

# KYKEON

STUDIES IN HONOUR OF H.S. VERSNEL

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## THE APOCALYPSE OF JOHN AND THE IMPERIAL CULT

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In an essay published in 1988, Versnel reacted to Fergus Millar's fundamental article on the role which the imperial cult played in the persecutions of the Christians.<sup>1</sup> Millar had contended that the imperial cult played only a minor part in the persecutions.<sup>2</sup> Versnel argued that the Christians' refusal to worship the emperor caused the pagans to associate the Christians with mythic examples of lawlessness and chaos. Consequently, according to Versnel, the imperial cult played a less harmless part in the persecutions than Millar had suggested.

In his essay, Versnel referred in passing to several passages in the Revelation of John, mainly to show that, in his turn, the author of this book too used mythic images to denounce his enemies.<sup>3</sup> In the present contribution I shall look somewhat more closely at Revelation's attitude towards the imperial cult. My question is: why was the author of Revelation so fiercely opposed to the imperial cult?

A few words must be said with regard to the place where and the time when Revelation originated. There is a general consensus that the book was written in the Roman province of Asia. As to its place of origin, Ephesus is a good candidate since the church in Ephesus is the first congregation mentioned in the list of seven churches to which the work is addressed (1:11; 2:1).<sup>4</sup> The book is

<sup>1</sup> Versnel 1988.

<sup>2</sup> Millar 1973.

<sup>3</sup> Versnel 1988, 255, with references to Rev. 12:1-4 (the dragon trying to devour the baby); 13:8, 14-18 (the beast representing the Roman emperor); 17:1-6 (the great whore representing Rome, drunk with the blood of God's people).

<sup>4</sup> The author only says that he 'saw' his revelation on Patmos. He does not say that he wrote his work there. Even the announcement that the author experienced his rapture on Patmos (1:9) can best be understood as a piece of literary fiction which is characteristic of the apocalyptic genre. The narrative framework of apocalyptic literature is always fiction. And one does not need to experience a rapture in order to write apocalyptically; one only needs to be familiar with the apocalyptic literary tradition. The narrative framework of Revelation made the selection of the island of Patmos, probably because banishment to an island (*relegatio in insulam*; see, e.g., *Digesta* 48.22.7.2) was a well-known punishment and Patmos was situated not too far (some fifty miles) from Ephesus.

often dated to the reign of Domitian, mainly on the basis of the testimony of Irenaeus.<sup>5</sup> But Irenaeus was writing in Gaul in about 180 CE. He thought that John saw his vision some 35 years before he, Irenaeus, was born. 'We would not normally regard so distant, belated and second-hand an opinion as, by itself, evidence.'<sup>6</sup> Moreover, he had an apologetic motive for dating Revelation not too late: if it was written after the end of Domitian's reign, its author could hardly have been a direct pupil of Jesus. Since Irenaeus attributed Revelation and the Fourth Gospel to the apostle John, the son of Zebedee, a date some time before the end of the first century was highly recommendable.

Recently, serious doubts have been raised as to a Domitianic date.<sup>7</sup> A date during Trajan's reign, some time around 114 CE, seems much more plausible. In my view, Rev. 17:10 is especially compelling for a date during the time of Trajan. The author presents himself here as writing during the reign of an emperor whose successor will reign for only a short time. But how can he know that this successor will only reign for a short time unless that reign has already come to an end? In addition, the author knows that the short reign of this ruler will be followed by the reign of yet another emperor. Titus (79–81) and Nerva (96–98) ruled for remarkably short periods. Thus, the author must have written under Domitian or Trajan. But there is no firm evidence of the persecution of Christians during the time of Domitian. No pagan writer accuses Domitian of persecuting Christians. Revelation can therefore best be dated during the reign of Trajan. In any case the 'number of the beast', 666, mentioned in Rev. 13:18 and 15:2, is not incompatible with the identification of the beast as Trajan. This emperor's name in Greek, NE. ΤΡΑΙ. Σ. (Νέρονας Τραιανὸς Σεβαστός [Σεβαστός = *Augustus*]) can easily be read as 50 + 5 + 300 + 100 + 1 + 10 + 200 = 666. The allusions to a threat from the Parthians in 6:2, 9:14–19, and 16:12–14 are also indicative of a date during the reign of Trajan.<sup>8</sup> Trajan launched his attack on Parthia in 114 CE. Understandably, a date during Trajan's reign is preferred by the most recent commentator.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 5.30.3.

