

HONOR DISCOURSE AND THE RHETORICAL  
STRATEGY OF THE APOCALYPSE OF JOHN

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Like the Gospels, the Apocalypse of John defies strict rhetorical analysis in terms of appeals to *logos*, *ethos* and *pathos*, or in terms of the classical division of an oration into four or five parts. It is not as clear-cut a piece of 'classical rhetoric' as, say, Galatians if one starts from the conceptualizations of oratory found in Aristotle's *Art of Rhetoric* or the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*. Nevertheless, Revelation clearly has a rhetorical agenda. It seeks to persuade seven different Christian communities to take certain specific actions (seen most clearly in the seven oracles of Rev. 2.1–3.22), as well as to engender a firm commitment to certain values in opposition to other values (reflected throughout the work).<sup>1</sup> Its visions create a world in which certain actions or alliances are advantageous and others disadvantageous, thus addressing topics of deliberative oratory. John presents models of praiseworthy action for emulation, and anti-models of those whose actions are censurable and lead to disgrace, thus incorporating aspects of epideictic oratory.

I would propose that attention to John's use of honor discourse, as this has been defined and refined in a series of articles,<sup>2</sup> will assist in

1. For an earlier attempt to analyze the strategy of John's visionary rhetoric, see D.A. deSilva, 'The Construction and Social Function of a Counter-Cosmos in the Revelation of John', *Forum* 9.1-2 (1993), pp. 47-61.

2. See D.A. deSilva, 'Worthy of his Kingdom: Honor Discourse and Social Engineering in 1 Thessalonians', *JSNT* 64 (1996), pp. 49-79; 'The Wisdom of Ben Sira: Honor, Shame, and the Maintenance of the Values of a Minority Culture',

the uncovering and analysis of the rhetorical strategy of this visionary work. According to classical rhetoricians, honor lies close to the heart of both epideictic and deliberative oratory. Epideictic rhetoric deals with topics of honor through the praise or censure of those who have embodied or failed to embody essential cultural virtues. The rhetorical goal of epideictic appears to have been to reinforce commitment among the hearers to those virtues that lead to honor now and an honorable remembrance after death.<sup>3</sup> Deliberative rhetoric aims at persuading an audience to take a specific course of action, or to choose one course of action over another, based on a demonstration of 'advantage' (cf. Aristotle, *Rh.* 1.3.5). Both Aristotle and Quintilian bear witness to the intimate relationship between the 'advantageous' and the 'honorable'.<sup>4</sup> Quintilian identifies the two completely, averring that nothing dishonorable could be truly expedient (*Inst.* 3.8.1). Aristotle and the author of the *ad Herennium* allow for other 'motives of choice'<sup>5</sup> but stress the

*CBQ* 58 (1996), pp 433-55, 'The Noble Contest Honor, Shame, and the Rhetorical Strategy of 4 Maccabees', *JSP* 13 (1995), pp 31-57, 'Investigating Honor Discourse Guidelines from Classical Rhetoricians', *Society of Biblical Literature 1997 Seminar Papers* (Atlanta, GA Scholars, 1997), pp 491-525, *Despising Shame The Social Function of the Rhetoric of Honor and Dishonor in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (SBLDS, 152, Atlanta Scholars Press, 1995)

3 See the close of Pericles' funeral oration in Thucydides, *Hist.* 2.43-44 'We who remain behind may hope to be spared their fate, but must resolve to keep the same daring spirit against the foe. It is for you to try to be like them. Make up your minds that happiness depends on being free, and freedom depends on being courageous.' G. A. Kennedy (*New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism* [Chapel Hill, NC University of North Carolina, 1984], pp 73-74) can also speak of the 'subtle deliberative purpose found in such works as Pliny's *Panegyricus*'

4 'Praise and counsels have a common aspect, for what you might suggest in counselling becomes encomium by a change in the phrase. Accordingly, if you desire to praise, look what you would suggest, if you desire to suggest, look what you would praise' (Aristotle, *Rh.* 1.9.35-36), 'But panegyric is akin to deliberative oratory inasmuch as the same things are usually praised in the former as are advised in the latter' (Quintilian, *Inst.* 3.7.28)

