. Tacitus recounts the origins of this temple in his *Annals*:

The case [against Lucilius Capito, the procurator of Asia] was accordingly tried and the defendant condemned. In return for this act of retribution, as well as for the punishment meted out to Gaius Silanus the year before, the Asiatic cities decreed a temple to Tiberius, his mother [Livia], and the senate. Leave to build was granted.¹⁷

However, after three years the cities of Asia were still arguing which city should receive the temple. The Senate convened to hear the claims of eleven cities.

With no great variety each pleaded national antiquity, and zeal for the Roman cause in the wars. . . . But Hypaepa and Tralles, together with Laodicea and Magnesia, were passed over as inadequate to the task. . . . The Pergamenes (see “Pergamum” below) were refuted by their main argument: they had already a sanctuary of Augustus, and the distinction was thought ample. The state-worship in Ephesus and Miletus was considered to be already centred on the cults of Diana and Apollo respectively: the deliberations turned, therefore, on Sardis and Smyrna.¹⁸

The Senate chose Smyrna as the location for the temple and selected a legate, Valerius Naso, to oversee the task (*Annals*, 4.56). Rounding out the literary evidence are various coins indicating the presence of a temple dedicated to Tiberius¹⁹ as well as to Livia and the Senate.

Pergamum

The imperial temple in Pergamum played a significant role in the life of the citizens in the province of Asia. As already noted in the citation from Dio, a temple to Octavian was established in Pergamum in 29 B.C. The temple is

¹⁵ There are at least fourteen inscriptions for the temple of Domitian. See *Die Inschriften von Ephesos*, Teil II, #232–42; Teil V, #1498; Teil VI, #2048.

¹⁶ W. Alzinger, “Ephesos (Archäologisch),” *ANRW* 2.72 (820). For photos and schematic drawings of the temple, terrace, and street of Domitian, see H. Vetters, “Domitianterrasse und Domitiangasse,” *Jahreshefte des Österreichischen Archäologischen Institutes* 50. Beiblatt (1972–1975): 311–30.

¹⁷ Tacitus, *Ann.*, 4.15 (trans. John Jackson; LCL; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1937), 29.

¹⁸ Tacitus, *Ann.*, 4.15.

¹⁹ Note the numerous coins mentioned in Steven J. Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 38; and in Price (*Rituals*, 258 nn. 45–46).

important not only because it “became the center of the imperial cult in the province of Asia,” but also because it “became the religious and political center of the Koinon of Asia—the organization of the cities of Asia.”²⁰ As the meeting place of the Koinon of Asia, Pergamum sponsored annual games, the Romaia Sebasta, when the Koinon assembled. In addition, the temple precincts “served as a repository for decrees of the Koinon, letters from Rome, and decrees honoring provincial priests or other officials of the Koinon, with stelai set up on the temenos or even in the temple itself.”²¹ Unfortunately, no archaeological evidence of the temple has been unearthed.²² Despite the absence of archaeological evidence, the confluence of the literary evidence from Dio and Tacitus with the numismatic evidence²³ render the existence of the temple in Pergamum virtually certain.

Laodicea

The evidence for an imperial temple in Laodicea is entirely numismatic. For instance, F. Imhoof-Blumer describes one of the coins found at Laodicea:

Obverse: ΔΟΜΙΤΑΝΟΣ ΚΑΙΣΑΡ ΣΕΒΑΣΤΟΣ ΓΕΡΜΑΝΙΚΟΣ in a circular legend and in the field ΔΟΜΙΤΙΑ ΣΕΒΑΣΤΗ. Facing busts of Domitian victorious and breast-plated on the right and Domitia in draped clothing on the left.

