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The Message to Laodicea and the Problem of Its Local Context: A Study of the Imagery in Rev 3.14–22

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Leading images in the message to Laodicea (Rev 3.14–22) are often thought to allude to the Laodicean water supply, banks, textiles, and medical school. Re-examination of available evidence, however, shows that this is unlikely. Instead, the references to hot, cold, and lukewarm draw on common dining practices. The admonitions concerning poverty and gold, blindness and eye salve, and nakedness and white garments invoke expressions and commodities that were familiar throughout the region. Using such common images enables the message to address local issues while being read and appropriated by a wider audience.

The opening chapters of Revelation include messages to Christian communities in seven cities in Asia Minor. Studies generally recognize that Revelation's author was familiar with issues confronting these congregations, such as controversies over true and false teaching and conflict with local synagogues, and that he wove references to these local issues into the messages to these churches. Since the work of William Ramsay in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many have also argued that the messages allude to the distinctive characteristics of the city in which each congregation was located.¹ For example, Smyrna could be compared to a crown, and Revelation is sometimes said to play on this image by assuring the faithful at Smyrna that they would receive a crown from Christ (Rev 2.10). Sardis was captured by surprise attacks in

¹ Some of Ramsay's proposals appear in *Cities and Bishoprics of Phrygia* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1895) and in more developed form in *The Letters to the Seven Churches* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1904). Aspects of Ramsay's work were continued by C. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches in Their Local Setting* (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2001); cf. R. Worth, *The Seven Cities of the Apocalypse and Greco-Asian Culture* (New York: Paulist, 1999). For critical but generally favorable evaluations of this approach, see D. E. Aune's foreword in Hemer, *Letters*, xv–xxii; J. M. Court, *Myth and History in the Book of Revelation* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1979) 20–8; C. H. H. Scobie, 'Local References in the Letters to the Seven Churches', *NTS* 39 (1993) 606–24.

the sixth and third centuries BC due to the defenders' lack of vigilance, and Revelation's call for Christians at Sardis to remain watchful is sometimes taken as a warning not to fall into their forebears' pattern of negligence (3.2). When the congregation at Laodicea is censured for being lukewarm, rather than hot or cold, many suggest that the author implies a contrast between Laodicea's lukewarm water and the hot and cold springs of nearby towns, and that Revelation's exhortations to obtain gold, white garments, and eye salve from Christ make an implicit contrast to Laodicean pride in the local banks, garment industry, and medical school (3.14–22).

These interpretations often appear in commentaries,² but connections between the imagery in Rev 2–3 and the characteristics of the Asian cities remain problematic. Critics have pointed out that quests for local allusions often allow the expressions in Revelation to exert too much control over the selection and interpretation of material from other sources. They observe that archaeological and other ancient materials appear as isolated pieces of evidence that are used without adequate consideration of the broader context from which these materials were taken. Appeals to conjecture are common, and some key points rely on circumstantial evidence.³

The message to Laodicea in 3.14–22 provides a valuable test for the way Revelation communicates with its readers, since this message is generally thought to exhibit the clearest local allusions. Our task will involve critically evaluating the proposed allusions in this message and developing an alternative approach to the imagery by interpreting it in light of common practices rather than special local knowledge. We can affirm that the passage reflects the author's familiarity with issues in the local Laodicean context, while recognizing that he addresses these issues using images that were not derived from that context but had broader currency. We will find that using figurative expressions that were derived from common practices enabled the author to define and respond to the situation at Laodicea in ways that could be understood not only by that congregation but by a wider circle of readers in the Asian churches.

2 E.g. G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids, MI/Carlisle: Eerdmans/Paternoster, 1999) 303, 306; J. M. Ford, *Revelation* (AB 38; New York: Doubleday, 1975) 418–19; W. J. Harrington, *Revelation* (Sacra Pagina 16; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1993) 74–5; R. H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (rev. edn; Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1998) 105–11; F. J. Murphy, *Fallen is Babylon: The Revelation to John* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1998) 161–2; J. Sweet, *Revelation* (London/Philadelphia: SCM/Trinity Press International, 1990) 106–8.

3 See the critiques by S. J. Friesen, 'Revelation, Realia, and Religion: Archaeology in the Interpretation of the Apocalypse', *HTR* 88 (1995) 291–314; L. L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University, 1990) 202–4; P. Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John* (Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 2001) 164–5, 192, 209–11.

I. The problem of hot, cold, and lukewarm water sources

The message to Laodicea, which is presented as a word from the risen Christ, includes the following reproof: 'I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I am about to vomit you out of my mouth' (3.15-16). In this passage both hot and cold have positive connotations and lukewarm has negative connotations. Since the text deals with the faith commitments of the Laodicean Christians, some have assumed that heat connotes zealous faith and that coldness indicates indifference.⁴ This is natural given precedents for taking coldness as a description for being antagonistic or unfeeling (e.g. Epictetus, *Diatr.* 3.15.7), but it does not fit the text since it would mean that Christ wanted the congregation to be either hot – that is, more ardent in faith – or cold – that is, more firmly entrenched in unbelief. An appeal for faithfulness would make sense, but a call for unbelief would not. The metaphor requires that both hot and cold be understood positively in contrast to being lukewarm, the negative trait that characterizes the complacency of the Laodicean Christians. The question is, how can both heat and coldness be viewed positively?

The theory of local allusions relates images of hot and cold to the kinds of water found in the vicinity of Laodicea. The reference to what is hot is generally connected to the hot springs that were located at Hierapolis, about 6 miles north of Laodicea. The springs emitted streams of hot water with a high mineral content that flowed down the slopes below Hierapolis and created a large white wall of mineral deposits that was visible from Laodicea. The metaphor of coldness is usually related to Colossae, which was about 11 miles east of Laodicea and evidently enjoyed an ample supply of fresh water from a nearby spring. In contrast to these cities, Laodicea relied at least in part on water from an aqueduct. The conjecture is that as the water flowed to Laodicea its temperature would have changed, so that when it arrived it would have been lukewarm and unappealing, rather than cool like the water at Colossae or hot like the water of Hierapolis.⁵

Two problems make this theory unlikely. One is that the imagery in Revelation requires that hot and cold be related to what a person would take into the mouth, and that lukewarm be applied to what a person would spit out of the mouth. The metaphor might fit the cool water at Colossae, which was presumably good to drink, but it would not suit the hot water from Hierapolis since ancient descriptions of the hot springs do not suggest that their waters were desired for drinking.