5 'Motives of choice are the noble, beneficial, and pleasant (καλοῦ συμφεροντος η̄δους), motives of avoidance are the shameful, harmful, and painful' (αισχροῦ βλαβεροῦ λυπηροῦ, Aristotle, *Nic. Eth.* 2.3.7), these motives are reduced to two in *Nic. Eth.* 3.1.11 'Pleasure and nobility (τα η̄δεια και τα καλα) between them supply the motives of all actions whatsoever.'

importance of the 'honorable' among those motives.<sup>6</sup> As we look at John's designation of behaviors that lead to honor and dishonor, and at the praiseworthy or censurable figures that John introduces, we can begin to grasp how the Apocalypse works on the motivations of the hearers and, in fact, persuades them to choose certain courses over others as the paths to greater 'advantage'. It is hoped that this investigation will add to the emerging conversation about Revelation as 'visionary rhetoric'.

### *The Setting and Purpose of Revelation*

The questions of the authorship and date of Revelation continue to spawn much debate, and it is not the purpose of the present article to enter into the intricacies of such issues. For the purposes of this discussion, I will assume a date during the reign of Domitian (81–96 CE) and will make no claims based on the identification of John the Seer with any other John known from early Christian literature (e.g., John the Apostle).<sup>7</sup> John writes to seven churches with whom he may have had intimate acquaintance, perhaps conducting a circuit ministry among them. The seven oracles in chs. 2 and 3, combined with other literary and archaeological evidence concerning the seven cities<sup>8</sup> and the churches in them (e.g., letters from Paul, his circle, or Ignatius of Antioch) provide a clear picture of the tensions and challenges facing these

6. Cf. *Rhet. ad Her.* 3.5.8-9, in which the author claims that even in cases where considerations of safety outweigh considerations of honor, the orator could never admit that the proposed course is dishonorable (*Rhet. ad Her.* 3.5.8-9).

7. For detailed discussions of authorship and date, and support for the positions taken here, see A.Y. Collins, 'Dating the Apocalypse of John', *BibRes* 26 (1981), pp. 33-45; *idem*, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1984), pp. 25-83; D.A. deSilva, 'The Social Setting of the Apocalypse of John: Conflicts Within, Fears Without', *WTJ* 54 (1992), pp. 273-302; D.E. Aune, 'The Social Matrix of the Apocalypse of John', *BibRes* 26 (1981), pp. 16-32; R.H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, rev. edn, 1998), pp. 15-21; L.L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 12-17.

8. Landmark works in this area include W.M. Ramsey, *The Letters to the Seven Churches in Asia* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, updated edition, 1994); C.J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in their Local Setting* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986); H. Koester (ed.), *Ephesos: Metropolis of Asia* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995).

Christian communities. Indeed, one is immediately struck by the different life situations faced by the churches, and in many cases the different challenges present within a single congregation, such that the old paradigm of reading Revelation simply as comfort for the marginalized and persecuted will no longer hold. At best, this corresponds only to the situation in Smyrna, and even there no deaths are mentioned. Pergamum has witnessed only one martyrdom at the time of John's writing.

Revelation, therefore, is not merely written to Christians in daily danger of being hauled before magistrates and sent to the arenas.<sup>9</sup> On the one hand, some believers—those who are mainly in agreement with John and fully committed to their confession—are comforted and encouraged in the face of growing troubles; others, however, are in grave danger (from John's perspective) because they are in no danger of suffering for their faith. Revelation can thus be read from some situations as a word of encouragement, but from others as a wake-up call to see that one's easy alliance with society is a partnership with the Whore of Babylon.