<sup>6</sup> Moberley 1992, 367, 381.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Moberley 1992; Garrow 1997, 66–72.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Herzer 1999, 234.

<sup>9</sup> Aune 1997, 1, lviii: 'during the early part of the reign of Trajan.' In Aune's

The possibility cannot be ruled out that the founding of the temple in honour of Zeus Philios and Trajan in Pergamum in 114 CE formed the historical backcloth of the genesis of Revelation.<sup>10</sup>

The Revelation of John focusses its attention on the imperial cult in at least ten passages, scattered through chapters 13 through 20.<sup>11</sup> I will not discuss them here one by one. Rather, I will handle them as one body of information and distill from it the various reasons why the imperial cult filled the author of Revelation with concern, even with aversion and abhorrence. There are four main reasons. For the sake of convenience, I shall summarize them here. It should be noted beforehand that, although they are closely interrelated and even overlap in part, they are not all on the same level.

Firstly, the imperial cult entailed the risk of the persecution of Christians; in a number of cases, it led to their execution. Secondly, the vigorous propagation of the imperial cult in the author's time and the strong temptation it exerted on people to participate in it, were a menace to the still small groups of Christians in Asia. Thirdly, Revelation's principal objection to the imperial cult is that it is closely interlaced with the power of Rome and with the Roman government which the author detested. Thus, the ideology of Rome as a self-contained, self-sufficient, religiously inspired universe clashed with the equally religious world view held by the author of Revelation: in the latter's opinion, the two ideologies were incompatible and excluded each other. Fourthly, more strongly than other cults, the imperial cult had a public character. This made it difficult for Christians to abstain from participation in it without irritating their fellow townsmen. Through its markedly public nature, the imperial cult must have been especially threatening to Christians. Its public character must therefore have been a reason for their loathing for it.

Let us now look somewhat more closely at each of these reasons. The first was the fact that the imperial cult led to the persecution and execution of Christians. Precisely this was the issue of Fergus

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portions of it would have been written at earlier dates. The same view is held by Hengel 1989, 81, who argues for a Trajanic date for the completion of a work begun under Nero.

<sup>10</sup> For this temple, see Price 1984, 252, and for 114 CE as the date of its founding, Friesen 1993, 58.

<sup>11</sup> See 13:4, 8; 13:11–18; 14:9–11; 15:2; 16:2, 13; 19:20; 20:4,10. It is possible that there are many other allusions to the imperial cult in Revelation, but other

Millar's article of 1973. Millar was probably right in denying that the worship of the emperor was an important factor in the persecutions of Christians. Two passages in Revelation, however, demonstrate unmistakably that the author of this work did see a link between the execution of Christians and their refusal to worship the emperor (13:15; 20:4).<sup>12</sup> The first of these passages is about the so-called 'beast from the land,' that is, the entire system of institutions that organize and maintain the imperial cult in Asia.<sup>13</sup> This being is said to 'cause whoever did not worship the cult image of the (first) beast (that is, of the emperor) to be executed.'<sup>14</sup> In the other passage the author relates a vision which he says he has seen in heaven: 'I could see the souls of those who had been beheaded for the sake of God's word and their testimony to Jesus, those who had not worshipped the beast and its image (. . .)' (20:4).<sup>15</sup> Neither of these passages informs us about precisely *how* the charge against Christians and their execution, on the one hand, and their rejection of the veneration of the emperor, on the other hand, interrelated. On what formal charge Christians were brought before the Roman authorities and on what charge they were sentenced, we do not know with certainty. The evidence seems to suggest, however, that pagans brought Christians before the magistrates simply as Christians, on the supposition that their religion entailed asocial and immoral behaviour, atheism, and seditiousness. Pliny, as governor of Bithynia-Pontus, assumed indeed that avowed Christians *as such* deserved death,<sup>16</sup> and Trajan subscribed to this viewpoint.<sup>17</sup> The legal basis on which a governor like Pliny sentenced them to death was probably nothing

<sup>12</sup> Liettaert Peerbolte 1996, 120

<sup>13</sup> I do not have the space here to give a detailed interpretation of chapter 13. Let it suffice for me to say that the 'beast from the sea' in 13:1-8, which is also called 'the first beast' (13:12), stands for the Roman empire. However, in v 8 (αὐτόν, masculine), and perhaps also in v 4, it represents the emperor who is religiously venerated. The 'beast from the land' in v 13:11, which is also called the 'other beast' (13:11), represents the entire system of institutions that organize and maintain the imperial cult, for instance, the Council of the cities of Asia, the *Komoi*, and the priesthoods, provincial as well as municipal, in the imperial cult. In 13:14-18, though, the second beast is once again a caricature of the emperor. The imagery of the beasts in chapter 13 is rather inconsistent and ambiguous.

