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Babylon and New Jerusalem in the Book of Revelation: Imagery and Ethical Discernment.

Craig R. Koester

Luther Seminary, ckoester@luthersem.edu

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Biblical Ethics and Application

Purview, Validity, and Relevance of Biblical Texts
in Ethical Discourse

Kontexte und Normen neutestamentlicher Ethik/
Contexts and Norms of New Testament Ethics

Volume IX

Edited by

Ruben Zimmermann and
Stephan Joubert

Mohr Siebeck

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Ruben Zimmermann, born 1968; Professor for New Testament Studies and Ethics at the Protestant Faculty of the Johannes Gutenberg-University, Mainz; co-founder and -leader of the Mainz Research-Center of 'Ethics in Antiquity and Christianity' (*e/ac*), chair of the Mainz Graduate School 'Time and Ethics' and elected advanced career scholar in the "Enhancing Life-Project" (Chicago); Research Associate of the University of the Free State (Bloemfontein, SA).

Stephan Joubert, born 1958; 1986–90 Minister in the Dutch Reformed Church; 1990–97 Assistant Professor in Biblical Studies, University of Pretoria; 1997–2002 Professor in New Testament Studies, University of Pretoria; 2005–09 Extraordinary Professor in New Testament Studies, University of Pretoria; since 2011 Research Fellow, Radboud University, The Netherlands; since 2013 Extraordinary Professor, Contemporary Ecclesiology, University of the Free State, South Africa.

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Babylon and New Jerusalem in the Book of Revelation

Imagery and Ethical Discernment

Craig R. Koester

The book of Revelation has inspired forms of action that can move in two seemingly opposite directions. On the one hand, the book seems to call for separation from a society that is permeated by evil. The faithful maintain a distinctive identity and adhere to forms of personal morality that are understood to be acceptable to God, but possibilities for social change are left mainly to God, who is expected to intervene in the future and bring about a new world.¹ On the other hand, Revelation seems to engage issues of justice on social, political, and economic levels. God's actions aim at overcoming injustice and they culminate in a transformed society. Therefore, those who follow God are to direct their present actions toward that same end, which means they are socially engaged.²

An important factor leading to these differences is that Revelation shapes the readers' perspectives on human conduct through imagery. The book does of course include some specific directives about what to do and not do.³ But much of the book's impact is created by images like those of Babylon the whore and New Jerusalem the bride, which are evocative.⁴

¹ Mark D. Mathews, *Riches, Poverty, and the Faithful: Perspectives on Wealth in the Second Temple Period and the Apocalypse of John* (SNTSMS 154; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 197–218. For historical perspectives on the tensions noted here see James H. Moorhead, "Apocalypticism in Mainstream Protestantism, 1800 to the Present," in *Apocalypticism in the Modern Period and the Contemporary Age* (ed. S. J. Stein; vol. 3 of *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*; New York: Continuum, 1998), 72–107; and Stephen J. Stein, "Apocalypticism Outside the Mainstream in the United States," in that same volume, pp. 108–39.

² Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 10–12.119–24; Barbara R. Rossing, *The Choice Between Two Cities: Whore, Bride, and Empire in the Apocalypse* (Harrisburg: 1999), 161–65.

³ On the variety of ethical issues considered in Revelation see Jürgen Kerner, *Die Ethik der Johannes-Apokalypse im Vergleich mit der des 4. Esra: Ein Beitrag zum Verhältnis von Apokalyptik und Ethik* (BZNW 94; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1998).

⁴ On imagery and ethical reflection see Jan G. van der Watt, "Ethics Alive in Imagery," in *Imagery in the Gospel of John: Texts, Forms, Themes, and Theology of Johannine Figurative Language* (ed. J. Frey, J. G. van der Watt and R. Zimmermann; WUNT 200; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 421–48. Also see his *Family of the King: Dynamics of Metaphor in the Gospel according to John* (BibIntSer 47; Leiden: Brill, 2000), 284–322.

Babylon the whore is the negative image, which is used for a city that is characterized by wealth and brutality (17:1–18:24). The city rides a hideous beast, whose seven heads signify royal power, and the city has an extensive commercial network that supplies a vast array of goods for the city to consume. There is a direct appeal for readers to reject the way of life associated with Babylon when a voice says, “Come out of her, my people, so that you do not take part in her sins and do not receive any of her plagues” (18:4). Yet how the readers would actually put that exhortation into practice is not spelled out.

New Jerusalem is the positive counterpart to Babylon, and the city is portrayed as the bride of Christ the Lamb (19:6–8; 21:1–22:5). This city is adorned with gold and jewels, which reflect the glory of God. The nations walk by its light and the central action performed there is worship of God and the Lamb. Yet the city comes “down out of heaven from God” (21:2), which makes it the product of divine action, and the vision pertains to the end of the age. Readers must ask how the vision of God’s city descending in the future might shape human actions in the present.

Determining how to translate images into specific actions is challenging, and yet it is integral to the way Revelation functions. The writer creates tension between value systems that have either positive or negative implications for behavior, but readers themselves must translate the images into specific actions. To consider the process we will look first at what it means to read Revelation as an ethical text, then ask how the images relate to values, and finally ask what this means for the readers’ ethical discernment.

I. Interpreting Imagery in Relation to Ethics

Ethics as a discipline assumes that people are responsible subjects who are to make thoughtful judgments about a proper course of action. Neither Revelation nor any other New Testament writing develops an ethical theory or system in the manner of Aristotle, yet these early Christian texts do go beyond simply listing right and wrong behaviors. They assume that readers must develop the capacity to make critical judgments, and the writers shape the perspectives that will enable the readers to do so.