4 G. B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966) 56-7; J. Roloff, *Revelation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 64.

5 M. J. S. Rudwick and E. B. M. Green, 'The Laodicean Lukewarmness', *ExpTim* 69 (1957-8) 176-8; Hemer, *Letters*, 186-91; S. E. Porter, 'Why the Laodiceans Received Lukewarm Water (Revelation 3:15-18)', *TynBul* 38 (1987) 143-9.

Strabo and Vitruvius tell of the hot water's tendency to calcify, so that when the people of Hierapolis channeled it for irrigation, the streams created white stony deposits. Strabo also observed that the 'water at Hierapolis is remarkably adapted also to the dyeing of wool . . . and the supply of water is so abundant that the city is full of natural baths' (*Geogr.* 13.4.14; Vitruvius, *On Architecture* 8.3.10). In these descriptions the benefits of the water are related to dyeing, bathing, and irrigation rather than drinking.

More importantly, Strabo thought that water from Laodicea was *better* for drinking than water from the hot springs at Hierapolis. He acknowledged that the water at Laodicea was like the water at Hierapolis in that it tended to calcify, then he added: 'although their [i.e. the Laodiceans'] water is drinkable' (καίπερ ὄντων ποτίμων; *Geogr.* 13.4.14). By Strabo's measure the waters at Laodicea were ποτίμων, that is, drinkable, fresh, or sweet, whereas the streams from the hot springs at Hierapolis were not. This makes it unlikely that Revelation alludes to local hot springs when wishing that the Laodicean Christians were 'hot', since hot water of that sort was not what people wanted to drink.

The other problem with the theory is that there is no evidence that the water from Laodicea's aqueduct was regarded as lukewarm and objectionable. Laodicea was flanked by two rivers, the Asopus and the Carpus, which supplied some of the city's water needs, but in Roman times the Laodiceans were also served by an aqueduct that was fed by a spring about 5 miles south of the city. A water tower and an adjacent structure, which may have been a fountain house, helped distribute water to points in the city. Although the date of the extant remains of the aqueduct is uncertain, inscriptions on the water tower and the adjacent structure seem to indicate that both were built in the late first century, suggesting that an aqueduct was in use at that time. The inscription on the structure by the tower emphasizes the fine quality of the water it provided. The builder was a certain Hedychrous, who named the edifice after himself: 'Hedychrous built me and named me "Hedychrous"' (*I.Laod.* 13.1-4). The name Hedychrous, which means 'sweet complexioned', apparently suited the pleasing quality of the water provided by the city's first-century water system. Similar commendations of Laodicea's water are also attested in later periods.⁶

6 On the date of the Hedychrous inscription and its positive assessment of Laodicea's water, see T. Corsten, ed., *Die Inschriften von Laodikeia am Lykos*, pt 1 (Bonn: Habelt, 1997) 48-9. On the aqueduct, see G. E. Bean, *Turkey Beyond the Meander: An Archaeological Guide* (London/Totowa, NJ: Benn/Rowman and Littlefield, 1971) 255-6. Bean concurs that the water at Laodicea was fine to drink. A Laodicean inscription from the fourth or fifth century AD, which was once part of a fountain house, begins: 'To good fortune! We, the nymphs of the spring, have the sweet, clear water of the Aidiskos', which was evidently the name of a stream (*I.Laod.* 11.1-2). This seems to confirm that good water was available in the area at that time.

In using water from an aqueduct, the Laodiceans were like the residents of the other cities mentioned in Rev 2–3. During the first century AD Ephesus had three aqueducts and Smyrna at least two; Pergamum's system of water conduits developed in phases from Hellenistic to Roman times; and Sardis, which had suffered earthquake damage in AD 17, completed a new aqueduct by AD 54.⁷ Aqueducts were regarded as genuine assets for a city, and people generally thought the water they provided was fine to drink (Athenaeus, *Deipn.* 2.42). If Laodicea's water was lukewarm, the same would have been true at Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, and Sardis. Although some have mistakenly assumed that Laodicea's aqueduct brought warm water from Hierapolis to Laodicea,⁸ there is no evidence for this since Hierapolis was north of Laodicea and the Roman aqueduct approached Laodicea from the south. Moreover, suggestions that Laodicea's water might have been especially bad because of its high mineral content miss the point. Revelation speaks only of temperature, not mineral content; and, as noted above, Strabo thought the water was fine to drink despite its mineral content.

II. Imagery from dining practices

An alternative interpretation of the imagery can be developed by shifting the frame of reference from special knowledge of local topography to more common practices that would have been familiar to the readers. We will first consider the literary shape of 3.14–22 to see how its components relate to each other, then we will explore sources outside of Revelation that might enhance our understanding of the passage. The message to Laodicea is presented in several concentric rings of thought that can be summarized as follows:

Sovereignty: Christ is the faithful witness and ruler of God's creation.

Dining: Christ will spit the lukewarm out of his mouth.

Prosperity: They think they are wealthy but are poor, blind, and naked.

Prosperity: They are to obtain gold, eye salve, and clothing from Christ.

Dining: Christ will eat with those who open the door to him.

Sovereignty: Christ's faithful followers will share a place on Christ's throne.