Reverse: ΔΙΑ ΚΟΡ. ΔΙΟΚΚΟΥΡΙΑΔΟΥ ΛΑ—ΟΔΙΚΕΩΝ. Temple with four columns, of which the frieze carries the inscription ΕΠΙΝΕΙΚΙΟΣ; inside Domitian stands on the left in military dress; Domitia stands on the right; each one is supported by a scepter and extends his/her hand [trans. mine].²⁴

Imhoof-Blumer notes that the first phrase on the reverse probably indicates the magistrate in whose reign the coin was stamped. More important is the inscription on the temple frieze. Imhoof-Blumer gives the following interpretation:

The adjective ΕΠΙΝΕΙΚΙΟΣ seems to refer to the temple (νεώς) which the frieze decorates. Since the emperor represents himself in military costume, carrying a trophy, between the columns of the building, it is permissible to believe that the

²⁰ Ronald Mellor, ΘΕΑ ΡΩΜΗ: *The Worship of the Goddess Roma in the Greek World* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975), 80.

²¹ Mellor, *Roma*, 81, 141.

²² Note the silence of J. Schäfer, “Pergamon,” *Princeton Encyclopedia of Classical Sites*, 688–92. Schäfer does mention “a room which served for the cult of the emperor” (689). Mellor, *Roma*, 141.

²³ See Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 29–30.

²⁴ F. Imhoof-Blumer, *Monnaies grecques* (Amsterdam: Johannes Müller, 1883), 404–5. The epсилons are lunate, which I have approximated by enlarging a small-case epсилon. Also, the KOP is a monogram.

temple had been erected or consecrated to Domitian, in honor of his victories which made him triumph and take the title of Germanicus, in 84 A.D. [trans. mine].²⁵

Other coins give similar information²⁶ for a temple to Domitian in Laodicea circa 84 A.D.²⁷

In summary, each of these four cities had imperial temples. At least two of them (Ephesus and Laodicea) erected a temple to Domitian in the early to mid eighties. Another, namely Pergamum, functioned as the Koinon for the province of Asia. However, this information gives only half the story. What happened in these imperial temples? What was the nature of the cult in these temples? Is there any evidence of forced sacrifice?

The Nature of the Emperor Cult

This section focuses on the practices of the emperor cult. Unfortunately, the sources for reconstructing this aspect are not as extensive as one might like. In fact, Price states, “there is no extended contemporary discussion of imperial ritual in the provinces.”²⁸ Probably most germane to the interpretation of Revelation is the description of sacrifices in the emperor cult. The most extensive literary description of the emperor cult comes from Nicolaus of Damascus (fl. 20 B.C.). His *Universal History* contains the following citation:

Because mankind address him thus (as Sebastos) in accordance with their estimation of his honour, they revere him with temples and sacrifices over islands and continents, organized in cities and provinces, matching the greatness of his virtue and repaying his benefactions towards them.²⁹

Perhaps the closest to a description of an imperial sacrifice comes from an inscription from Gytheum near Sparta.

A procession made its way from the temple of Asclepius and Hygeia, the gods of health, to the imperial shrine. A bull was sacrificed there, but this was not, as one might have expected, to the emperor but “on behalf of the safety of the rulers and gods and the eternal duration of their rule,” that is on behalf of the emperors past and present. Another sacrifice was offered in the main square, and from there, probably, the procession passed to the theatre, where sacrifices of incense were

²⁵ Imhoof-Blumer, *Monnaies*, 405. Ἐπινίκιος means “victorious” (*LSJ*, 648). ΕΠΙΝΕΙΚΙΟΣ appears to be an alternate spelling of Ἐπινίκιος. Notice the variant spellings for νικάδιον (νεικ-) and νίκος (νεϊκος) (s.v. *LSJ*, 1176).

²⁶ See Price, *Rituals*, 264.

²⁷ Friesen (*Imperial Cults*, 61–62) understands this temple as a municipal imperial temple rather than a provincial imperial temple.

²⁸ Price, *Rituals*, 3.