A useful framework for exploring the ethical dimensions of early Christian texts has been developed by Michael Labahn. He proposes that an ethical text is one that:

- a) provides a reflective orientation toward the reader’s actual “way of life”
- b) by defining how to behave and act
- c) according to a value system that is defined or supported by the text, its characters, and/or its setting

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d) in relation to a specific social group and/or in relation to the surrounding society at large.⁵

His corollary to this definition is that ethical texts attempt to persuade readers to accept the writer's perspective on appropriate conduct as normative. These observations provide a useful framework for considering the ethical significance of the Babylon and New Jerusalem images in Revelation.

1. Imagery and a Reflective Orientation

For our work here we will define an "image" as a word picture that shapes perception through a transference of meaning. In ordinary usage the words "whore" (πόρνη) and "bride" (νύμφη) refer to individual human beings and the types of relationships they have with others. But the literary context in Revelation makes clear that in each case there is a transference of meaning: The characteristics ordinarily used for a person are now ascribed to a city (πόλις; 17:18; 21:2), and that transference of meaning helps engage the readers in a process of reflection.

The process begins as the images in the text evoke a range of associations in the mind of the reader.⁶ On a primary level many associations would come from the cultural context in which the readers lived. Both marriage and prostitution were common in the Roman Empire, and the images in Revelation draw on common assumptions about both types of relationship. Other associations come from the Jewish Scriptures and tradition. The writer makes extensive use of biblical language when describing both cities. The images of marriage and prostitution recall passages in which God is identified as a husband and Israel is variously portrayed as a bride or a prostitute, depending on the people's perceived loyalty or disloyalty to God. Finally, the visions of the cities draw on a network of images within Revelation itself. The writer links the language of sexual infidelity to idolatry (2:14, 20–22) and uses bridal imagery for faithful followers of Jesus the Lamb (14:4–5; 19:7–8).

A transference of meaning is already apparent in the way older biblical texts use the language of marriage and prostitution for ways of relating to God, and there were also passages that applied the language to entire cities.⁷ Revelation contin-

⁵ Michael Labahn, "It's Only Love' – Is That All? Limits and Potentials of Johannine 'Ethic' – A Critical Evaluation of Research," in *Rethinking the Ethics of John: "Implicit Ethics" in the Johannine Writings* (ed. J. G. van der Watt and R. Zimmermann; WUNT 291; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 44–80, esp. 7. See also Richard B. Hays, "Mapping the Field: Approaches to New Testament Ethics," *Identity, Ethics, and Ethos in the New Testament* (ed. J. G. van der Watt; BZNW 141; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2006), 3–19.

⁶ See Jörg Frey, "Die Bildersprache der Johannesapokalypse," *ZTK* 98 (2001): 161–85; cf. Craig R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community* (2d ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 6; van der Watt, *Family of the King*, 111–18.

⁷ Terms for prostitution are used for Jerusalem (Isa 12:1) and more often for the people of Israel when they violated their covenant relationship with God by worshiping other deities (e. g. Jer 2:20; 3:1–14; Ezek 16:15–22; 23:1–49; Hos 4:12–13; 5:3). In Revelation, however, the image

ues that process. As traits ordinarily used for a person – a whore or a bride – are transferred to a city, the text brings readers to a point of incongruity. They must recognize that on one level a city with many people, buildings, and streets *is not* identical to an individual person. Therefore, the incongruity prompts an imaginative leap in which the reader must discern how the city *is* like an individual bride or prostitute. Since some traits do not transfer, the reader must discern which traits do transfer.⁸ When a reader can see the points of similarity, despite the persistent points of dissimilarity, the passage becomes meaningful.

Such word pictures function differently in ethical reflection than plain directives do. The descriptions of the two cities include specific forms of behavior that are presented negatively and positively, but the images also have an evocative character in which the words suggest behaviors and traits that go beyond those specifically mentioned in the text. The broader connotations are integral to the way images shape the readers' perspectives. The interpretive process is like that described by Paul Ricoeur in relation to symbols. He commented that a symbol does not conceal a message that "only needs to be unmasked for the images in which it is clothed to become useless." The images stimulate and direct an ongoing process of reflection, rather than giving an answer that obviates the need for further thought. The "symbol gives; but what it gives is an occasion for thought, something to think about."⁹

2. *Relevance for the Readers' Way of Life*

In terms of method our next step is to ask how this reflective orientation might relate to the readers' actual way of life. Revelation was written for readers living under Roman rule in a variety of social situations in the province of Asia. The messages to the churches in Revelation 2–3 outline the social setting as the author understood it, including issues that call for ethical discernment.

First is the issue of wealth. The congregation at Smyrna is said to be economically poor (2:9), which was not true of the city as a whole. Smyrna was a vibrant commercial center. It had an excellent harbor and access to a road system that facilitated trade with markets further inland. There were associations of goldsmiths, silversmiths, winemakers, fishermen, and flax workers, as well as physicians and a medical school.¹⁰ By way of contrast, the members of its Christian

of prostitution is linked to Babylon rather than Jerusalem, and the imagery recalls passages comparing Nineveh (Nah 3:4) and Tyre (Isa 23:16–17) to a prostitute because of the allure of their commercial networks.

⁸ Paul Ricoeur, "Metaphor and Symbol," in *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 45–69, esp. 50.

⁹ Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Religious Perspectives 17; New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 348.

¹⁰ Philip A. Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 39–40.

community were not benefitting from the prosperity enjoyed by others. It is not clear whether they were poor because they came from the lower classes or whether they had been economically marginalized because of their distinctive religious commitments.¹¹ In either case, their situation was one of material deprivation.