The outer ring of the message draws on themes of sovereignty. Christ introduces himself as 'the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation' (3.14), and he concludes by recalling how he conquered and sat down on God's

7 On the aqueducts at Ephesus, see *I.Eph.* 401; 402; 3092. On the water systems of Smyrna, see C. Cadoux, *Ancient Smyrna: A History of the City from the Earliest Times to 324 A.D.* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1938) 177, 248; for Pergamum, see W. Radt, *Pergamon: Geschichte und Bauten einer antiken Metropole* (Darmstadt: Primus, 1999) 147–58; for Sardis see G. M. A. Hanfmann, *Sardis from Prehistoric to Roman Times: Results of the Archaeological Exploration of Sardis 1958–1975* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1983) 142–3.

8 E.g. Ford, *Revelation*, 418–19.

throne, adding that others who conquer will also take their places on the throne (3.21–2). The introductory statement raises a number of interpretative problems that do not need to be resolved here, but attention needs to be given to the expression ἡ ἀρχὴ τῆς κτίσεως θεοῦ, ‘the ruler of God’s creation’. Some translators prefer to take ἀρχή as ‘origin’ (NRSV) or ‘source’ (REV, NAB), identifying Christ as an agent of creation as in Col 1.15–18. There are, however, more compelling reasons to take ἀρχή as ‘ruler’ (NIV). In formal terms, the opening lines of the messages to the churches regularly identify Christ in language that appeared in Revelation’s first chapter.⁹ The message to Laodicea echoes Rev 1.5, which called Christ ‘the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler (ἄρχων) of the kings of the earth’. The term ἀρχή in 3.14 seems to recall the ἄρχων, or ‘ruler’, of 1.5. Linguistically, the word ἀρχή was used for positions of authority that included civic offices (*I.Laod.* 65.3; 83.7; *I.Smyr.* 641.7), the proconsulate, and imperial power (Dio Cassius, *Rom. Hist.* 39.9.3; 51.21.6). By extension, the word was also used for the persons in such positions of power.¹⁰ Colossians speaks in the plural of earthly thrones, authorities, and rulers (ἀρχαί, Col 1.16), but uses the singular ἀρχή to show that in all things Christ is first in rank (Col 1.18).

The wider literary context also bears out that ἡ ἀρχὴ τῆς κτίσεως θεοῦ points to Christ’s rule. The idea that Christ is the origin or source of creation does not appear elsewhere in Revelation, but Rev 5.6–14 pictures the whole creation ascribing power and might to Christ the Lamb. From a literary perspective, Christ’s identity as ‘the ruler of God’s creation’ (3.14) finds visionary expression when ‘every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea’ declares, ‘To the one who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!’ (5.13). By introducing the theme of Christ’s sovereignty in 3.14 and developing it in 3.21–2, where Christ’s followers are promised a place on the throne, the author creates the outer frame of the message to Laodicea.

The second ring of the message, which is our concern here, draws imagery from practices of dining. In 3.15–16 Christ indicts the Laodiceans by saying that he is about to vomit them out of his mouth, but in 3.20 he matches this warning with the promise that he now knocks at the door and will come in to dine with everyone who opens to him. The two parts of the message can be interpreted together. The vulgar picture of Christ vomiting something out of his mouth is a graphic

9 The lampstand and stars in Rev 1.12, 13, 16; 2.1; the first and last, who died and came to life in 1.17–18; 2.8; one with the two-edged sword in 1.16; 2.12; one with eyes like flame and feet like bronze in 1.14–15; 2.18; one with the seven spirits and seven stars in 1.4, 16; 3.1; on the one with the key, cf. 1.18 and 3.7.

10 For the singular, see Hos 1.11 [2.2 LXX]; 2 Esdr 19.17; *P.Hal.* 1.226; for the plural, see Luke 12.11; Tit 3.1; *Mart. Pol.* 10.2. See further H. J. Mason, *Greek Terms for Roman Institutions: A Lexicon and Analysis* (Toronto: Hakkert, 1974) 110–11.

image of rejection that comes from the field of meal practices, just as sharing a meal with someone is a common way to depict acceptance and fellowship. The passage would have been effective not because it draws on special knowledge of the locale of Laodicea but because it recalls common practices.

In the message to Laodicea, Christ says that he wishes they were either cold or hot, and the context makes clear that one might desire to take something either cold or hot into one's mouth. It was understood that when one's 'thirst is accompanied by heat, then the desire is for a cold drink; or, if the thirst is accompanied by cold, then the desire is for a hot drink' (Plato, *Rep.* 437D). This observation appears in a classical source but it appeals to common experience, since those who are hot find a cold drink refreshing, while those who are cold desire something heated. In the second century AD Athenaeus created a conversation in which one dining companion says, 'The ancients are also acquainted with the use of very cold water in drinking healths, but I will not quote them unless you tell me in your turn whether they drank hot water at banquets' (*Deipn.* 3.123a). Accordingly, a number of examples are cited to show 'That they know of hot water is clear' and that conditions may 'add the desire for a hot drink' (*Deipn.* 3.123bc). After the examples of drinking hot water, the conversation partners give examples of drinking cold water, telling of wells that are delightfully cold and of people using snow to chill their water, sometimes purchasing snow in the market. They also describe people placing lukewarm water in underground jars in order to cool it and make it more palatable (*Deipn.* 3.123d).

The positive use of cold and hot can also be related to wine, which was regularly mixed with water before drinking. In classical times Xenophon wrote of those who bought costly wines and sought out snow in the summer to enhance the pleasure of their drinking (*Mem.* 2.1.30). Writing centuries later, under the Empire, Athenaeus cites sources that tell how the Greeks liked to chill their wine by placing it in a cold well or mixing it with snow (*Deipn.* 3.124cd). The Romans also liked chilled wine. Martial wrote of dissolving snow into wine and about the *colum nivarium*, which was a colander in which snow was placed so that the wine could be poured through it into the cup (*Epigr.* 5.64.1-2; 14.103-4). Seneca commented about those who assume that someone is sick if 'he does not mix snow with his wine' or 'revive the chill of his drink' by 'chipping ice into it' (*Ep.* 78.23). A chilled beverage was viewed positively.