²⁹ Nicolaus of Damascus, *Universal History*, 90F 125. Quoted from Price, *Rituals*, 1.

made in front of the images of Augustus, Livia and Tiberius which had been placed there.³⁰

The imperial festival at Gytheum lasted six days, but the length could stretch as long as fifty-one days, although the normal duration was two to thirteen days.³¹ Absent from this description of imperial sacrifices is the indication that sacrifices were made to the emperor. The *locus classicus* for the distinction of “sacrificing to” versus “sacrificing on behalf of” is Philo’s *Embassy to Gaius*:

“All right;” he (Gaius) replied, “that is true, you have sacrificed, but to another (ἐτέρω), even if it was for me (ὕπὲρ ἐμοῦ); what good is it then? For you have not sacrificed to me (ἐμοῖ).”³²

However, reality is not so neat. One can adduce several examples of sacrifices to the emperor even though such sacrifices were likely “less common.”³³ One of the examples is a petition of L. Pompeius Apollonius to L. Mestrius Florus from Ephesus circa A.D. 88:

To the proconsul Lucius Mestrius Florus, from
Lucius Pompeius Apollonius of Ephesus:
Sir, mysteries and sacrifices are offered yearly
with great purity by initiates
to the fruit-bearing Demeter at the Thesmophoria (festival)
and to the divine Augustans [θεοὶς Σεβαστοῖς; trans. mine].³⁴

The ambiguity of the evidence (“*on behalf of* the emperor” vs. “to the emperor”) prevents one from making absolute claims about the precise wording accompanying sacrifices to the emperor.

In addition to sacrifices, two other activities (viz., prayer and hymns) are worthy of brief comment. Prayers do not seem to have played a role in the emperor cult,³⁵ or if they did, the prayers may reflect “prayers for benefactors such as are well attested.”³⁶ Hymns, on the other hand, probably played a

³⁰ Price, *Rituals*, 210–11. Other inscriptions mention libations, ritual cakes, and incense as other types of offerings (208).

³¹ Price, *Rituals*, 106–7. Apparently the celebration could get fairly wild. See Tertullian, *Apology*, 35.

³² Philo, *Embassy to Gaius*, 357 (trans. F. H. Colson; LCL; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952), 178–79. Price (*Rituals*, 211) claims, “In only one instance is a sacrifice to the emperor known to have been performed by an imperial priest.”

³³ Price, *Rituals*, 216–20, esp. nn. 47 and 48.

³⁴ *Die Inschriften von Ephesos*, Teil II, #213, 25.

³⁵ A. D. Nock, “Deification and Julian,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 47 (1957): 115–23.

³⁶ Price, *Rituals*, 214, esp. the examples in n. 41.

significant role. Price describes the contents of an inscription from Pergamum that depicts a choir in the service of the emperor cult:

A private celebration is vividly depicted by the regulations of the choir of Rome and Augustus at Pergamum. This was an association involved in provincial imperial cult, but it also performed private ritual within the association, meeting on a variety of occasions in a special building. . . . Hymns were sung beside the altar during sacrifices, which perhaps consisted of wine. Ritual cakes, incense and lamps were offered to Augustus, the last perhaps for illuminating the images of Rome and the emperors. The inscription gives a very intense picture of the practice of imperial ritual and sacrifices.

The hymns were sung by groups called hymnodes. Friesen summarizes the duties of hymnodes from an inscription dated circa A.D. 41: “they sang hymns to the imperial family, participated in imperial sacrifices, led celebrations, and hosted banquets.”³⁷ In this description, we see not only singing but also other activities regularly associated with pagan worship.

Finally, images played a role in the emperor cult; at the very least, they were present in the temple. A few factors indicate that images were placed in the imperial temples. First, we have the head of one of the Flavian emperors, which was found in the temple of Domitian in Ephesus.³⁸ Second, indirect evidence comes in the form of statues that appear to have been sculpted for a niche. For example, the back of the head of Livia (#10) “is left rough-hewn and the bun of hair at the nape of the neck has not been even indicated.”³⁹ Third, coins indicate the presence of images in the imperial temples.⁴⁰ In summary, the use of imperial images, including those of the emperor, his family, and Roma, appears to be widespread in imperial temples.

From this brief survey, one can draw a few conclusions. First, the existence of temples to living emperors in some of the seven cities of Revelation is virtually certain. Second, the cult consisted of sacrifices and hymns probably preceded by processions and concluded with banquets. Third, one would likely find an image of the emperor in the temple. Fourth, there is no evidence of forced sacrifice to the emperor in the first century A.D.⁴¹

³⁷ Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 105. See also 104–13.