Other readers apparently saw no problem with the current economic situation. The Christians at Laodicea are said to be rich, prosperous, and in need of nothing (3:17). Like Smyrna, the city of Laodicea was a flourishing center for commerce, but in contrast to Smyrna, the Christians at Laodicea were able to share the prosperity of the time. The writer, however, saw their complacency as a threat to their religious commitments. They are spiritually “wretched, pitiable,” and “poor” despite their material wellbeing (3:17). Socially, their focus on wealth could make them prioritize relationships with business partners over those with impoverished Christians like those at Smyrna. It is striking that the specific behaviors called for by the text are expressed in metaphors rather than direct statements. The Laodiceans are to “buy” (ἀγοράσαι) from Christ gold refined by fire, white garments, and eye salve (3:18). The idea of buying something is transferred from ordinary transactions in the marketplace to obtaining something of another order. But what specific actions might be required are not spelled out.

A second problem was conflict and violence. The Christians at Smyrna experienced conflict with members of a local synagogue and the situation had apparently escalated to the point where others were involved (2:9–10). The writer mentions the threat of imprisonment, which would have involved civic or provincial officials. He also warns that some Christians could be put to death, which implies the involvement of Roman officials, who had the authority to impose capital punishment.¹² The writer does call on them to be faithful to the point of death, promising them the crown of life, but does not go further in developing a case for that course of action.

Other congregations addressed by Revelation did not experience conflict and violence to the same extent. At Pergamum a Christian named Antipas had been put to death in the past, but the message to that congregation does not suggest that they faced a similar threat at the time Revelation was written (2:13). At Philadelphia the congregation experienced conflict with a local synagogue, which created a sense of social vulnerability, but nothing is said about violence or Roman involvement (3:8–9). The message to Sardis does refer to death, but in a transferred sense. The congregation has a reputation of being alive, but in

¹¹ For the idea that the Christians at Smyrna were from the lower classes see Stephen S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John: A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005), 65. On exclusion from trade associations see Heinz Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (RNT; Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1997), 106–7. On the general economic conditions in the city see Craig R. Koester, *Revelation* (AYB 38A; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 271–72.

¹² Koester, *Revelation*, 276.

terms of faith it is “dead” (νεκρός, 3:1). Their complacency is a form of dying (ἀποθανεῖν) and it is shown by actions that are far from complete (3:2). They are to wake up and repent, which will presumably lead to more acceptable actions (ἔργα), but what those are is left unsaid (3:2–3).

A third issue concerns eating food that has been offered to idols (εἰδωλόθυτα; 2:14, 20). The question was whether the followers of Jesus could take part in meals where people served food that had come from the sacrifices made to various gods and goddesses. Festivals honoring Artemis, Dionysus, Athena, and other deities were part of the cultural fabric of the Roman world. The emperor was given religious honors at festivals in his honor and in those dedicated to the traditional deities. Many celebrations were public events at which animals were slaughtered and patrons hosted meals at which people ate the meat. Sacrificial meat could also be served at meals in the temple of a Greco-Roman deity, in private homes, and at gatherings of business associates and friends.¹³

Ethically, the problem Christians faced was whether they could rightly take part in such meals. On the one hand, Christian commitment to God involved rejecting the worship of other gods. That would mean that they should not participate in meals where sacrificial meat was served. On the other hand, many Christians wanted to maintain good relationships with family members, friends, and business associates who were not part of the Christian community. That desire would lead to a greater willingness to participate in the meals. Members of the Christian community in Asia Minor were divided over this issue. The Nicolaitans and others encouraged people to participate in the meals, while the congregation at Ephesus opposed the practice (2:6, 14–15, 20). It was an issue of ethical discernment.

For Revelation to address the readers’ actual way of life meant dealing with a variety of social situations in which the readers’ experiences were different. The evocative character of the book’s imagery plays an important role in doing this, since it can engage various kinds of readers in a process of critical reflection.

II. Babylon Vision and Social Critique

The Babylon vision in Revelation 17–18 shapes the readers’ ethical perspectives through a satirical critique of a value system that the writer opposes. Characters including the whore, her royal clients, and the merchants and sailors who do business with the whore all play a role. The way satire works is that a writer takes stock features of a subject and then exaggerates certain traits, so that readers can still see the resemblance, although the subject now seems outlandish. If people can be startled into seeing that something that initially appears to be impressive or desirable is actually ridiculous, they will be more ready to resist it.

¹³ Koester, *Revelation*, 99–101.

1. Images of Wealth and the Values of Profit and Status

Wealth is a prominent aspect of the portrayal of Babylon the whore in Revelation 17–18.¹⁴ The woman displays wealth through sumptuous clothing and jewels, and the kings, merchants, and sailors who play supporting roles emphasize her extensive trade networks, which provided them with hefty profits. The imagery draws in part on biblical depictions of Tyre with its expansive trade network (Isaiah 23; Ezekiel 26–27), along with prophetic indictments of Babylon (Jeremiah 51) and Nineveh (Nahum 3). But the vision also reflects popular impressions of Rome's commercial power. Those doing business with Rome frequented ports along the Mediterranean Sea, northeast Africa, and the Arabian Peninsula. Some went to India, where they could obtain goods from China.¹⁵ The Roman trade network was an economic mainstay for the cities of Asia Minor where the readers lived. Ephesus was said to be "the largest emporium in Asia" (Strabo, *Geogr.* 14.1.24), but the other cities were also important for commerce.