A heated mixture of wine and water was also viewed positively.¹¹ We noted above that hot water alone was apparently drunk in Greece, but it is not clear that it was mixed with wine in classical times. By the late third or early second century BC, however, the Latin writer Plautus referred to an establishment known as the

¹¹ The following material is taken from K. M. D. Dunbabin, 'Wine and Water at the Roman *Convivium*', *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 6 (1993) 116-41.

thermopolium, which was a stand where hot drinks were sold. First-century examples of such hot drink stands were found at Pompeii and other cities, and Asian inscriptions show that such stands became known further east.¹² Heated wine became a common feature of dinners in Roman times. For example, Petronius writes of a guest calling for wine and hot water (*Satyricon* 65); and in later collections of stock phrases to be used when requesting wine one reads, 'mix it hot for me, not boiling and not lukewarm', but at the moderately hot temperature suitable for drinking.¹³

Various methods were used to prepare hot water for the wine. The wealthy favored self-contained water heaters, which had their own chambers for charcoal to heat the water. Some styles had taps near the base that enabled people to draw out the hot water for mixing with their wine. Names for such heating devices included *authepsa*, or self-boiler, and *miliarium*, or μιλιάριον, and they are mentioned by Latin and Greek writers from the period of the Roman Republic onward.¹⁴ Examples of hot water heaters dating from the second century BC through the first century AD have been found at Pompeii and other European locations, and later examples have been discovered in Cappadocia (3rd cent. AD), Cyrene (c. 400), and other places. Mosaics from Spain in the west (late 2nd cent. AD) to Ephesus in the east (early 4th cent.) include hot water heaters in depictions of banquets. Simpler methods of obtaining a heated mixture of wine and water are also attested. Dining motifs on mosaics and Roman sarcophagi show the water to be mixed with the wine being heated in bowls over a fire.

The Romans sometimes seem to have followed the Greek custom of mixing the wine and water in a common bowl from which all guests would be served. In such cases, the wine could be heated or cooled in the bowl before being put into individual cups, and a scene on a Roman sarcophagus seems to show wine being poured into a common cauldron over a fire.¹⁵ The Romans also developed the practice of allowing guests to choose whether they wanted their wine mixed with hot or cold water. Martial wrote that one might ask for either cold or hot water to mix with the wine, since both types were available (*Epigr.* 14.105). The option of choosing either hot or cold water may even have been extended to poorer guests,

12 Plautus, *Curculio* 292–3; *Trinummus* 1013–14; *Rudens* 529–30. Inscriptions from Corasium (MAMA 3.165) and Corycus (MAMA 3.719) refer to a θερμοπόλης, i.e. one who operates a *thermopolium*.

13 From the fourth-century *Corpus Glossariorum Latinorum*, quoted in Dunbabin, 'Wine and Water', 129.

14 Among Latin writers see, e.g., Cicero, *Ros. Am.* 133; Seneca, *Quaest. Nat.* 3.24.2; Lucian, *Lex.* 8. Among Greek writers see Heron of Alexandria, *Pneumatica* 2.34–5, which was probably written in the second half of the first century AD; Athenaeus, *Deipn.* 3.98c.

15 On both the sarcophagus and the Roman practice of mixing water and wine to individual taste, see Dunbabin, 'Wine and Water', 138–41.

although Juvenal writes of the arrogant slave who ignores a poor guest's call for hot or cold water (*Sat.* 5.63).

As a contrast to cold and hot, Revelation identifies what is lukewarm (*χλιαρός*) as objectionable and something to be vomited out of the mouth. This too would have been broadly understandable to readers who could picture persons at a meal spitting out something that did not meet their taste (Athenaeus, *Deipn.* 3.123a). More graphically, the *Life of Aesop* 2–3 tells of using lukewarm water to induce vomiting. In the story two of Aesop's fellow slaves ate some of the master's figs, so that when the master asked for the figs, after finishing his dinner, he found that the figs were missing. The other slaves blamed Aesop for taking them. To prove his innocence Aesop drank lukewarm water then put his fingers down his throat, but all he vomited out was the water. The master therefore demanded that the other slaves do the same, and after they drank the lukewarm water and placed their fingers in their mouths, they threw up the figs. In the message to Laodicea, the physical image of vomiting indicates rejection. Similar imagery occurs elsewhere, as in the biblical idea that the land would vomit out those who defiled it (*Lev* 18.5, 28). The imagery is clear without special knowledge of Laodicean topography.

The message to Laodicea rebukes the congregation by declaring that its works are lukewarm rather than cold or hot. Drawing on the imagery of a meal, the author expected readers to know that cold and hot beverages stand in contrast to their environment, and that diners find them refreshing. In contrast, the temperature of a cup of lukewarm water or wine is more like that of its surroundings; it does not distinguish itself to the touch. When applied to the Christians at Laodicea the imagery suggests that their works in no way distinguish them from others in their society. In previous messages the risen Christ commends works of perseverance, faith, and love (*Rev* 2.2, 19; 3.8) – the kind of works that would be positively regarded as cold or hot. Subsequent verses will identify the lukewarm quality of the Laodicean Christians with a complacency born of prosperity, which is a common human tendency that was frequently critiqued in antiquity.¹⁶ The call for works that are cold or hot summons readers to actions that are distinguished from the familiar pattern of wealth breeding complacency, and instead express the relationship with the risen Christ that sets the Christian community apart. The vulgar image of Christ vomiting the lukewarm Christians out of his mouth is designed to startle the readers into an awareness of the danger of being rejected unless there is change.