<sup>14</sup> Rev 13:15 ποιήσῃ ἵνα ὅσοι ἐὰν μὴ προσκυνήσωσιν τῇ εἰκόνι τοῦ θηρίου, ἀποκτανθῶσιν

<sup>15</sup> Rev 20:4 εἶδον τὰς ψυχὰς τῶν πεπελεκισμένων οἵτινες οὐ προσεκύνησαν τὸ θηρίον οὐδὲ τὴν εἰκόνα αὐτοῦ

<sup>16</sup> Pliny, *Ep* X 96

but his mandate as *legatus Augusti*, which empowered him to do anything he might deem necessary to secure public order and peace.<sup>18</sup> It should be noticed that public order was not only at risk if certain people allowed themselves to take no part in the prescribed cults of the gods, but also if a governor withstood popular indignation against such people.<sup>19</sup> Once people had been brought before a Roman magistrate on the charge of being Christians, the magistrate could release them if they renounced their faith. In order to verify the trustworthiness of their apostasy, the magistrate could subject them to a simple test of loyalty to the gods and the emperor. To pass this test successfully, the accused had to offer a modest sacrifice to the gods and the emperor. The sacrifice normally consisted of the burning of incense or the libation of wine in front of the statues or busts of some gods and the emperor. If a Christian refused to make the sacrifice, he or she could be convicted of belonging to a subversive or seditious group which was considered to be dangerous to the state. As Trajan wrote in his well-known rescript to Pliny: 'If people are accused [that is, as Christians] and convicted, they must be punished—yet on this condition, that whoever denies being a Christian, and makes the fact plain by his action, that is, by worshipping our gods, shall obtain pardon on his repentance.'<sup>20</sup> It may be concluded that the ground on which Christians were sentenced was that by being Christians they were members of a suspect, subversive group.

Neither Pliny nor Trajan says that Christians were sentenced for refusing to participate in the public cult of the gods or in the worship of the emperor. The ground of the Christians' conviction was not this refusal, but the fact that, as Christians, they belonged to a potentially seditious association. Yet it is clear from Rev. 13:15 and 20:4 that the cult of the emperor—even if it was conceived by the pagans as part of the customary cult of the gods in general<sup>21</sup>—could, and sometimes did entail, the execution of Christians. This, then, is

<sup>18</sup> On the issue of the charge on which Christians were arrested and executed, see the discussion between Sherwin-White 1952 and 1964 and De Ste Croix 1963 and 1964.

<sup>19</sup> Art. Persecutions, early Christian, in *ODCC* 1997, 1257–1259, esp. 1258.

<sup>20</sup> Pliny, *Ep.* X 97.

<sup>21</sup> This explains, according to Millar 1973, why the imperial cult did not play an important role in the persecutions. The pagans blamed the Christians not especially for refusing to worship the emperor, but for refusing to worship the gods in

clearly one reason, and an understandable reason at that, why the author of Revelation was strongly opposed to the imperial cult.

Secondly, the author of Revelation directs his critique against the imperial cult also because he is worried about its widespread propagation and popularity and about the attraction it exerts on countless people all over the world. He complains that 'all on earth' worship it, that is, the beast representing the emperor (13:8). He has seen in a vision that 'the whole world went after the beast in wondering admiration' (13:3). Those who participate in the worship of the emperor are no fewer than 'the earth and its inhabitants' (13:11), 'everyone, great and small, rich and poor, slave and free' (13:16). There is of course much exaggeration in this depiction of the imperial cult, but the impression he gives of its popularity fully corresponds to what we know about the development of this cult from epigraphic, numismatic, and historiographic evidence. In no period within the three centuries between 50 BCE and 250 CE, were more temples, shrines, and sanctuaries built for the imperial cult in Asia Minor than in the first half of the second century.<sup>22</sup> During the Trajan era the imperial cult was the most widely propagated form of public religion in Asia Minor.<sup>23</sup> The Christian communities to which the Revelation of John was addressed were situated in cities of the province of Asia in which the imperial cult was particularly prominent. In fact, there were temples, priesthoods, ceremonies, and games for the emperor cult in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea, that is, in all seven cities to which the book of Revelation was sent.<sup>24</sup> Ephesus alone had at least five temples and shrines for the imperial cult before the end of the first