One aspect was that Asia Minor included *suppliers* of goods mentioned in Rev 18:12–13. Their textiles, wines, gems, marble, timber, and horses, which were sold in Rome and elsewhere. Inscriptions from the seven cities refer to local associations of goldsmiths, silversmiths, weavers, winemakers, and in some cities there were groups of Roman businesspeople. Notably, Revelation's list of trade goods concludes with a reference to slaves, which were regarded as an important commodity in Asia Minor.¹⁶

The portrayal of merchants and sailors involved in commerce links trade to the profit motive. In conventional thinking merchants were unscrupulous people, who were driven by greed. They would take great risks by sailing across the seas in order to trade in luxury goods, and it was said that their primary goal was to return home "with a tight-stuffed money bag" and a "swollen purse" (Juvenal, *Sat.* 14.281–83; cf. Persius, *Sat.* 5.132–39). They represented those for whom profits were more important than honesty, who could say, "Call me a scoundrel, only call me rich!" (Seneca the Younger, *Ep.* 114.15; cf. Sir 26:29). Readers could assume that the merchants would respond to the ethical question, "What shall we do?" by saying, "Do what is profitable." But the negative connotations of the imagery press readers to reject the values undergirding this mode of thinking.

¹⁴ J. Nelson Kraybill, *Imperial Cult and Commerce in John's Apocalypse* (JSNTSup 132; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996); Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy Studies in the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), 338–83; Allen D. Callahan, "Apocalypse as Critique of Political Economy: Some Notes on Revelation 18," *HBT* 21 (1999): 46–55.

¹⁵ Aelius Aristides, *Or.* 26.11, 13; Lionel Casson, *The Periplus Maris Erythraei* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

¹⁶ Craig R. Koester, "Roman Slave Trade and the Critique of Babylon in Revelation 18," *CBQ* 70 (2008): 766–86; Koester, *Revelation*, 706; Peter Herrmann, "Neues vom Sklavenmarkt in Sardeis," *Arkeoloji Dergisi* 4 (1996): 175–87.

The image of the whore brings in another aspect of commerce, since she is not a supplier but a *consumer* of goods. She is emblematic of those who buy the merchants' cargo, which is heavily weighted towards luxury goods. Of the commodities listed in Rev 18:12–13, eighteen are included in Pliny the Elder's list of the most costly items in the Roman world (*Nat.* 37.204). Many were associated with ostentation. The woman is adorned with gold and jewels and drinks from a gold cup. Her clothing is purple and scarlet, which conveys the impression of wealth. The merchants supply her with ivory, silk, perfumes, carriages, and other items that were used for display.¹⁷

The value most closely linked with ostentation was social status. To some extent Revelation echoes Roman writers, who decried the decadence of the wealthy and those who imitated them in the hope of gaining social recognition. They satirized a society where people valued wealth more than good character and appearances more than genuine virtue.¹⁸ When asked the ethical question, "What shall we do?" the woman would presumably reply, "Do what brings ease and status."

Portraying the woman as a whore taints the pursuit of wealth and status by linking it to moral corruption. The woman initially appears to have high status, since she wears elegant clothing and jewelry, and has kings as her clients (17:1–4). One might assume that she is an upper-class courtesan (ἑταίρα), who had sexual relationships with men of wealth. Yet Revelation calls her a whore (πόρνη), a term used for prostitutes of all sorts, from the lower class and destitute women and girls, who worked on the streets and in brothels, to the slaves who were forced into prostitution by their owners. Common perceptions were that prostitutes were brazen and shameless; they were said to be driven by lust and they provided services that were crude and impure.¹⁹ For a woman who personified vice to appear publicly in elegant clothing was seen as an affront to standards of decency (Jer 4:30; Martial, *Epigrams* 2.39; Lucian, *Dial. meretr.* 6.2).

In antiquity some thought it was fine for men to use prostitutes as an outlet for sexual desire (Horace, *Sat.* 1.2.31–32), but others insisted that it was shameful for men – including kings – to do so.²⁰ That value is apparent in the conventional practice of personifying vice as a seductive woman in garish attire and virtue as a woman in modest clothing. In both Greco-Roman and Jewish sources such

¹⁷ Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 338–83; Koester, *Revelation*, 718–22.

¹⁸ Sallust, *Bell. cat.* 5.8; Seneca the Younger, *Ep.* 115.10; Juvenal, *Sat.* 6.292–300; Dio Chrysostom, *Orations* 3.93; 13.34. See Robert M. Royalty, *The Streets of Heaven: The Ideology of Wealth in the Apocalypse of John* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1998), 81–124; Peter S. Perry, "Critiquing the Excess of Empire: A Synkrisis of John of Patmos and Dio Chrysostom," *JSNT* 29 (2007): 473–96.

¹⁹ Ezek 16:28, 30; 23:5; Terence, *Andr.* 69–70, 797–980; Plautus, *Asin.* 504–44; Juvenal, *Sat.* 6.125–32. See Jennifer A. Glancy and Stephen D. Moore, "How Typical a Roman Prostitute is Revelation's 'Great Whore'?" *JBL* 130 (2011): 551–69.

²⁰ Dio Chrysostom, *Orations* 7.133–34; Athenaeus, *Deipn.* 569a; *Sib. Or.* 5:392; *Tg. Jer.* 51&.

images reinforced the idea that rejecting the seductress was the moral thing to do.²¹ Feminist interpreters have rightly pointed out that these ancient sources draw on stereotypes and that the imagery can be highly problematic when used for women's roles generally. But they have also noted that in Revelation the imagery functions in a transferred sense, since it depicts a social order that is corrupting for women and men.²² In Revelation the imagery challenges a value system in which attaining wealth and status are the primary factors that shape one's way of life.