Later in the message the author resumes the dining imagery when telling readers, 'Listen, I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and

¹⁶ E.g. *Hos* 12.9; *Zech* 11.5; *1 En.* 97.8–9; *Luke* 12.16–21; Epictetus, *Diatr.* 3.7.29; D. E. Aune, *Revelation* (3 vols; WBC 52; Dallas: Word, 1997–8) 1.258–9.

open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me' (3.20). This evocative passage poses a number of interpretative challenges, but the positive connotations of dining are clear.¹⁷ The setting is that of a person's home rather than a public space, since Christ is depicted as standing outside the door. The reader is assumed to be on the inner side of the door with the ability to open it, and when the door is opened, Christ joins the householder in a meal. The resonances of fellowship that were part of meal contexts in antiquity are accented by the repetition of Christ and a person eating 'with' each other: 'I will come in to you and eat *with you* and you *with me*.' Vomiting the lukewarm out of the mouth is a disturbing way of warning readers about the prospect of rejection, while eating together is a vivid way of extending the prospect of continued fellowship; and through the interplay between the threatening and the encouraging uses of the meal imagery the author seeks to move readers toward the repentance for which the message calls.

III. The problem of banks, textiles, and eye salve

The central portion of the message to Laodicea deals with problems arising from the community's prosperity. After chiding the congregation for being lukewarm, Christ says: 'For you say, "I am rich and have become wealthy and need nothing", but you do not know that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. I advise you to buy from me gold refined by fire in order that you may be rich, and white garments that you may be clothed and that the shame of your nakedness may not be exposed, and salve to anoint your eyes in order that you may see' (3.17–18). The reproof assumes that the Laodicean Christians were affluent, since the passage would have no force if they were not well off. Ancient sources do indicate that the city was prosperous (Strabo, *Geogr.* 12.8.16), and Revelation understands that the Christians had become self-satisfied because of their financial success. Many interpreters, however, go further, assuming that pride in wealth was a civic trait, not merely a congregational one, and that the exhortations to obtain gold, white garments, and eye salve from Christ are designed to counter a misplaced confidence in the city's banks, textile industry, and medical school. Despite the popularity of this approach, however, it remains problematic.

The evidence does not suggest that pride in wealth characterized Laodicea any more than it did other cities. The idea that pride typified Laodicea is in part an inference from a comment by the Roman author Tacitus, who noted that in AD 60 Laodicea was 'laid in ruins by an earthquake, but recovered by its own resources, without assistance from ourselves' (*Ann.* 14.27). Laodicean inscriptions from the

17 For a summary of the issues, see Aune, *Revelation*, 1.250–4.

late first century also indicate that the rebuilding was supported by local benefactors, who funded a new gate, a stadium, and other public works, sometimes indicating that they funded projects out of their own means (ἐκ τῶν ἰδίων; *I.Laod.* 9.9; 12; 15.3; cf. 13; 24). Accordingly, some read Revelation's rebuke of the Laodicean Christians 'against the background of the boasted affluence of Laodicea, notoriously exemplified in her refusal of Roman aid and her carrying through a great program of reconstruction in a spirit of proud independence and ostentatious individual benefaction'.¹⁸ This interpretation goes beyond the evidence, however, since Laodicea did not have a pattern of refusing Roman help. When the city suffered an earthquake earlier in the first century it received Roman assistance in rebuilding (Strabo, *Geogr.* 12.8.18; Suetonius, *Tib.* 8). In the case of the earthquake of AD 60, Tacitus says nothing about the Romans offering help or about the Laodiceans refusing it; he simply observes that the city had sufficient means to rebuild.¹⁹ Moreover, relying on private benefaction for public works was common, and inscriptions often indicated that something was paid for out of a benefactor's own means; the expression ἐκ τῶν ἰδίων was conventional.²⁰ There is nothing to suggest that pride was any more characteristic of Laodicea than it was of other cities.

Short descriptions of Laodicea usually describe it in terms of three traits – its banks, its wool production, and its medical school – which can then be correlated with the references to gold, garments, and eye salve in Rev 3.18. Before considering each in detail, we should note that these elements actually characterized many of the cities mentioned in Rev 2–3. First, the principal banking center in Asia was Ephesus, where enormous sums of money were deposited in the temple of Artemis; and Pergamum also had a banking industry. Gold was traditionally associated with Sardis, where King Midas was said to have rid himself of his golden touch by washing in the river near the town, and the wealth of the former kings of Sardis was legendary. Smyrna had a guild of goldsmiths and a famous street named for gold.²¹ Second, medicine was practiced at Pergamum, where the physicians at the shrine to Aesclepius were said to have cured eye diseases and other ailments. Smyrna had a medical school, and Ephesus had an association of

18 Hemer, *Letters*, 195; cf. Ford, *Revelation*, 419; Caird, *Commentary*, 56; Sweet, *Revelation*, 107.

19 See D. Magie, *Roman Rule in Asia Minor to the End of the Third Century after Christ* (2 vols; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1950) 1.564; Prigent, *Commentary*, 210–11.

20 The inscriptional evidence is abundant. For examples see *I.Eph.* 20.10; 422.2; 3008.10; *I.Smyr.* 599.7; 643.6–7; 722.4–5; *I.Perg.* 2.402.2; 3.47.7.

21 On banking at Ephesus and Pergamum, see T. R. S. Broughton, 'Roman Asia Minor', *An Economic Survey of Ancient Rome* (ed. T. Frank; Paterson, NJ: Pageant, 1959) 4.503–950, esp. 888–97; Magie, *Roman Rule*, 1.624. On gold at Sardis, see Ovid, *Metam.* 11.136–45; Lucan, *Pharsalia* 3.209–10; Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 6.37. On gold at Smyrna, see *I.Smyr.* 721; Aelius Aristides, *Or.* 18.6.

physicians, and competitions in the writing of medical treatises.²² Third, wool and textile production were important to many of the cities in the region; and Ephesus, Smyrna, Sardis, Thyatira, and Philadelphia all had one or more guilds associated with the textile industry: wool merchants, linen workers, dyers, and garment makers.²³ One could as easily relate the admonitions in Rev 3.18 to institutions in Ephesus, Smyrna, and Pergamum as to those in Laodicea, which suggests that the imagery might be interpreted in a broader context.