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<sup>22</sup> Price 1984, 59 In the discussion following the presentation of this paper, Dr W M Jongman rightly pointed out that this statistical datum can not be taken as indisputable evidence of the importance of the imperial cult until it has been compared with the development of the contemporary building industry for other cults in Asia Minor. If there was a boom in temple building for other cults, or in the construction of stone buildings in general, the information mentioned rather reflects a flourishing of religion in general or a booming economy. It is true that a systematic comparison of the building activity for the imperial cult with that for other cults in the region is a desideratum, but there is little reason to suppose that the comparison will not turn out in favour of the imperial cult.

<sup>23</sup> Price 1984, 130, Mitchell 1993, 1, 113 'No other cults had so widespread a distribution.'

<sup>24</sup> Price 1984, 250–265. For Thyatira, see Mitchell 1993, 1, 102. For Philadelphia

century CE.<sup>25</sup> Pergamum had two famous temples for the imperial cult. In 29 BCE it was the first city of Asia to receive authorization from Octavian to establish a provincial cult and temple for Rome and the emperor. A cult and temple in honour of Zeus and Trajan were founded there in 114 CE.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum and Sardis, along with Cyzicus, were the very cities where the native political organization—the *Kommon*, a provincial council composed of representatives from the cities of Asia—held its annual meetings in rotation.<sup>27</sup> The principal task of the *Kommon* was the organization of the cult of the emperor. The fact that these cities took turns as the residence of the *Kommon* was undoubtedly an extra menace to the Christians who lived there. In addition, periodical athletic festivals associated with the provincial cults of the emperor took place in the cities of Pergamum, Smyrna, Ephesus, Cyzicus, Philadelphia, Laodicea, Sardis and Tralles.<sup>28</sup> This resulted in an average of two provincial athletic competitions in Asia every year,<sup>29</sup> all of them accompanied by religious ceremonies.

Not only was the imperial cult immensely popular, it was also a great enticement for the people in the cities. It enjoyed the warm sympathy of the pagan population. This cult was not a duty which was imposed upon the people from higher up; for most people participation in it was certainly not an empty political gesture but the fulfilment of a real religious need. 'Emperor worship was not a political subterfuge, designed to elicit the loyalty of untutored provincials, but was one of the ways in which Romans themselves and provincials alongside them defined their own relationship with a new political phenomenon, an emperor whose powers and charisma were so transcendent that he appeared to them as both man and god.'<sup>30</sup> As a result, the wealthy occupants of the cities competed with each other to make financial contributions for the building of temples, the institution of priesthoods, and the organization of ceremonies and games. The cities competed with each other in order to obtain authorization to inaugurate a new cult for the emperor or for a member

<sup>25</sup> Price 1984, 254–255. On Ephesus as a centre of emperor cult, see Biguzzi 1998.

<sup>26</sup> Price 1984, 252; Friesen 1993, 58.

<sup>27</sup> Calder, Gray, Mitchell 1996, 190.

<sup>28</sup> Friesen 1993, 114.

<sup>29</sup> Friesen 1993, 115.

of the imperial family. By venerating the emperor and the imperial house, the cities—which did not play an official role in the political administrative system of the empire—tried to develop an access to the supreme centre of power. Via the cult of the emperor, the cities ritualized the relationship between themselves and the emperor, thus increasing their self-respect and their prestige. The city councils as well as the inhabitants of the cities, from the highest to the lowest, were glad to possess temples and ceremonies for the imperial cult, including the various contests, games, and spectacles affiliated with it.