³⁸ Jale Inan and Elisabeth Rosenbaum, *Roman and Early Byzantine Portrait Sculpture in Asia Minor* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 67, #27. The head may or may not be that of Domitian. For further discussion, see Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 50.

³⁹ Inan and Rosenbaum, *Sculpture*, 59.

⁴⁰ See Price, *Ritual*, 188–91.

⁴¹ Price (*Ritual*, 221) finds four references to demands to sacrifice to the emperor in the “genuine martyr acts.” He cites *Acta Pionii* 8; Eusebius *Mart. Pal.* 1.1, 1.54; and *EH*, 7.15. Price also contends, “There is no parallel, so far as I know, for such an expression of conflict (i.e., confess the emperor’s divinity or die) between the imperial

The Exegetical Significance of the Emperor Cult
for the Interpretation of Revelation

Equipped with some basic understanding of the presence and nature of the emperor cult, we are now ready to see what impact the emperor cult had on the composition of Revelation. Although the influence of the emperor cult on the book has been overrated, the emperor cult does seem important for some of the language and imagery in Revelation. However, the emperor cult does not appear to provide a sufficient cause for the book's writing. That is, Revelation would look different if the emperor cult had not existed at the time. On the other hand, the emperor cult alone does not explain the present form and content of the book. For instance, the emperor cult does not explain much of the content in the seven letters to the churches (with the possible exception of the death of Antipas in the letter to Pergamum), the polemic against the Jews (2:9; 3:9; 11:8), or the negative attitude toward wealth (3:14–22; 18). In short, the emperor cult provides a necessary, but not sufficient, cause for the occasion and content of the book.

If the emperor cult does not play a major role, how does one account for Revelation's images of death and persecution? Some of the examples may be due to conflicts between the Christians and Rome, independent of the influence of the emperor cult. John's banishment to the island of Patmos in 1:9 reflects a conflict with authorities, but a link with the emperor cult is not necessary to explain John's condition.⁴² Ste. Croix's study makes it apparent that persecutions between A.D. 64 and 250 were local, sporadic, and initiated from below.⁴³ John's plight likely reflects such a conflict. There are a number of references to tribulation and death in Revelation (2:10, 13; 6:9–12; 7:13–14; 13:7; 16:6; 17:6; 18:24; 19:2; 20:4). Of those references, only three (2:13; 13:15; 20:4) may link death and the emperor cult. Rev 2:13 states:

I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is; you hold fast my name and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.

cult and Christianity in any preConstantinian document" (126). Against this last contention, compare Tertullian, *Apology*, 10, 28, 32.

⁴² Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 102–4. Collins summarizes the debate over the nature of John's banishment (i.e., whether it was a *relatio* or *deportatio*). Whatever the case, neither sentence is explicitly connected to the emperor cult. Rather, the banishment was probably the result of a perceived threat to the public order, perhaps prophecy (102; cf. Rev 1:3).

⁴³ G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, "Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?" 211, 228, 238–42. See also Pliny, *Letters*, 10.96.

It is possible that “Satan’s throne” refers to this temple and the imperial cult. Others, such as Adela Yarbro Collins, suggest that “Satan’s throne” refers to “the complex comprising the Temple of Athena, the Great Altar, and the Temple of Zeus.”⁴⁴ Whatever one decides, the relationship between Pergamum as “Satan’s throne” and the death of Antipas is not clear. Was Antipas “arrested” for merely being a Christian? For alleged abominations? For not sacrificing? Was Antipas required to give an oath of allegiance to the emperor? Offer a sacrifice to the emperor? These questions remain shrouded in silence. Perhaps the use of μάρτυς indicates some type of testimony or confession was associated with Antipas’s death. On this point, Rev 12:11 provides a suggestive comparison:

And they (the brethren) conquered him (Satan) through the blood of the Lamb and through the word of their testimony (διὰ τὸν λόγον τῆς μαρτυρίας αὐτῶν), and they did not love their lives even unto death.