Consideration of each of these institutions separately gives additional reasons for questioning the idea that the admonitions in 3.17–18 make specifically local allusions. First, the Laodiceans are censured for thinking they are rich. Interpreters often link Laodicea's wealth to its banking system, although the evidence for this is not entirely clear. Under the Roman Republic, Laodicea was one of the places where court cases were heard in the Cibytratic judicial district, and the Romans evidently had banks in Laodicea for use by tax collectors and other officials. Therefore, when Cicero was in the region in 51–50 BC he could anticipate exchanging bills for local currency at Laodicea (Cicero, *Fam.* 3.5.4). About this time Jewish communities also used Laodicea as a collecting point for the gold that was to be sent to Jerusalem (Cicero, *Flac.* 68). During the first century AD, under imperial administration, Laodicea retained its importance in the judicial system (Pliny the Elder, *Nat.* 5.105), but its role as a financial center in this period is unclear, since the method of tax collection had changed so that communities collected their own funds and sent them directly to the quaestor of the province.²⁴ The collection of Jewish funds for Jerusalem also changed after AD 70, when the temple was destroyed, and in any case such collections for Jerusalem took funds out of the local economy rather than contributing to local wealth. In early imperial times, Strabo ascribed Laodicea's prosperity to the region's fertility and wool production, but he said nothing about banking (*Geogr.* 12.8.16). The extent to which Laodicea's prosperity came from banking when Revelation was written is uncertain.

Second, the Laodiceans are rebuked for being blind and are admonished to obtain eye salve from the risen Christ in order that they might see. Many have noted that near Laodicea there was a medical school that followed the tradition of the Hellenistic physician Herophilus, who studied the optic nerve (Strabo, *Geogr.* 12.8.20), and one of the physicians associated with the school in the first century was the ophthalmologist Demosthenes Philaethes. Although no extant source

22 On Pergamum, see Aelius Aristides, *Or.* 39.15; A. Hoffmann, 'The Roman Remodeling of the Asclepieion', *Pergamon: Citadel of the Gods* (ed. H. Koester; Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998) 41–61; on Smyrna, see *I.Smyr.* 536; 537; Cadoux, *Ancient Smyrna*, 150–1; on Ephesus, see Broughten, 'Roman Asia', 851.

23 Strabo, *Geogr.* 13.4.14; Pliny the Elder, *Nat.* 8.73.190; Magie, *Roman Rule*, 1.47–8.

24 On the changes in tax collection, see Magie, *Roman Rule*, 1.165, 407.

says that Laodicea produced eye salve, it did produce an ointment used in ear treatment, and the nearby region of Phrygia yielded a mineral used in eye salve. Therefore, some conjecture that Laodicea could have produced an eye salve of which residents were proud, prompting the author of Revelation to counter with a warning about spiritual blindness.²⁵

The major weakness of this proposal is that there is no direct evidence that Laodicea was known for its eye salve. On the one hand, the region of Phrygia evidently produced a mineral that was used for the treatment of eyes. Galen wrote: 'And the eyes you will strengthen by using the dry collyrium made of Phrygian stone, applying the mixture to the eyelids without touching the membrane of the eye inside.'²⁶ Extant sources do not, however, link this mineral to Laodicea or its medical school. On the other hand, Galen says that Laodicea produced an ointment made from nard (μύρον νάρδινον), but he does not say that this ointment was used in treating eyes. Even in the case of the ears Galen identified celandine as the primary medication and he listed the kind of nard produced in Laodicea as an auxiliary treatment:

But for strengthening the ears, celandine alone is needed, pulverized on a stone with vinegar and then infused very gently through a tube, or through that familiar instrument called by all an ear-syringe. And when it seems to you that they are strengthened, so that nothing more runs from them, continue to instill the best ripe nard, formerly made best only in Laodicea in Asia, but now also in other cities.²⁷

Elsewhere Galen again mentions the type of nard that came from Laodicea in connection with liver or stomach inflammations, especially those accompanied by a slight fever, but he does not relate it to eye problems.²⁸ Ramsay proposed that the 'Phrygian' mineral used for eyes might have been 'Laodicean', but Hemer rightly pointed out that there is insufficient evidence to make this leap, and that the evidence for linking Laodicea to eye salve is circumstantial and inconclusive.²⁹

Third, the Laodiceans are said to be naked and are exhorted to obtain white garments from Christ. Strabo mentions that 'the country around Laodicea produces sheep that are excellent, not only for the softness of their wool, in which they surpass even Milesian wool, but also for its raven-black color, so that the Laodiceans derive splendid revenue from it' (*Geogr.* 12.8.16), and inscriptional evidence shows that the city also was involved in the garment trade (*I.Laod.* 51 b 2).

25 Ramsay, *Letters*, 316–17; Hemer, *Letters*, 196–201.

26 *De sanitate tuenda* 6.12 (439); R. M. Green, *A Translation of Galen's Hygiene* (*De Sanitate Tuenda*) (Springfield, IL: Thomas, 1951) 269.

27 *De sanitate tuenda* 6.12 (439–40); Green, *A Translation of Galen's Hygiene*, 270.

28 Galen, *De compositione medicamentorum secundum locos* 13.119; *De methodo medendi* 10.791.

29 Ramsay, *Letters*, 419; Hemer, *Letters*, 197, 199, 208.

Accordingly, Revelation is often thought to be exhorting the congregation not to rely on the prosperity generated by the local black wool but to obtain the white garments that Christ gives.

What makes a specifically local allusion unlikely is that neither the economic benefits from textiles nor the prospect of obtaining white robes was limited to Laodicea. We noted earlier that nearly all of the cities in Rev 2–3 had some connection with the textile industry. More importantly, the message to the church at Sardis promises the faithful white robes, just as the message to the Christians at Laodicea does; yet there is nothing to suggest that the author was contrasting the white robes with garments made in the local textile industry at Sardis (3.4–5), and this in turn makes it less likely that we should detect such a contrast in connection with Laodicea. Later visions show all the redeemed wearing white robes (7.9–14). The robes are not unique to the Laodicean context.