2. Images of Violence and the Values of Life and Reconciliation

A second area for ethical reflection among the readers concerns conflict and violence. As noted earlier, some readers apparently faced threats, while others felt secure, but for both groups the value of preserving life would shape their mode of conduct. In various situations they might respond to the question, "What shall we do?" by replying, "Do whatever secures life for you." The author of Revelation will challenge that idea by insisting that other values come into play, yet he will also affirm the value of life, even as he redefines it. His exhortation to resist to the point of death includes the hope of receiving the "crown of life" (ζωή) through resurrection (2:10). The challenge for ethical discernment is seeing how that hope for the future reshapes the readers' response to social conflict in the present.

Readers who would take the path of avoiding conflict to preserve life could invoke conventional arguments for accommodating Roman rule. On the one hand, the Romans were often seen as those who controlled violence rather than those who perpetrated it: "As long as Caesar is the guardian of the state, neither civil dissention nor violence shall banish peace" (Horace, *Odes* 4.15; cf. Vellius Paterculus, *Roman History* 2.126.3). Any threats from Roman authorities, like those at Smyrna, could be seen as exceptional and readers could insist that the stability that the Roman order provided was the best means of preserving life overall. As a result, people should reconcile themselves to that fact. On the other hand, the Romans did use violence for conquest and social control, but the general sense was that the Romans were invincible. Sculptures in the imperial temple at Aph-

²¹ Xenophon, *Mem.* 2.1.21–22; Philostratus, *Vit. Soph.* 482–84; Maximus of Tyre, *Orations* 14.1; Prov 7:10–18; 4Q185; Philo, *Sacr.* 20–26.

²² Feminist critiques of Revelation's feminine imagery include Tina Pippin, "Eros and the End: Reading for Gender in the Apocalypse of John," *Semeia* 59 (1992): 193–210; Catherine Keller, "Eyeing the Apocalypse," *Postmodern Interpretation of the Bible: A Reader* (ed. A. K. A. Adam; St. Louis: Chalice, 2001), 253–77; Jean K. Kim, "Uncovering Her Wickedness: An Inter(con)textual Reading of Revelation 17 from a Postcolonial Perspective," *JSNT* 73 (1999): 61–81. Those who emphasize that Revelation uses feminine imagery to call for resistance against Rome include Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation*, 12–15; Rossing, *Choice Between Two Cities*, 87–90.

rodisias, for example, picture the emperors in triumph over conquered nations.²³ The imperial imagery gives the impression that resisting the Romans is futile.

Revelation's imagery challenges such reasons for placating Roman authority. In chapter 13 the writer portrays the ruling power as a savage seven-headed beast, which dominates the nations of the world and makes war against the followers of Jesus (13:7). In chapter 17 the whore is pictured riding on the beast. The imagery conveys the idea that the city that rules the world is supported by rulers who will slaughter others to sustain the current political order. Moreover, the whore is drunk on the blood of the saints, the witnesses to Jesus, and countless others who have been slaughtered (17:6; 18:24). In a Roman context the image of drinking blood connoted the kind of senseless cruelty that might typify a tyrant (Suetonius, *Tib.* 59.1). Jewish sources magnify the sense of horror, since consuming blood was deemed antithetical to God's will (Lev 17:10–11; *1 En.* 7:5; 98:11; *Jub.* 7:29).

At each point the images of a beast and a woman drinking blood alter the basis for ethical reflection by making violence seem repulsive rather than impressive – it is something no one can rightly accommodate. When translated into specific actions, the imagery supports the exhortation for Christians facing persecution to be “faithful to death,” since giving in would allow the power of evil to have its way (Rev 2:10). For readers who felt secure, like those at Sardis and Laodicea, the imagery shows that indifference to the violent dimensions of society is dangerously shortsighted. The whore is complacent when she says, “I rule as a queen; I am no widow, and I will never see grief” (18:7). Yet the vision shows how the beast that carries her eventually turns its violence against her and destroys her (17:16). The imagery shows how a city based on violence finally becomes the victim of violence. The implication is that reconciling oneself to social patterns that involve violence is not the way to secure life, but the imagery also leaves readers to discern what specific actions might result from that change in perspective.

3. Images of Idolatry and the Value of Fidelity to God

A third issue facing the readers was whether it was acceptable in at least some circumstances to eat food that had been sacrificed to Greco-Roman deities. In the messages to the churches the writer is sharply critical, using language of sexual infidelity for the practice. Eating food offered to idols is a kind of fornication (πορνεία, 2:14, 20–21) and those who engage in the practice are committing adultery (μοιχεύω, 2:22). The language follows older biblical patterns in which Israel's relationship to God was compared to a marriage and the worship of other gods was described as sexual infidelity (e.g., Hos 1:2; Isa 1:21; Jer 3:1–14; Ezek 16:15–22).

²³ Steven J. Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 204.

Among early Christians there were various perspectives on the practice. There were some who had a broad acceptance of it. For example, some Christians at Corinth thought that eating such food was not a problem because the gods represented by the statues did not exist, so a person did not actually worship other gods by eating it (1 Cor 8:1–6). They might also have thought that Jewish law forbade eating what was offered to the gods (Exod 34:15), but Christians were free from such laws (1 Cor 10:23). Revelation ascribes similar views to the Nicolaitans and those nicknamed “Balaam” and “Jezebel” (Rev 2:14–15, 20).

Other Christians, like Paul, thought that if food had been purchased on the open market and was eaten in social settings that had no connection to idolatry, then there was no problem eating it (1 Cor 10:23–27). But he rejected the practice of eating in a Greco-Roman temple or in contexts where a host made clear that the meat had been offered in sacrifice, since idolatry was antithetical to Christian faith (1 Cor 8:7–13; 10:28). The author of Revelation, however, unequivocally opposed the practice as something “of Satan” (Rev 2:24). That view was shared by others, who considered idolatry demonic and insisted that under no circumstances could one eat such food.²⁴ Accordingly, those who would eat sacrificial meat are directly told to repent with warnings that failure to do so brings judgment from Christ (Rev 2:16, 21–22).