Despite all of the uncertainty associated with this passage, it provides one of the three strongest arguments for persecution related to the emperor cult.

Rev 13:15 provides further support for some type of connection between persecution of Christians and the emperor cult:

And it [the earth beast] was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast so that the image of the beast should even speak, and to cause those who would not worship (προσκυνησῶσιν) the image of the beast to be slain.

Here the “worship”⁴⁵ of the image of the emperor plays a role. However, our evidence does not support or require forced “homage.” Perhaps the passage reflects a situation like the one in Pliny’s letter (10.96). That is, someone accused of being a Christian has an opportunity to prove otherwise; however, the Christian does not render “homage” and is killed.

Another passage that appears to link death to the emperor cult is Rev 20:4. Rev 20:4 describes a vision of the “souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus (διὰ τὴν μαρτυρίαν Ἰησοῦ)⁴⁶ and for the word of God (διὰ τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ)⁴⁷ and who had not worshipped the beast or its image

⁴⁴ Adela Yarbro Collins, “Pergamon in Early Christian Literature,” in *Pergamon: Citadel of the Gods: Archaeological Record, Literary Description, and Religious Development* (ed. H. Koester; Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity, 1998), 166–76, esp. 174.

⁴⁵ “Worship” may not be the best translation here. Nock makes a distinction between “homage” and “worship,” the former in reference to humans, the latter in reference to gods. However, the distinction is not one based in antiquity, as Nock notes. He suggests the concept of τιμῆ. A. D. Nock, “ΣΥΝΝΑΟΣ ΘΕΟΣ,” in *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World* (ed. Zeph Stewart; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 241.

⁴⁶ Note the occurrences of “testimony of Jesus” (1:2, 9; 12:17; 19:10).

⁴⁷ See the same phrase in 1:9; 6:9; cf. 19:13.

and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands.” Here is an explicit connection of worshiping the Beast (Caesar) image with a beheading. Again, as in the passage concerning Antipas, the language of “testimony” occurs. These three passages (i.e., 2:13; 13:15; 20:4) provide evidence for persecution associated with the emperor cult.

Nevertheless, the nature of the relationship and the extent of the persecution cannot be determined from the text of Revelation. Perhaps all the passages referring to the death of Christians reflect an extreme reaction of John to the death of Antipas and to Rome, an understandable reaction given John’s banishment. On this point, one must ask, “How much does it take to *feel* persecuted?”⁴⁸

On the other hand, perhaps Revelation is the exception; maybe there was widespread persecution of Christians that was somehow connected to the emperor cult. However, the latter option seems unlikely given the evidence about the emperor cult in the first two sections.⁴⁹

Nevertheless, the influence of the emperor cult on the language and imagery in Revelation seems quite likely. Most convincing is the use of honorary titles. Aune lists several honorific titles of the Caesars. He wants to show that the antithetical claims of Caesar, symbolized by these names (i.e., god, son of god, god made manifest, lord, lord of the whole world, lord’s day, savior of the world, imperator) “characterized the imperial cult from its inception under Augustus.”⁵⁰ Strikingly, Revelation uses precisely these titles for God or Jesus as a direct contrast to the claims of the Roman emperors.

First, θεός is used quite often. However, the only places where an antithesis is implied are 19:10 and 22:9, where the command is to worship God. However, the contrast is made with worshiping an angel, not the Beast or Satan. One could argue that the angel represents a divine intermediary, a being greater than humans, but less than God—a parallel with the emperors. Such an association could have occurred to the readers, but we have no way of being sure it did.

Second, “Son of God” is used only once (2:18), and the title is not contrasted with the emperor.⁵¹ Third, “god made manifest” (or any form of ἐπιφάνω) is not used at all in Revelation.

⁴⁸ A helpful insight shared by Greg Stevenson, Pepperdine University Lectures, May 1, 2002.

⁴⁹ Furthermore, the earliest evidence for widespread persecution of Christians under Domitian is Eusebius, *EH*, 3.18.4.