It is not difficult to imagine that the population of the cities enjoyed attending the festivals and ceremonies connected with the imperial cult, participating in the sacrifices and especially the sacrificial meals, and attending the contests, games, spectacles, and fights of animals and gladiators. Even Christians may have been tempted to partake of meals or to watch the games in the imperial cult, and thus to engage in the cult itself. According to Revelation, the organizers of the imperial cult 'deceived the inhabitants of the earth' in order to make them erect an image in honour of the emperor (13:14). In Jewish apocalyptic tradition, 'deception' is a characteristic of several eschatological opponents of God;<sup>31</sup> in early Christian apocalyptic literature, 'deception' becomes a standard characteristic of the great, definitive, eschatological opponent of God.<sup>32</sup> In Rev. 13:14, the role of this eschatological opponent of God is cast upon the administrators of the imperial cult. This is why they are repeatedly called 'the false prophet' (16:13; 19:20; 20:10). The author says that this false prophet deceives people (19:20). In this way he places the imperial cult on a par with 'the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world.' Briefly, in the opinion of the author of Revelation, the popularity and attraction of the imperial cult is a danger to the Christians, and a reason why he abominates it wholeheartedly.

A third, and very important, reason why the author of Revelation abhors the imperial cult is its close connection with the power of Rome. In the author's view, the imperial cult and political admin-

<sup>31</sup> See, e.g., 1 *Henoch* 54:5–6. Azazel's hosts become servants of Satan and lead astray those who dwell on earth, cf. 56:4 'The days of their leading astray will no longer be counted', and 69:28 'those who led astray the world will be destroyed'. Furthermore, 1QS III 20–24 the Angel of Darkness leads the righteous ones astray.

<sup>32</sup> *Oracula Sibyllina* III 68–69 (probably Christian) 'Beliar misleads people, he will also mislead many faithful and chosen Hebrews'. See also Mark 13:22 'These

istration were two aspects of one reality: the oppressive regime of Rome. How much repugnance he felt for Rome as a political power becomes clear from his chapters 17 and 18, where he depicts Rome as a harlot, clothed in purple and scarlet, mounted on a scarlet beast, and drunk with the blood of God's people and with the blood of those who, as Christians, had suffered martyrdom.

It is worth while noticing to what extent Revelation regards the Roman empire, on the one hand, and the imperial cult, on the other hand, as connected with each other or even as identical. In chapter 13, the author describes the beast from the sea, which he calls also 'the first beast'. This beast stands for Rome or the Roman empire. However, in the course of the description, Rome is designated as 'him' (αὐτόν, masculine), and as the object of religious veneration and adoration by all the inhabitants of the earth. The author is evidently unable to distinguish Rome and the imperial cult. Somewhat further down in the same chapter (13:11), he introduces the second beast, the one from the land, which stands for the system of institutions which are responsible for the imperial cult, such as the *Komoi* and the priesthoods, both provincial and municipal. The author says not only that the second beast exercises the authority of the first beast, that is Rome (13:12), but also that the name of the second beast is a *man's* name and that the numerical value of its letters is six hundred and sixty six (13:18). In 15:2, however, the name at issue is that of the *first* beast, that is, of an emperor as representative of Rome, not of the second beast (the imperial cult). Evidently, the author is unable to distinguish clearly between Rome and the imperial cult; occasionally, he can identify both with the emperor.<sup>33</sup>

Now according to Revelation, Rome received its power from the Dragon (13:2), that is, from Satan or the devil (12:9). Since the author regarded the imperial cult as a function of the Roman empire, and the two systems, political and religious, as two sides of the same coin, he abominated the imperial cult as much as he detested Rome and the Roman administration. Clearly, Revelation views the government and the imperial cult as one manifestation of Satanic oppression and influence. As Versnel argued, the pagans' estimation of the Christian religion was of course not much higher.

At this point it should be recalled that during the first two decades of the second century CE, Christians still represented an extremely small minority of the population. Their membership was still a long way short of one percent of the population of the empire. In the years 110–115, there were probably only approximately 2 Christians per 1000 people.<sup>34</sup> It need not surprise us, therefore, that the author of Revelation, who belonged to this small minority, felt unable to identify with the ruling political system or with the religious system which sanctioned it. In his view, Roman rule and the imperial cult formed a demonic counterculture, just as Christianity formed a mythic counterculture in the view of certain Romans. The Christian world view of the author of Revelation formed a symbolic universe which was entirely incompatible with that of those who supported the worship of the emperor: these symbolic universes were mutually exclusive.