IV. Using common expressions to address local issues

The study of the language in the message to Laodicea can be helpfully reframed by considering it in light of common idioms rather than specifically local allusions. From this perspective the message would be effective not because it used imagery derived from the distinctly Laodicean context but because it addressed the congregation using expressions that were both familiar and apt for the situation.

First, the contrast between types of wealth and poverty is used in different contexts; it is not peculiar to Laodicea. In the message to Smyrna, Christ says: 'I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you are rich' (2.9). The Smyrnan Christians were evidently poor in the economic sense, and according to the message they were subject to abuse by others in their city. Despite their material poverty, however, the author understands the Smyrneans to have a faith that is abundant enough to sustain them in the face of sharp opposition; in that sense they are rich. In the message to Laodicea the contrast is reversed: these Christians are economically well situated but poor in relation to Christ. Various ancient writers made similar distinctions. Some said that those who were economically poor could at present be considered rich if they had abundant non-material possessions like virtue or wisdom. From this perspective those who were 'lapped around by silver and gold and a multitude of landed possessions and revenues' could be called poor if they lacked virtue.³⁰ Similarly, in Christian tradition those with ample possessions but not faith are said to 'store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God' (Luke 12.21). Such present spiritual wealth could be construed as receiving the riches of divine grace (Eph 1.7; 2.7; cf. 2 Cor

³⁰ Philo, *Good Person* 8–9; *Flight* 17; Cicero, *Fin.* 5.28 §84; Seneca, *Ep.* 62.3.

6.10; 8.9) or having abundant good works (1 Tim 6.18). A second way to speak of spiritual wealth was to identify it with the reward that would be given to the faithful in the future. In this pattern believers have spiritual wealth in the form of the hope of a glorious future in the presence of God (Col 1.27). Fusing both the present and futuristic understandings of spiritual wealth was also possible: 'God has chosen the poor to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him' (Jas 2.5).

The 'gold refined by fire', which the Laodiceans are to obtain from the risen Christ in Rev 3.18, is primarily an image for the future reward of the faithful, although it might also have secondary overtones of abundant faith. In the visions that follow, the author will contrast the earthly gold that sets people against God with the gold that has a place in God's kingdom. The book warns that on earth gold readily becomes linked to false belief, whereas heavenly gold is associated with the glory of God. The Laodiceans manifest pride in their wealth, yet they will be shown ominous scenes in which evil locusts arise from the great abyss wearing crowns of gold (9.7) and unbelievers worship idols made of gold (9.20). The sharpest critique of earthly wealth appears in the vision of the whore of Babylon, who is adorned with gold and lures people into the network of trade in gold and other commodities until she meets her demise (17.4; 18.12, 16). In contrast to such disturbing visions, the author directs the readers to heavenly scenes in which a golden altar stands before God's throne (8.3; 9.13) and elders wearing golden crowns hold golden bowls (4.4; 5.8). The new Jerusalem, which displays the future glory of the faithful, is measured with a golden rod, is made of gold, and has a street of gold (21.15, 18, 21). Where the ominous visions show the corrupting power of earthly wealth, warning readers like the Laodiceans not to put their trust in it, the heavenly visions fix the readers' hope on the blessings that come to the people of God.

A second group of images has to do with blindness and eye salve. The Laodiceans are called blind in a figurative sense because their prosperity has generated a false sense of security. Calling someone who lacked understanding 'blind' was common. For example, 'Who is blind but my servant' or 'blind like the servant of the Lord? He sees many things but does not observe them' (Isa 42.19–20a; cf. 56.10). Similarly, Jesus is said to have castigated his opponents: 'Woe to you, blind guides, who say, "Whoever swears by the sanctuary is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gold of the sanctuary is bound by the oath." You blind fools!' (Matt 23.16–17; cf. 23.24, 26; John 9.40–1). In many cases the expression was associated with wealth, which was said to make people blind to their true condition. In the classical tradition Antiphanes compared wealth to an incompetent physician who makes people blind (*Frag.* 259), and Menander called the rich and self-absorbed 'blind' (*Frag.* 77; 83). Writing in the late first or early second century AD, Epictetus said, 'What are you doing, O wretched people? Like

blind men you go tottering all around. You have left the truth path and are going off upon another; you are looking for serenity and happiness in the wrong place ... It is not in possessions' (*Diatr.* 3.22.26–7; cf. 3.26.3). Such figurative use of blindness was common.³¹

Eye salve is an image for what will enable the Laodiceans to clear up their vision. The image is apt because salves were common products that were produced and marketed at many places in the Roman Empire, reflecting the widespread need to treat eye diseases. There was no necessary connection between the availability of eye salve and the presence of a medical school like the one near Laodicea. Writing at the beginning of the first century AD, the medical author Celsus comments that 'there are many salves devised by many inventors', and he assumes that most eye disorders can be treated by 'readily procured remedies' (*De medicina* 6.6.2, 39). These medications were usually compounds made from various plants and minerals, which could be mixed with water, milk, wine, or other liquids. Formulas for eye medications varied, and as production expanded new combinations were developed. Some eye specialists made their own salves, but others evidently used what was sold in the druggist shops.³² Writing in the mid-first century, Pliny the Elder remarked that doctors 'are so detached from the process of making up drugs, which used to be the special business of the medical profession'. Instead of preparing medications themselves, 'for a long time they have been buying plasters and eye-salves ready made' (*Nat.* 34.108). The diffusion of the trade in pharmaceuticals is reflected in comments that Galen made in the second century, for when he mentions a certain type of nard he repeatedly says that it was 'formerly made best only in Laodicea in Asia, but now also in other cities'.³³

If eye salves were produced by various types of druggists, they were utilized by various kinds of healers. Some were trained physicians, like those who learned their practice at Laodicea, Pergamum, and other medical centers, but other healers practiced without studying at a medical school, and some had little if any training. Epictetus, for example, refers disparagingly to those who attempt to practice medicine by obtaining eye salves even though they do not have the proper knowledge of how to use them (*Diatr.* 3.21–20–21). Some healers established practices in cities, while others traveled from place to place, and as medications proliferated on the market, patients could buy and administer eye salves

31 See further W. Schrage, 'τυφλός, κτλ.', *TDNT* 8 (1972) 270–94, esp. 277.

32 On the preparation and ingredients in eye salves, see H. Nielsen, *Ancient Ophthalmological Agents* (Odense: Odense University, 1974) 9–57; R. P. J. Jackson, 'Eye Medicine in the Roman Empire', *ANRW* 2.37.3 (1995) 2228–51, esp. 2238–43; V. Nutton, 'The Drug Trade in Antiquity', *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 78 (1985) 138–45.