The honor of a number of Christian communities appears to have been challenged. The oracles to Smyrna and Philadelphia (2.8-11; 3.7-13) speak of the 'slander' of Jews living in those cities directed toward the Christian community and of the promise for the vindication of the believers' honor in the sight of their detractors. Believers in Smyrna are exposed to 'affliction' and stand in danger of imprisonment, both of which may be understood as replications of the society's rejection of them as deviants and attempts to shame them into a more 'honorable' way of life. A number of believers are commended for not denying Jesus' name, a course which apparently led to the untimely death of one Christian in Pergamum (perhaps by official action, but also possibly the result of an unofficial lynching). There are clearly attempts being made to pressure believers into hiding or denying their association with the unpopular and subversive name of Christian. John envisions such pres-

9 See especially Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*, pp 96-132, 171-85, Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*, pp 84-110, D L Barr, 'The Apocalypse as Symbolic Transformation of the World', *Int* 38 (1984), pp 39-50, C H Talbert, *The Apocalypse A Reading of the Revelation of John* (Louisville, KY Westminster/ John Knox Press, 1994), pp 24-25 Thompson and Collins forcefully argue against the likelihood of Revelation being written in response to a new persecution of Christians, all four show how apocalyptic rhetoric may function in a setting not marked by a rise in incidence of persecution

sure growing in the future, such that in Antipas the martyr one might see the shape of things to come.

Notably, however, the honor of the believers in Sardis and Laodicea is challenged not by their society but, in John's prophetic voice, by Jesus himself. Here are congregations who receive not encouragement from John but a challenge to their claims to honor. Sardis has a reputation (a 'name') for being alive, but is really dead (3.1); Laodicea's claims to wealth and prosperity are rejected as self-deception (3.17). These congregations, together with some percentage of the believers in Pergamum and Thyatira, suffer from being too well adjusted to the ethos and demands of the dominant culture. The external pressures and the internal propensities to conform constitute, from John's perspective, a grave danger to the believing communities.

Recent decades of scholarship have helped us appreciate the meaning of the imperial cult and the cults of the traditional Greco-Roman deities for those who participated, and the social and civic importance of participation.<sup>10</sup> The specters of enforcement of emperor worship from above, or of the 'sham religion' of the idolatrous cult, have given way to a new understanding of the local and grassroots motivation for such cultic activity. Participation in the cults of Rome, the emperor and the traditional pantheon showed one's *pietas* or εὐσεβεία, one's reliability, in effect, to fulfill one's obligations to family, patron, city, province and empire. Participation showed one's support of the social body, one's desire for doing what was necessary to secure the welfare of the city, and one's commitment to the stability and ongoing life of the city. Moreover, participation was an important expression of gratitude toward those who were perceived to be the city's benefactors. Imperial cult in all parts of the empire focused attention on the emperor as the patron of the world. Since his gifts matched those of the deities (peace, protection from enemies, and the like), it was deemed only fitting that

10. Cf. S.R.F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); G.W. Bowersock, 'The Imperial Cult: Perceptions and Persistence', in B.F. Meyer and E.P. Sanders (eds.), *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), III, pp. 170-82; D. Earl, *The Age of Augustus* (New York: Exeter, 1968), pp. 166-76; Thompson, *The Book of Revelation*, pp. 95-170. These developments are summarized, and John's counter-propaganda explored, in D.A. deSilva, 'The "Image of the Beast" and the Christians in Asia Minor: Escalation of Sectarian Tension in Revelation 13', *TrinJ* NS 12 (1991), pp. 185-208.

the expressions of gratitude and loyalty should take on the forms used to communicate with the patron deities themselves.<sup>11</sup> As long as the emperor was strong and his clients faithful, peace and prosperity would remain and the horrors of civil war and foreign invasion be prevented.

By withdrawing from cultic expressions of solidarity with the citizenry and loyalty and gratitude toward those who secured the well-being of the city, Gentile Christians especially were held in suspicion and stood at risk of being viewed as subversive, unreliable and even dangerous elements of society.<sup>12</sup> An in-church movement which John labels the 'Nicolaitans' appears to have been gaining some ground in Asia Minor, speaking to this very issue. The Nicolaitans, those 'who hold to the teaching of Balaam', and the followers of 'Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess', are all depicted in similar terms—they 'eat food sacrificed to idols and commit fornication' (Rev. 2.14; 2.20) and teach others to do so as well. They present an alternative interpretation of the gospel and therefore an alternative response to the social order, vying with John's for acceptance as the 'faithful' response. For John,