The portrayal of the beast from the sea in 13:1–18 heightens the writer’s critique of accommodating Greco-Roman religious practice by focusing specifically on the imperial cult. The ruling power is depicted as a hideous seven-headed monster, but the vision shows people being impressed by its apparent invincibility, so they worship it (13:4). A figure identified as the beast from the land then deceives people into making a statue of the beast from the sea to worship. The imagery reflects the way the imperial cult received popular support from people in the empire. Then the author satirizes public acceptance of the cult by picturing the beast from the land animating the statue so that it speaks (13:11–15). The action seems to be a kind of sorcery, which reinforces the idea that idolatry of all sorts – including the imperial cult – is demonic.²⁵

Including the seven-headed beast in the portrait of Babylon in chapter 17 enables readers to see questions of worship as a subtheme. Images from the imperial cult celebrated the way the empire brought economic prosperity and demonstrated Roman invincibility – ideas that the vision of Babylon’s demise will challenge. Moreover, the image of the woman sitting on the beast suggests ways in which the imperial cult was related to other religious traditions. Cybele the mother goddess was sometimes shown riding a leopard or lion, but in Revelation the great mother

²⁴ Acts 15:20, 29; 21:5; *Did.* 6:3; Justin Martyr, *Dial.* 34–35; Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1.6.3; 1.24.5; 1.28.2.

²⁵ Empowering the statue to speak has been variously understood as sorcery, a hoax, or spontaneous animation. For an overview see Koester, *Revelation*, 593–94. For recent discussion of its relationship to sorcery see Rodney L. Thomas, *Magical Motifs in the Book of Revelation* (LNTS 416; London: Continuum, 2010), 68–81.

becomes the great whore and mother of earth's abominations (17:5).²⁶ Dionysus could be pictured riding a tiger while clutching a flask of wine, and the whore on the beast holds a wine cup filled with blood (17:6).²⁷ The repulsive imagery supports the admonitions to reject the practice of eating food offered in the imperial cult and the forms of polytheism associated with it.

The challenge is determining how such rejection would take place in practice. For example, some readers of Revelation were probably businesspeople, who might have belonged to the trade associations that were useful for developing the social networks that enhanced the chances of success. The problem was that gatherings of those groups often involved rites that honored the emperors and Greco-Roman deities. By withdrawing from the associations the Christians would avoid compromising their beliefs by honoring other gods.²⁸ Yet simply withdrawing would raise questions about how people were to make a living. Philip Harland observes that the "Apocalypse does not provide clear answers to such questions, and we are left wondering."²⁹

III. New Jerusalem and Alternative Values

The process of wondering is made more helpfully complex by considering the vision of New Jerusalem, which reflects the values the readers are to embrace. Some features of the city are drawn from the idealized vision of a restored Jerusalem in Ezekiel 40–48. The city has walls with twelve gates and is square in shape; the river that flows out of it waters the trees that provide food each month and have leaves that heal. But many elements in the description also fit Greco-Roman practice, which could include the square shape, gates with inscriptions, and paved streets.³⁰ Yet the vision again uses parody by exaggerating these elements to a degree that beggars the imagination. Where ordinary walls, gates, and foundations were made of stone, those of New Jerusalem are made of jewels and pearls, and its streets are paved with gold. If the size of a city would impress people, then New Jerusalem overwhelms them with walls fifteen hundred miles long and high.

²⁶ See Joscelyn Godwin, *Mystery Religions in the Ancient World* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 114; Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 370–71.

²⁷ On Dionysus see Pier Giovanni Guzzo and Antonio d'Ambrosio, *Pompeii* (Naples: Electa, 2002), 30.

²⁸ Kraybill, *Imperial Cult and Commerce*, 16, 100, 135–41; Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, 376–77; Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 124–27.

²⁹ Harland, *Associations*, 272.

³⁰ See recently Eric J. Gilchrest, *Revelation 21–22 in Light of Jewish and Greco-Roman Utopianism* (BIS 118; Leiden: Brill, 2013).

No human being could create a city on this scale, which fits Revelation's point: No earthly city can be equated with the kingdom of God. God's city is of another order – and that poses a challenge for ethical discernment. Given the focus on God's action and the difference between New Jerusalem and the social contexts of the readers, how might the imagery help shape their way of life in the present? Does it suggest social withdrawal and or does it call for social engagement?

1. Images of Wealth and the Value of Fidelity

The vision of Babylon's fall is followed by the announcement that "the wedding day of the Lamb has come and his wife has made herself ready" (19:7).³¹ What is striking is that the bride's attire has some similarities to that of the whore, although the values represented by the imagery are different. Babylon's ostentation included wearing purple and fine linen (βύσσινος, 18:12, 16). The bride now is given fine linen (βύσσινος) to wear, but it is white and pure (καθαρός, 19:8). When used for a bride, the notion of purity shows that prior to the wedding she has been chaste rather than promiscuous.

The bride's conduct reflects the value of fidelity. In ordinary Greco-Roman and Jewish practice a marriage relationship began with a betrothal, in which the man and woman were bound together by promises of commitment. Specific pledges could include a dowry, the man's promise to provide for his wife, and emphasis on marital fidelity.³² During the period of betrothal the bride was to be faithful to her husband, and the wedding was when the bride was taken to live in her husband's home. By analogy, the readers of Revelation are to see themselves in the role of the bride, who are to remain faithful to the Lamb until the wedding day, which will be depicted as resurrection to life in New Jerusalem, God's dwelling place (21:1–2).