The three reasons mentioned so far for Revelation's radical rejection of the imperial cult can easily be deduced from the book itself. One further reason why Revelation is so fiercely opposed to the religious veneration of the emperor cannot immediately be deduced from the book, but it can safely be postulated on the ground of the particular nature of the imperial cult. I refer to the fact that this cult had a strongly public character.<sup>35</sup> It is true that many or most ancient religions were, at least to a certain extent, public religions. But this applied especially to the imperial cult, simply because the emperor was the summit of the administrative hierarchy that ruled the world. This was the reason why cities, in prescribing rules for the celebration of festivals of the imperial cult, often expected the involvement of the whole community. For instance, the arrangements for the Caesarea at Chios instructed all inhabitants to wear bright clothes.<sup>36</sup> What were Christians to do in that situation? For the celebration of festivals connected with the imperial cult, several cities passed decrees instructing all citizens whose houses were situated along the route of the procession, to sacrifice on altars outside their houses and even to provide their own altars.<sup>37</sup> What were Christians

<sup>34</sup> Stark 1996, 12–13.

<sup>35</sup> Indirect references to the public character of the imperial cult may nevertheless be found in some passages of Rev. 13 which intimate that everyone had to worship the emperor under penalty of death; see vv. 15–16, 12, and 8.

<sup>36</sup> *IGR* IV 947 and 948, with L. Robert 1933, 518–533, reprinted in idem 1969, 486–501.

to do if their houses happened to be located along the route of the procession? About the middle of the second century, Antoninus Pius' birthday was celebrated at Ephesus with a distribution of money to each citizen from public funds to enable everybody to make sacrifices. What was a citizen to do who happened to be a Christian?<sup>38</sup>

Thus it was precisely the public character of the imperial cult which made this religion a threat to Christians. For Christians it was often difficult to avoid participating in, or attending the public processions and sacrifices at issue without appearing to be disloyal towards the emperor and the other gods in whose honour these rituals took place. In the eyes of their compatriots, the Christians who refused to participate in these rituals, took advantage of the peace, the social stability, the benefits and the prosperity which the imperial government provided, but they were unwilling to pay the homage which was due to the emperor and the gods for providing these benefits. In the eyes of the pagans, the Christians' impious attitude toward the cult of the emperor and other gods might deprive the world of the protection these gods extended to the cities and the empire as a whole.<sup>39</sup> Accordingly, the persecution of the Christians was a response to their violation of concerns of Roman religion, piety, and the public weal. By its very nature, the imperial cult exposed the Christians more easily to the suspicion of impiety and irreverence towards the gods than any other cult.

Summarizing it may be said that the author of Revelation was opposed to the imperial cult for four reasons: firstly, because it entailed the execution of Christians; secondly, because it spread fast and obtrusively and exerted a strong attraction, also on Christians who happened to be less resolute in their conviction than the author; thirdly, because he viewed the imperial cult as interrelated with the oppressive political system of Rome, which he detested; and fourthly, because the imperial cult, by its public character, was more dangerous to the Christians than other pagan cults.

In conclusion I wish to return to Fergus Millar, mentioned at the beginning of this paper, or rather to the reaction to Millar's article given by Versnel.<sup>40</sup> According to Versnel, the imperial cult played a more important part in the persecutions of Christians than Millar

<sup>38</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>39</sup> Millar 1973 164

had admitted. In Versnel's view, the persecutions were the result of a clash between two mutually exclusive utopias: on the one hand the golden age, the *aetas aurea* of the *Pax augustana*, on the other hand the *Regnum dei* inaugurated by Jesus and soon to become reality. According to Versnel, the Christians' refusal to participate in the worship of the emperor led the pagans to associate them with the mythic images of the reversed world of ἀνομία and chaos. In pagan eyes, the Christian rejection of the imperial cult amounted to the total negation of the normal Greco-Roman world view. Accordingly, the pagans categorized the Christians as belonging to a mythic counterculture of lawlessness and immorality. Hence, in Versnel's view, the well-known accusations of cannibalism, incest, and infanticide. This pagan assessment of the Christians as representatives of a world turned upside down, reinforced the processes which led to their persecution.

In Versnel's reassessment of the role the imperial cult played in the persecutions, he looked at the conflict at issue mainly from the pagan perspective. He argued that, since the pagans experienced the Christian rejection of the imperial cult as the repudiation of their whole value-system, they came to see the Christians as people belonging to another world and as representatives of a counterculture.