11 This principle is well documented in the praise of Demetrius Poliorketes, liberator of Athens 'The other gods must be far distant, or have no ears, or even do not exist, or, if they do, care nothing for us—but you we see as living and present among us, not of wood or of stone, but truly present Thus we pray above all, make peace, Most Beloved, for you are Lord (*kyrios*)', Durus the Historian, *Athenian Cultic Song for Demetrius Poliorketes*, in M E Boring *et al*, *Hellenistic Commentary to the New Testament* (Nashville Abingdon Press, 1995), p 548 Poliorketes provided the deliverance that was the goal of prayers offered to the gods Nicolaus of Damascus gives a similar picture in his observations of the imperial cult in the Eastern provinces 'all people address him [as Augustus] in accordance with their estimation of his honor, revering him with temples and sacrifices across islands and continents, organized in cities and provinces, matching the greatness of his virtue and repaying his benefactions towards them' (Price, *Rituals and Power*, p 1)

12 The author of 1 Peter, for example, speaks of the origin of the society's hostility in the unbelievers' surprise that their former colleagues no longer join them in their accustomed rituals and practices (4 3-5) While 1 Peter censures these activities as 'excesses of dissipation', these activities included the 'lawless idolatry' (4 3) that was the foundation of civic loyalty and solidarity A view from the 'other side' comes from Pliny the Younger (*Ep* 10 96), who sees the renewed interest in traditional religious activity as the healthy result of his investigation of the deviant Christians, many of whom are now returning to fulfill their social and civic obligations

they represented a present and persuasive threat to the boundaries and definitions of the communities.

John labels (and censures) his opponents using figures from the Jewish Scriptures, casting them as enemies of the people of God. The Nicolaitans are cast as disciples of Balaam (Balaam means in Hebrew what Nicolaus means in Greek, namely 'conquering' or 'wearing down the people'<sup>13</sup>). Balaam is remembered in Jewish tradition for leading Israel astray at Baal-Peor, a story recounted in Num. 25.1-3. Balaam's responsibility in this incident is recorded in Num. 31.16. At Baal-Peor, the Israelites 'began to play the harlot with the daughters of Moab', with the consequence that they accepted the Moabites' invitation to bow down to their gods and eat of their sacrifices. Balaam thus became a figure for the false teacher of apostasy, and is particularly connected with teaching the Midianites to convince the Israelites to 'eat food sacrificed to idols and practice immorality'. The danger associated with this is loss of Israel's identity as the 'people of God', becoming indistinguishable from the nations around them.

When John casts the Nicolaitans as 'disciples of Balaam', and highlights 'eating food sacrificed to idols', the main issue appears to be whether or not one can, as a Christian, participate in the religious life of the Greco-Roman society.<sup>14</sup> There are obvious advantages for doing so—it eliminates all the tension between the church and society if one can again go out in public and show oneself pious and reliable through participation in the cults of the traditional gods and emperors. If it could be shown that 'an idol is nothing', and that these empty rituals could not offend God, why should the Christians suffer society's hostility unnecessarily? In this context, it is better to read the second charge—committing fornication—metaphorically, especially in light of the history of depicting God's relationship with God's people Israel as a marriage (with frequent infidelity on the part of the bride).<sup>15</sup> Follow-

13. This bilingual pun is noted by R.H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1920), I, p. 52; J.M. Ford, *Revelation* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), p. 391.

14. Mounce, *Revelation*, p. 81; A. LeGrys, 'Conflict and Vengeance in the Book of Revelation', *ExpTim* 104 (1992) pp. 76-80; Talbert, *The Apocalypse*, p. 19; Ford, *Revelation*, p. 291; G.B. Caird, *The Revelation of St. John* (London: A. & C. Black, 1966), p. 39: 'The sum total of the Nicolaitan's offense, then, is that they took a laxer attitude than John to pagan society and religion.'

15. While Mounce (*Revelation*, p. 81) and J. Roloff (*The Revelation of John*

ing the Nicolaitans' compromising position amounts to forsaking a faithful relationship to Jesus.