The bride's fine linen is "given" (ἐδόθη) to her, presumably by God, as an affirmation of their faithfulness, much as God gave a white robe to the martyrs earlier (19:8; cf. 6:11). But the garment is also said to consist of the saints' actions of justice (δικαιώματα, 19:8). Such actions would be the opposite of Babylon's deeds of injustice (ἀδικήματα), which expressed violence and greed. (18:5). The bride's actions would instead be congruent with those of God, whose deeds of justice (δικαιώματα) bring about the defeat of evil (15:4). This construes faithfulness in active terms as deeds expressing allegiance to God and the Lamb and resistance to the ways of God's opponents.

Images of wealth emerge more prominently in the vision of New Jerusalem, which is compared to a bride elegantly dressed for her husband (21:2). In Jewish

³¹ In the theme see Ruben Zimmermann, "Nuptial Imagery in the Revelation of John," *Bib* 84 (2003): 153–83.

³² Philo, *Spec.* 3.72; Shemuel Safrai and Menachem Stern, *The Jewish People in the First Century* (2 vols.; Assen: van Gorcum, 1974–76) 2:756.

and Greco-Roman practice it was common for a bride to wear jewelry on her wedding day. The gemstones, pearls, and gold would be fitting in such a context.³³ Jewish sources then facilitate transferring the imagery from a bride to a city, because a restored Jerusalem was sometimes pictured having a gemlike appearance (Isa 54:11–12; Tob 13:16).

What is striking is that in the Jerusalem vision the gold and jewels function positively as adornment, while in the Babylon vision they functioned negatively as ostentation. The difference comes from the underlying relationships. New Jerusalem's bridal imagery reflects an honorable relationship based on fidelity, while Babylon's prostitution imagery reflects a pattern of relationship that is dishonorable. The signs of wealth can be construed positively or negatively depending on the kinds of relationships they reflect.

That aspect brings readers to an interpretive crux. The writer is clear that making wealth the object of attainment or the basis for social status would manifest infidelity to God, yet the writer does not treat poverty in itself as a virtue, and New Jerusalem shows wealth being used for the glory of God and God's city in the future. The contrast places readers – like the prosperous Christians at Laodicea – at the point of discerning whether wealth can be used faithfully in the present, and if so, how that would be put into practice.

2. *Images of the City and the Values of Life and Reconciliation*

We have seen that another issue is conflict and violence. In the New Jerusalem vision the writer presents an image that conveys the value of life. The primary agent in the New Jerusalem vision is God, the Creator, who is said to have made all things in heaven, earth, and sea (4:11; 10:6). In New Jerusalem God's activity as Creator culminates when he makes all things new (21:5).³⁴ The vision goes beyond the salvation of individual human beings to include creation. The extent to which God's action can be understood as a renewal of the present creation is disputed, but what is important for us here is the character of God's action and the value of life that it represents. In New Jerusalem death no longer exists and God wipes away the tears from all faces (21:3–4). God gives people the water that brings life (ζωή) and there is food each month from the tree of life (21:3–4; 22:1–2).

The vision also involves reconciliation and the end of conflict. The Babylon vision showed the kings of the earth acting in opposition to God and the Lamb and posing a threat to God's people (17:2, 18; 18:3, 9). In New Jerusalem, however, the kings and nations come into the city through the gates. As noted above, the images depict a transformed society. Instead of following the destructive

³³ Ezek 16:10–13; *Jos. As.* 3:6–4:1; 18:5–7; *T. Jud.* 13:5; Pliny the Younger, *Ep.* 5.16.7.

³⁴ On God's role as Creator see Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 47–53.

ways of Babylon they conduct themselves or “walk” in a manner fitting for a city illumined by God and the Lamb (21:22–26). God’s designs extend to the healing of the nations (22:2).

The values of life and reconciliation stand in tension with the vision’s warning about those who have no place in New Jerusalem but are relegated to the lake of fire, which is called “the second death” (21:8). A number of wrongful behaviors are listed, which manifest opposition to God. Since God is the Creator who gives life, Revelation lists types of conduct that are the opposite of what the Creator intends. By practicing them, people collaborate with the Creator’s opponents, who are called “the destroyers of the earth” (11:18). For the Creator’s will to be accomplished, the forces of destruction must be overcome. When the forces of destruction are destroyed, then life can thrive.

The behaviors on the list fit this pattern. The “cowardly,” who give way in the face of evil, allow the forces of destruction to have their way. The “faithless” are the opposite of faithful witnesses like Jesus (1:5; 3:14; 19:11) and Antipas (2:13), who refused to capitulate even at the cost of their lives. The “vile” share the traits of Babylon the whore, whose practices include idolatry and violence against the saints (17:4–6). “Murderers” wrongfully destroy life, while “sorcerers” engage in the illicit manipulation of supernatural forces for their own ends (9:21; 22:15). If true worship means honoring the God who created the world (4:11; 14:7; 15:3–4), then idolatry is the opposite and manifests opposition to God. Where God (6:10; 15:3) and Jesus (3:7, 14; 19:11) are true, Satan and the other destroyers of the earth carry out their designs through deception (12:9; 13:14; 16:13; 18:23).

Interpreters have rightly noted that the function of the warning about wrongful behavior in the New Jerusalem vision is not predictive but hortatory. As Barbara Rossing has commented, “the primary function of these verses is not to proclaim either universal salvation or eternal damnation but rather to exhort the audience to repentance and faithfulness.”³⁵ The warnings are designed to startle readers into rejecting the forms of conduct listed in order to more fully live out the values expressed by the vision of life in God’s city.