⁵⁰ David E. Aune, “The Influence of Roman Imperial Court Ceremonial on the Apocalypse of John,” *Papers of the Chicago Society of Biblical Research* 28 (1983), 22.

⁵¹ Compare the inscription where Nero is called “Son of the greatest of the gods, Tiberius Claudius” in Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East* (New York: Harper, 1927), 347 n. 4.

Fourth, κύριος plays a significant role in the language about God in Revelation.⁵² The title “lord” was a common one for the emperors.⁵³ Deissmann thinks that those who heard Paul preach would have understood it as “a silent protest against other ‘lords’ and against ‘the lord’ as people were beginning to call the Roman Caesar.”⁵⁴ Perhaps the phrase “Lord God” in Revelation is a protest against the arrogation of the title by Domitian.⁵⁵ Pliny indicates that Domitian thought himself a god:

He (Domitian) was a madman . . . who felt himself slighted and scorned if we failed to pay homage to his gladiators, taking any criticism of them to himself and seeing insults to his own godhead and divinity (*suam divinitatem suum numen*); who deemed himself the equal of the gods yet raised his gladiators to be his equals (*cumque se idem quod deos, idem gladiatores quod se putabat*).⁵⁶

Suetonius does not say that Domitian required the use of the name “Lord.” However, Suetonius does indicate that Domitian used the name of himself:

He (Domitian) delighted to hear the people in the amphitheatre shout on his feast day: “Good Fortune attend out [sic: our] Lord and Mistress” (*Domino et dominae feliciter*).

With no less arrogance he began as follows in issuing a circular letter in the name of his procurators, “Our Master and our God bids that this be done” (*Dominus et deus noster hoc fieri iubet*). And so the custom arose of henceforth addressing him in no other way even in writing or in conversation.⁵⁷

The evidence for the use of this title has been attested among the emperors up to Nero.⁵⁸

Fifth, κυριακός, employed in 1 Cor 11:20 and Rev 1:10, “may have been connected with conscious feelings of protest against the cult of the Emperor with its ‘Augustus Day.’”⁵⁹ Sixth, “savior” is not used in Revelation. Seventh, δεσπότης is used only once (Rev 6:10):

⁵² Eleven of the twenty-one times κύριος occurs in combination with θεός. In five of those eleven times, παντοκράτωρ is added to the string. Compare the inscriptions in Deissmann (*Light*, 353 n. 3), where sacrifices are offered for Augustus (ὑπὲρ τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ κυρίου Αὐτοκράτορος) and where Nero is described as “lord of the whole world” (354 fn. 4).

⁵³ See Deissmann, *Light*, 351–55.

⁵⁴ Deissmann, *Light*, 355.

⁵⁵ However, the references in Dio Chrysostom, *Oration* 45.1, and Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 67.13.4, have δεσπότης not κύριος.

⁵⁶ Pliny, *Panegyricus* 33.4 (trans. Betty Radice; LCL; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 394–95.

⁵⁷ Suetonius, *Domitian*, 13.1, 2. LCL. Many question or dismiss Suetonius’s testimony; on this point, see Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, 148.

⁵⁸ Deissmann, *Light*, 351–55.

⁵⁹ Deissmann, *Light*, 359.

They cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before thou wilt judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth.

Here a contrast with Caesar may be implicit, a contrast between the apparent sovereign and the real sovereign.

Eighth, the word “king” is significant in at least three passages. In 1:5, Jesus is described as ὁ ἄρχων τῶν βασιλέων τῆς γῆς. In 17:14 and 19:16, the phrase “King of Kings and Lord of Lords” appears. In 17:14, the Lamb (“the King of Kings and Lord of Lords”) conquers the Caesars.