John further labels a female opponent 'Jezebel', an unflattering epithet associating this prophetess with the wife of Ahab and queen of Israel who supported the prophets of Baal in Israel. Her message is, as John represents it, essentially the same as that of the Nicolaitans. Like her biblical counterpart, she may be a woman of prominence who has opened her house to the Nicolaitan prophets, supporting them in the same way as others supported John in his itinerant ministry. Her endorsement of a stance that allowed some degree of participation in the cultic rites that accompany meetings of guilds and even dinners among networks of 'friends' would be quite natural if she was, herself, a person of means intent on maintaining her status. At the very least, she is presented as a vocal advocate for accommodation to social pressures for the sake of the survival of the community.<sup>16</sup>

Another sort of internal compromise is to be found in the issue of wealth in Laodicea. Achieving and maintaining wealth in the Roman province was closely tied to partnership with Rome, presented in Revelation 18 as the image of wealth and conspicuous consumption. The road to riches was the way of accommodation and compromise. When the boundaries of the community could be abrogated, the members of the community could freely participate in the pagan economy, in league with Babylon, as it were, and share in her prosperity. Perhaps even more insidious, they might believe in the myth of her prosperity, encapsulated in the ideology of *Roma Aeterna*. It was, however, a tainted prosperity because, on the one hand, Babylon was already drunk with the blood of God's servants (who held to a different system of values)

[Minneapolis, MN Fortress Press, 1993], p 52) hold that the Nicolaitans deviated from the group's sexual norms, Caird (*Revelation*, p 39) insightfully notes that 'in every other case except one in which he uses the verb *porneuein* or the noun *porneia* he uses them metaphorically' Given the allusiveness of John's language and his compounding of resonances from the Jewish Scriptures, a metaphorical sense seems most appropriate here

16 On the social and economic dangers facing the Christian who avoided all contact with idolatrous settings, see Ford, *Revelation*, p 406, Charles, *Revelation*, I, pp 69-70, Mounce, *Revelation*, pp 85-86 David Aune ('Social Matrix', p 28) presents the intriguing opinion that Jezebel is in fact the 'chair' of the Nicolaitan circle of prophets, which has gained substantial ground in Pergamum and Thyatira, but been successfully blocked in Ephesus According to this view, she is John's primary rival among the seven churches



and, on the other hand, material prosperity had been purchased at the cost of maintaining ‘the testimony of Jesus’. That wealth was tainted for John, because it meant cooperation with and participation in an unjust system, is seen both from the description of the Laodiceans’ wealth as being, in fact, poverty, and the affirmation of Smyrna’s poverty as being, in God’s sight, wealth.<sup>17</sup>

The setting of the addressees of Revelation is thus varied and multifaceted. Some believers need encouragement that they have chosen the path that will lead them to true and lasting honor (as John would define it); others, however, need to see that a compromise with the dominant culture may bring graver danger and loss than it averts. In Revelation, John calls each reader and each community of readers to seek out the path of faithfulness to God and the Lamb, and to respond to the challenge to reject the enticements of participation in, or peace with, an impious and unjust social order. Here his use of honor discourse becomes an essential part of his rhetorical strategy. He must move the audience to construe advantage in terms of the ‘larger picture’ of the Christian world view and eschatology.<sup>18</sup> He must set token expressions of honor toward the gods of the society against the background of the exclusive claims to worship made by the One God.

### *Revelation and the Question of whom to Honor*

Many who have read Revelation as ‘prophecy’ only in the sense of eschatological prediction have missed a critical aspect of the book’s message. John’s driving question from beginning to end is not simply about the course of events leading up to the end but about whom to honor and at what cost that honor is to be preserved.<sup>19</sup> Those scholars

17. Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*, pp. 132-33.

18. For fuller discussion of how Revelation as ‘apocalypse’ works to interpret everyday realities and choices in terms of a larger world-construction, see deSilva, ‘Counter-Cosmos’, and Barr, ‘Symbolic Transformation.’