33 *De sanitate tuenda* 6.12 (440); *De compositione medicamentorum secundum locos* 13.119; *De methodo medendi* 10.791.

themselves.³⁴ In referring to eye salve, Revelation develops a metaphor based on a commodity that was widely available, not one that was necessarily connected to an institution at Laodicea.

In the immediate context eye salve is an image for the words that the risen Christ speaks to the Christians of Laodicea, since it is by speaking that he seeks to change their outlook. Although the Laodiceans are told to purchase the needed eye salve from the risen Christ, the author actually begins opening their eyes to his perspective by telling them about their poverty, their nakedness, and their blindness in matters of faith. In a wider sense, the book of Revelation as a whole is designed to bring about a clarity of vision on the part of its readers. At the beginning of the visions the voice of the risen Christ directed John to write what he saw in a book and to send it to the seven churches (1.11). Throughout the book John repeatedly conveys what he 'saw', such as the door to the heavenly throne hall, the Lamb who was slain, destructive powers, the saints in glory, and the new Jerusalem. As readers follow John's prose, they too come to see something of what he saw, and by receiving this 'revelation from Jesus Christ' (1.1) they come to 'see' themselves and their situation in a way that they did not see it before.

The third set of images concerns nakedness and white garments. Although the text is sometimes thought to contrast the black wool of the local market with the white garments that Christ provides, the explicit contrast is between white garments and nakedness. The word 'naked' (γυμνός) challenges the idea that the Laodicean Christians are rich and need nothing. Underlying the reproof is the assumption that God and the risen Christ see things in a way that human beings cannot. There was precedent for using the term 'naked' to alert people to the fact that they are completely known to God. Of God it was said, 'Everything is naked and open before your sight, and you see everything; and there is nothing that can hide itself from you' (1 En. 9.5; cf. Philo, *Cher.* 17; Heb 4.13). As the author develops the idea he connects nakedness with shame, referring to 'the shame of your nakedness' (Rev 3.8; cf. 16.15), an idea that is also attested in other sources (e.g. Gen 2.25; 3.7; Isa 20.4).

The white garments convey a sense of honor, which is the opposite of shame. In ordinary practice white garments were worn by various kinds of people in the cities of Asia, and the significance of white garments varied depending on the situation. Writing in Asia Minor in the second century AD, Artemidorus indicates that some people of means, such as a lawyer, customarily wore white clothes, whereas artisans and other workers in the lower classes did not, although slaves apparently could wear white if that was usual for their masters (*Onir.* 2.3; 4.3). Also writing in second-century Asia Minor, Aelius Aristides indicates that it was customary for participants in Greco-Roman religious rites to wear white, which evidently

34 Jackson, 'Eye Medicine', 2231–5.

connoted purity and holiness and was widely considered to be the color most appropriate to the gods.³⁵ In Jewish and early Christian writings heavenly beings were often depicted as wearing white (Dan 7.9; Matt 17.2; John 20.12; Acts 1.10; *1 En.* 14.20), and bright garments could point to the glory of those who are raised from the dead (*1 En.* 62.15–16).

White garments did not have a single well-defined meaning, but they did have connotations of honor and holiness that suited the message to Laodicea. The author reproved the congregation by insisting that the complacency that grew out of their prosperity was not cause for pride but for shame in relation to the risen Christ. Directing them to cover their shame not simply with clothing but with 'white garments' from the risen Christ is useful because white robes were traditionally associated with what is holy and acceptable to God. By developing the image the author of Revelation strengthens the idea that genuine honor must be seen in relation to God and Christ. In one sense a white robe means that a person has been cleansed from sin and defilement through Christ's death: 'they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb', so that his self-sacrifice makes it possible for them to join the triumphant company of the redeemed around the throne of God (Rev 7.9–14). In another sense the honor of wearing white robes is the reward given to the faithful. Those who resist sin and thereby refrain from defiling themselves, and who 'conquer' by remaining faithful as Christ himself conquered by remaining faithful to the point of death (5.5–6), have the promise of wearing white (3.4–5), like the elders who worship God and the Lamb in the heavenly throne hall (4.4). A gift of white robes is a special assurance that those who die for their faith are nonetheless favored by God (6.11).

The figurative language in the message to Laodicea addresses issues in the congregation, but it does not rely on special inside knowledge of the locale for its effectiveness. The author uses the imagery to define and speak to the situation in a way that could be understood not only by the Laodicean Christians but by a wider group of readers. This message, like those to other cities, concludes by appealing for readers to heed 'what the Spirit is saying to the churches' in the plural (3.22; cf. 2.7, 11, 17, 29; 3.6, 13). The words of reproof and encouragement that are written to this specific congregation are designed to be read and understood by others. By using vivid figurative expressions that draw on practices familiar throughout the Asian context, the author crafts a passage that is local in focus yet accessible to Christians in other cities, who are included among the readers who are to receive and be moved by this message.

35 Aelius Aristides, *Or.* 48.30–1; cf. Plato, *Laws* 956A; Plutarch, *Mor.* 771D; *P.Oxy.* 471.101; Josephus, *Ant.* 11.327, 331. The dead were also buried in white (Plutarch, *Mor.* 270D–F; Pausanias, *Descr.* 4.13.3).