We can now conclude that the mechanism pointed out by Versnel also worked the other way around, at least in the case of Christians like the author of Revelation. Since these Christians experienced Roman culture, including the Roman political administration and the imperial cult, as the absolute negation of their own Christian value system, certain Christians came to see Rome and the imperial cult as belonging to another world than their own. For them, Rome and the imperial cult represented an alternative symbolic universe.<sup>41</sup> This assessment of Rome and the imperial cult induced the author of Revelation to depict these institutions as mythic monsters. In Rev. 13, Rome is the beast from the sea, whereas the institutions responsible for the imperial cult are the beast from the land. The mythic character of the imagery in this depiction of Rome and the imperial cult is unmistakable.<sup>42</sup> The message is equally unmistakable: Rome and the imperial cult do not belong in the author's symbolic universe.

<sup>41</sup> For a similar view, see Yvonne Collins 1986: 314-316.

But the author of Revelation did not content himself with disqualifying Rome and the imperial cult as monsters belonging to a mythic, alternative world. He went further. He took care to preface his chapter 13 on the two beasts with a chapter on the raging of the great Dragon, the devil (chapter 12). The timely introduction of the Dragon in chapter 12 makes it easy for the author to declare in chapter 13 that the first beast, Rome, derives its power, rule, and authority from the Dragon (13:2, 4), and that the second beast, the imperial cult, derives its authority from the first beast (13:11-12), that is, indirectly from the Dragon as well. In this way, with the help of his composition technique, the author of Revelation makes the imperial cult an instrument of the devil. The demonization of Rome and the imperial cult could not be made more explicit or more complete.

It should be observed, though, that Revelation's view of Rome was not the only one current among Christians in Asia Minor. Other Christians in this area, in precisely the same time and circumstances, could remain loyal to the emperor as God's servant, as appears from the so-called first letter of Peter (2:13-17). It should also be borne in mind that, when Revelation was written, in a city like Ephesus, which had a population of around 200,000 inhabitants, there were probably about 400 Christians.<sup>43</sup> Since house churches would normally comprise some 20 to 40 members, the Christians of Ephesus must have been scattered among more than ten communities. Given the house church setting of the early Christian communities, it was impossible for all Christians in a large city like Ephesus to gather in one place on a regular basis, even for the weekly supper. Hence diversity and friction could easily develop within a given locale; this happened for instance in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:10-13; 3:3-4; 2 Cor. 11:7-11) and in Galilee (Mark 9:38-40). Revelation itself shows that there were differing opinions and practices among Christians in Ephesus (2:4), Pergamum (2:14-15), Thyatira (2:20-24) and Sardes (3:1-4). Briefly, if there is every reason to suppose that there was much variation of opinion, both among and within the various Christian communities of a city like Ephesus, the anti-Roman stance of the author of Revelation need not be taken as representative of early Christianity in Ephesus, or in Asia, or in Anatolia, at the

beginning of the second century CE.<sup>44</sup> On the contrary, 1 Peter 2:13–17, mentioned above, and 1 Tim. 2:2, possibly also written in Ephesus at the beginning of the second century,<sup>45</sup> show that when Revelation was written, other Christians in Asia Minor succeeded in coming to terms with Rome. That was indeed the more usual attitude of Christians towards Rome, at least in the first century CE, as appears from Paul (Rom. 13:1–7), Mark (12:17), and 1 Clement (61:1–2).

In Rev. 13, however, we witness the complete clash between two mutually exclusive, religious ideologies, that of the Christian author of Revelation and that of his pagan compatriots who were loyal to Rome and the emperor. Pagans felt that the Christian ideology undermined and subverted their world in a way that reminded them of the lawlessness and rebellion of primeval ages. Versnel rightly pointed out that the pagans' aversion for Christianity had a substratum in mythological reminiscences. Hence their mistrust and occasional outbursts of intolerance and intransigence towards Christianity. In their turn, however, certain Christians saw Rome and the imperial cult as a demonic puppet play directed by the devil. This was not the usual Christian assessment of Rome, but it did occur; and it is exemplified in Revelation.

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<sup>44</sup> Cf. P.A. Harland 2000, 101: '[The author of the Revelation of John] advocates a sectarian perspective, drawing sharp and exclusive boundaries around the Christian groups, especially when it comes to honouring the emperor and participating in imperial-related activities. Yet this is only one side of a conversation, for a significant number of the Christians in the cities of Asia, it seems, were more open towards participating in the aspects of the *polis*, including commonplace activities such as honours for the emperors and affiliations with fellow-workers in occupational associations.'

<sup>45</sup> Lohse 1991, 65 'vermutlich in Ephesus'; Kummel 1978, 341: 'Als Entstehungszeit

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