19. Words for honor and honoring appear rather frequently in Revelation (τιμή: 4.9, 11; 5.12, 13; 7.12; 21.26; δόξα: 1.6; 4.9, 11; 5.12, 13; 7.12; 11.13; 14.7; 15.8; 16.9; 18.1; 19.1, 7; 21.11, 23, 24, 26; δοξάζω: 15.4; 18.7). Beyond the bare occurrence of lexical entries, however, authors indicate honor and dishonor through terms indicating approval (or blessedness) and disapproval (e.g., punishment or judging), through physical replications of status (e.g., crowning, bowing, imprisoning, leaving corpses unburied), through identifying an action with a virtue or vice (chief components of honor and dishonor), and through discussion of status through

who see in Revelation a work fundamentally interested in worship and liturgy<sup>20</sup>—the right worship of God and the Lamb standing in opposition to alternative, idolatrous worship settings—come closest to the heart of John’s vision (as long as this understanding of ‘worship’ is not limited to cultic activity). John thus manifests most strongly a concern of most every New Testament author, namely the claim that God has to receive honor and the necessity of choosing that course of action that shows God the honor which is God’s due.<sup>21</sup> This locates Revelation’s rhetoric within the context of discussions of ‘justice’ (δικαιοσύνη) in the Greco-Roman world. Aristotle (*Virtues and Vices* 5.2) had written that the ‘first among the claims of justice are our duties to the gods... and among these claims is piety, which is either a part of justice or a concomitant of it’. In the same vein, the author of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* writes:

We shall be using the topics of Justice if we show that it is proper to repay the well-deserving with gratitude if we urge that faith (*fidem*) ought zealously to be kept if we contend that alliances and friendships should scrupulously be honored, if we make it clear that the duty imposed by nature towards parents, gods, and the fatherland (*in parentes, deos, patriam*) must be religiously observed, if we maintain that ties of hospitality, clientage,<sup>22</sup> kinship, and relationship by marriage must inviolably be cherished, if we show that neither reward nor favour nor peril nor animosity ought to lead us astray from the right path (3 3 4)

birth or other ascribed means. Also relevant for the analysis of honor discourse is an ancient author’s discussion of opinion (delineating whose estimation of one’s honor truly matters, reinterpreting the experience of dishonor in the eyes of non-group members, and the like). Revelation’s engagement with honor language, therefore, goes well beyond its use of the word group.

20 See, e.g., A. Y. Collins, ‘The Revelation of John: An Apocalyptic Response to a Social Crisis’, *CurTM* 8 (1981) pp. 4-12.

21 This is a prominent aspect, for example, of the rhetorical strategy of Hebrews, where the role of God and Jesus as patrons of the new community demanded the proper return of honor and loyalty. Any course of action that might bring dishonor to the name of Christ was to be rejected outright as an expression of rank ingratitude which would result in the punishment of the offender. See D. A. deSilva, ‘Exchanging Favor for Wrath: Apostasy in Hebrews and Patron-Client Relations’, *JBL* 115 (1996), pp. 91-116.

22 Cf. *Rhet. ad Alex.* 1421b 36-40, which also includes honoring of parents, benefitting one’s friends, and returning good to one’s benefactors as topics of justice.

John's concern for the honor due God shows him to be an honorable person, concerned about the maintenance of a virtue that is central to both the dominant culture and the Christian culture. The difference comes, of course, from the way in which 'piety' is conceived. In the Jewish construction of 'piety', idolatry and the offering of honor to many gods was an act of injustice. John shares this conviction, and censures the Greco-Roman world for its lack of virtue, its dishonorable conduct with regard to the One God.

John's encouragement and challenges to the seven churches, and his denunciation of the non-Christian world, are motivated by his vision of the honor due God and the violations of that honor which are rampant in his world. He prescribes as a path to honor that way of life which refuses to share the honor of God (or of God's Anointed) with another at any cost. He repeatedly insists that the failure to reserve divine honors exclusively for God and the Lamb, while it may result in temporary advantage, is ultimately the path to greater disadvantage. The hearers of Revelation are thus invited into a deliberative arena,<sup>23</sup> in which they are directly advised by the seven oracles and indirectly by the visions that follow. In both types of appeal, Revelation gives evidence of a well-orchestrated implementation of honor discourse in the service of its rhetorical goals.

The chief themes of this orchestration are concentrated in Rev. 14.6-13, the messages of the three angels and the makarism that closes the episode, which we will use as a launching-off point for an examination of the broader literary context. The messages of the three angels represents the most extensive, and closest, approximation of direct exhortation after the opening of the visionary experience in Rev. 4.1, and so it is perhaps not accidental that these should point most strongly to the pillars of John's rhetorical strategy and his use of honor discourse.