3. *Images of Worship and the Values of Fidelity and Community*

Worship of God and the Lamb is an element of continuity between human action in the present and in the future (22:3). Worship reflects the value of fidelity, which also informs the vision’s wedding imagery. The interplay is analogous to that in prophetic texts, which pictured God as husband and Israel as his bride. The assumption was that worship of God was an expression of their covenant

³⁵ Rossing, *The Choice Between Two Cities*, 156. See also David E. Aune, “The Apocalypse and the Problem of Genre,” *Semeia* 36 (1986): 65–96, esp. 89.

relationship, just as worship of other gods was likened to prostitution. In Revelation, Christ the Lamb is the bridegroom, the faithful one (πιστός, 1:5; 3:14; 19:11). He brings his followers – his bride – to his home, which is the dwelling of God, whose words are faithful (πιστοί, 21:5). Human worship, in turn, is a way of expressing fidelity to the Lamb and to God.

The description of New Jerusalem facilitates seeing the interconnection between the bridal imagery and worship imagery. The gemstones that adorn the bride are similar to those on the breastplate of the high priest (Exod 28:17–21), and the city's symmetrical shape is like that of the holy of holies in Israel's sanctuaries, which were perfect cubes. It is striking that the vision says that there is no temple in the city (Rev 21:22). God and the Lamb function as the temple, and there is no separate structure. That distinguishes the pattern in New Jerusalem from prophetic visions of a temple structure dominating a restored Jerusalem and from Greco-Roman cities, which regularly included temples. The focus of worship on God and the Lamb is deemed primary.

A key aspect of the worship scene is that it is done collectively. The servants of God and the Lamb are treated as a group, who see God's face and bear God's name (22:4). Earlier in the book they were depicted as priests (1:6; 5:10), and that role continues as they engage in worship (λατρεύουσιν) God in the climactic scene in the book (22:4). Where other passages admonish readers to reject forms of worship that are related to the deities honored by Roman society, the vision of New Jerusalem emphasizes the value of remaining part of the community that worships God and the Lamb now, knowing that the community's worship is of abiding significance.

Yet here again the vision of social transformation is striking, because the nations and kings who might be associated with opposition to God are now shown coming into the city (21:24, 26). The imagery is similar to that of Isa 60:11, but the sense is different. In Isaiah the nations and kings are subservient to Israel, but in Revelation they willingly bring their glory to the city, which honors God. The nations also walk in the light of the city that God's presence illumines, which recalls prophetic passages in which the nations come to learn God's ways (Isa 2:2–4; Mic 4:1–4; Jer 3:17).

That emphasis fits broader patterns in Revelation, which picture the worshipers of God including people of every tribe, language, people, and nation (Rev 5:9–10; 7:9–10). It challenges readers to consider the function of their worshiping community in relation to the wider society. Notions of witness (μαρτυρία), which appear throughout Revelation point toward the outward-facing quality of community life. The book heightens the tension between worship practices that maintain the distinction from the wider society along with forms of witness that engage the wider society.

IV. Imagery and Ethical Discernment

Revelation's imagery contributes to ethical discernment in a number of ways. First, ethical theory presupposes that people are responsible subjects who are able to make reflective judgments about appropriate conduct.³⁶ In practice that is true of Revelation. The book makes sharp contrasts between the values represented by Babylon and those of New Jerusalem, but readers are expected to determine how to turn those values into concrete actions. To some extent the reflective process is shaped by specific directives to reject eating food offered to idols and to persevere in the face of conflict. But it is notable that many seemingly direct admonitions use images that involve a transference of meaning. For example, the call to "come out" of Babylon is not a direct summons to exit a city (18:4) and the exhortation to "buy" gold, white garments, and eye salve from Christ does not pertain to ordinary transactions in the marketplace (3:18). Both require that readers determine how the imagery *does* pertain to actions needed in their social contexts. The images of the two cities require the same kind of discernment but on a more extensive scale. Put positively, this assumption honors the role of individual and the community in ethical discernment.

Second, the process of discernment is dynamic. The visions of the two cities position readers between the negative values represented by Babylon and the positive values linked to New Jerusalem, and that generates the process of working out the implications. They are to reject Babylon's deeds of injustice (ἀδικήματα), which manifest greed, violence, and false worship (18:5), and they are to perform the deeds of justice (δικαιώματα) that are fitting for those who belong to the city of God (19:8). But because Babylon represents the society of the present and New Jerusalem is yet to come, the interplay between resisting the negative values and enacting the positive ones is ongoing. The vision of Babylon's demise moves readers toward social and economic separation, and yet the vision of New Jerusalem's open gates, which welcome kings and nations to God's city, points toward more positive forms of social engagement. The tension is not resolved but gives shape to the readers' manner of life.

Third, the imagery allows for complexity in the readers' ethical responses. Revelation addresses readers who were positioned quite differently in terms of social and economic status. For example, the wealthy Christians at Laodicea would have a different range of options than would be true for the impoverished Christians at Smyrna. The vision of Babylon addresses both types of readers with a scathing critique of those who make wealth the object of attainment and the basis of social status, yet the description of New Jerusalem shows images of wealth being used positively for a future characterized by fidelity to God. Given the contrasts, readers might ask whether wealth is inherently corrupting or whether it can in the

³⁶ Labahn, "It's Only Love," 6.

present situation be used in fidelity to God. But Revelation does not give a direct answer. Instead, its function as an ethical text is to provoke reflection informed by the values conveyed through its imagery, and readers assume the responsibility of discerning a way forward in the contexts where they live.