From this survey it is clear that some of the titles have polemical force. That is, they function to show the surpassing nature of that which is heavenly. The terms θεός, κύριος, κύριος θεός, κυριακός, δεσπότης, and “King of Kings/Lord of Lords” stand out. In fact, Dominique Cuss has suggested that divine titles used of the emperor may account for the phrase ὄνομα[τα] βλασφημίας in Rev 13:1, “And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten horns and seven heads, with ten diadems upon its horns and a *blasphemous name* upon its heads.”⁶⁰

Another aspect, which may be promising, is the imagery surrounding the throne room scenes. However, since no hymns sung in the emperor cult survive, it is difficult to compare the hymns. Equally frustrating is the silence on the practice of obeisance before imperial images. One aspect, however, appears to be illuminated by knowledge of the emperor cult. Aune connects the crowns of Rev 4:10 with the crowns that the lictors wore.⁶¹ Price, on the other hand, suggests that the crowns on the twenty-four elders would remind the readers of the crowns on the imperial priests:

These crowns worn by imperial priests displayed up to fifteen busts of the reigning emperor, his family and his predecessors, and are a token of the importance of the imperial cult. They are prominently featured on coins of one city (Tarsus), presumably as part of that city’s claim to special provincial status (P1. 2f), while leading citizens often chose to be immortalized in stone in the prestigious role of an imperial priest, wearing the special crown (P1. 1a).⁶²

It seems possible that Pergamum, the provincial center of the emperor cult, had similar coins or practices. At the least, these data present another feasible “solution” to the significance of the crowns in the book of Revelation.

Conclusion

Some of the presuppositions surrounding the study of the emperor cult, upon which many interpreters build, cannot be supported by actual data. In fact,

⁶⁰ Dominique Cuss, *Imperial Cult and Honorary Terms in the New Testament* (Fribourg, Switzerland: Fribourg University Press, 1974), 50. See also 13:5, 6; 17:3.

⁶¹ Aune, “Court Ceremonial,” 12–13.

⁶² Price, *Rituals*, 170–71.

part of the benefit of this study is negative, telling us what we do not know or know not to be true. In general, the threat of death because of the emperor cult seems *overestimated*, while the influence of the emperor cult on the daily life of early Christians is *underestimated*.

Illustrations of the pervasive influence of the imperial cult include the following: (1) provincial calendars were reformed around the date of the birth of the emperor; (2) other cities in Asia—beyond the seven addressed in Revelation—had provincial imperial temples (in fact, when one adds municipal imperial temples to the provincial temples we have been considering, then the number of temples and their influence rise dramatically); (3) imperial temples employed many—almost always influential—citizens.⁶³

In summary, the evidence adduced in this study indicates the presence of imperial temples in three or four of the seven cities of Asia. At least two of the cities (Ephesus and Laodicea) had a temple to Domitian at the time of the writing of Revelation if one dates Revelation circa A.D. 95–96. In addition, readers would have been familiar with the language and practices associated with the emperor cult. Although one should not presume that there was a general persecution under Domitian, much less a persecution based on forced sacrifice in the emperor cult, the presence of priests, images of the emperor, sacrifices, and hymns in Asia Minor does illuminate many features of the book of Revelation. The interpreter is aided in the areas of language, royal imagery, and titles, and perhaps the occasion of the writing of the book. Findings such as these highlight the importance of examining the full range of primary sources, from literary works to epigraphy, numismatics, and archaeology.

⁶³ See the discussions in Friesen (*Imperial Cults*). On calendars, see 32–36. On the provincial imperial temple at Miletus, see 39–41. On municipal imperial temples, Friesen thinks that “most—if not all—small cities and towns had imperial temples” (61). Friesen also claims that even those cities that did not have temples still probably had imperial cults that used the existing temples of deities or various other public spaces (65–75). On imperial cult officials, note that although inscriptions record the titles of a number of officials, their functions are not always entirely clear (41–43, 54, 59, 104–13 [*hymnodes*], 114 [*sebastophant*]).

An enormous amount of the Book of Revelation is a scathing, prophetic critique of the cult of emperor worship and a warning to Christians living in the Empire not to get caught up in it. 4:11 PM - 5 Jan 2018 from St Joseph, MO. 409 Retweets. I fell in love with the Book of Revelation after reading it. 0 replies 0 retweets 0 likes. Reply. I thought Revelation was about the world going up in flames at the end, which means we can trash it. (Not really.) 0 replies 0 retweets 2 likes.