23. Quintilian (*Inst.* 3.8.33) writes that 'at times we have to choose between two advantageous courses after comparison of their respective advantages' (cf. Aristotle, *Rhet.* 1.7). As the Nicolaitans have already gained some hearing for their case that participation in the cultic expressions of loyalty toward the Roman order brings the advantage of lessening hostility from outsiders toward the group, John must demonstrate that the course of renunciation of partnership with the Roman order is indeed the more advantageous course of action. His use of topics of justice and courage throughout the book (depicting the path of loyalty to Christ as the way to express these virtues in the present) suggests that the eschatological punishment of the unfaithful and reward of the faithful, while an important part of his deliberative strategy, is not the only motivating factor he employs.

*'Fear God and Give God Glory': Respect for, and Challenges to, God's Honor*

The first angel proclaims with a loud voice 'to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and tongue and people', calling them to 'fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgment has come; and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the fountains of water' (14.6-7). As John looks out upon 'every nation', he sees that the majority of humankind is engaged in the worship of gods other than the one recognized by Israel. These idolaters are guilty of failing to honor the One God, sharing the honor due God with false gods and demons (cf. 1 Cor. 10.14-21; Rev. 13.4). The angel summons them to give honor where it is due, to the God who created all things and thus claims the gratitude and reverence of all living creatures as the divine Patron of all. Moreover, God's day of judgement approaches—the day on which God will mete out honor and dishonor, reward and punishment. Those who have honored God in their lives may anticipate approval on that Day, whereas those who have failed to honor God may anticipate becoming the objects of God's satisfaction of God's honor.

Readers have stumbled over the command to 'fear' God, finding 'love' to be a more appropriate orientation toward the Deity. Indeed, Revelation has been criticized as an inferior expression of theology on account of its emphasis on 'fear' and 'wrath'.<sup>24</sup> 'Fear', however, is not an expression of a servile attitude, but rather one of respect for the honor of God. It is the awareness of the greatness of God's honor, and the value of God's favor, such that one would do nothing willingly to violate these but rather choose those actions that expressed one's acknowledgement of God's honor and one's debt of gratitude to God for life itself. Aristotle describes the experience of the emotion of fear as:

24 C G Jung (*Answer to Job* [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954], p. 125), for example, thinks that Revelation 'contradicts all ideas of Christian humility, tolerance, and love of your neighbor and enemies, and makes nonsense of a loving father in heaven and rescuer of [hu]mankind'. It contains 'a veritable orgy of hatred, wrath, vindictiveness, and blind destructive fury'. D H Lawrence (*Apocalypse* [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974], p. 18) is more complete in his denunciation of the theology and ethics of Revelation: 'Judas had to betray Jesus to the powers that be—and in the same way, Revelation had to be included in the New Testament, to give the death kiss to the Gospels'.

a painful or troubled feeling caused by the impression of an imminent evil that causes destruction or pain... Such signs are the enmity and anger of those able to injure us in any way...and outraged virtue when it has power, for it...always desires satisfaction (*Rh.* 2.5.1, 3, 5).

The fear aroused in the hearers is proportionate to the honor and power of the one who has been slighted. An orator might arouse fear by augmenting the picture of the honor and virtue of the slighted figure through encomiastic embellishment—something to which John attends in great detail. The act of ‘fearing’, then, would be to show concern for the honor of this more powerful figure, to live so as not to offer any affront to a virtuous Benefactor who indeed possesses the power to avenge slights and injuries.

The Greek word frequently translated as ‘glory’ (δόξα) has a range of meanings in large part consonant with considerations of honor. It may mean ‘opinion’ or ‘reputation’,<sup>25</sup> or be used as a synonym for the word ‘honor’ (τιμή),<sup>26</sup> or may indicate the visual display that replicates the honor of the individual, such as the trappings of a human king.<sup>27</sup> The angel who calls the nations to ‘give God glory’ summons them to join the ranks of angelic beings whose postures and hymns demonstrate visually their estimation of God’s honor. John calls his audience (and, indirectly, their non-Christian neighbors) to recognize God’s claim to reverence and gratitude, and to weigh all their actions and choices in light of that claim.

The first angel’s message thus recalls the opening scene of John’s vision, namely the heavenly liturgies of chs. 4 and 5. Here, the various orders of angels render to God and to the Lamb the honor they deserve, and their hymns teach John’s audience the grounds for such honor and gratitude. God sits upon the throne, the symbol of God’s rule and

25. As in Dio’s sixty-sixth oration.

26. Cf. Plutarch, *Roman Questions* 13 (*Mor.* 266F-267A): ‘Why do they also sacrifice to the god called “Honor” with the head uncovered? One might translate Honor as “renown” (δόξα) or “honor” (τιμή). Is it because renown (δόξα) is a brilliant thing, conspicuous, and widespread, and for the reason that they uncover in the presence of the good and honored men, is it for this same reason that they also worship the god who is named “Honor”?’

27. As in LXX Est. 15.1-6, where the trappings, clothing and position of the king have been arranged to give a stunning visual representation of his honor or dignity; similarly Esther herself has garments which provide a visual representation of her status and honor, which she puts off for prayer (14.1-2) and puts on again before entering the king’s chamber (15.1).

authority, surrounded by concentric circles of worshiping beings—the four living creatures (reminiscent of the seraphim of Isa. 6), the seven spirits (corresponding to the seven archangels or angels of the presence in other Jewish texts, cf. *T. Levi* 2–5), and the 24 elders on their thrones (perhaps corresponding to the angelic order known as ‘thrones’ in Col. 1.16; again cf. *T. Levi* 2–5). These figures are engaged unceasingly in giving honor to God, affirming that God is ‘worthy...to receive glory and honor and power, for thou didst create all things, and by thy will they existed and were created’ (4.11). As the creator of all things and source of all living, God has a unique claim to honor and upon the gratitude of all people (cf. Rev. 14.7).<sup>28</sup> Those who fail to return to God the appropriate return of gratitude show themselves to be dishonorable clients, and this ingratitude in the face of the gift of life itself is especially shameful.

As the heavenly liturgy continues, John’s attention turns to the figure of the Lamb who also has a unique claim to honor. Of all ‘in heaven or on earth or under the earth’, the Lamb alone is worthy to open the seals of a certain scroll held in God’s right hand. The Lamb’s surpassing worthiness derives from his own beneficent acts toward humanity: ‘You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth’ (5.9–10). The career of Jesus is summed up in his death on behalf of others, an ennobling interpretation of Jesus’ execution shared widely among New Testament authors (cf. Mt. 20.28; 26.28; Jn 10.11–18; 2 Cor. 5;15; Gal. 1.3–4; 1 Tim. 2.5–6; Heb. 2.9). By this death, people from every nation have been ransomed from a servile status and

28 Again, this is a familiar subtopic of ‘justice’ in the Greco-Roman world. Aristotle (*Nic Eth* 1163b 15–18), for example, had written that ‘requital in accordance with desert is in fact sometimes impossible, for instance in honouring the gods, or one’s parents—no one could ever render them the honour they deserve, and a man is deemed virtuous if he pays them all the regard he can’. John departs from this shared ethic in his determination of which God deserves this response of gratitude, loyalty, and obedience. In reminding his Christian readers of God’s claim on their gratitude and loyalty particularly in cultivating a willingness to endure loss for the sake of this commitment to God, John comes strikingly close to the logic of *4 Macc* 16 18–19, where the mother of the seven martyred brothers says, ‘Remember that it is through God that you have had a share in the world and have enjoyed life, and therefore you ought to endure any suffering for the sake of God’.

ascribed an honorable status—that of priests serving God, enjoying the honor of face-to-face access to the Divine Patron. The angelic orders are joined by ‘every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea’ in the recognition of Jesus’ achieved honor, as the whole of creation unites in acclamations honoring their Divine Patrons for creation and redemption. John thus attempts to catch his audience up in the sense of gratitude and the immensity of the honor of God and the Lamb (an implicit appeal to *pathos*), such that each believer, within each of the different settings of the seven churches, will seek to find his or her place in these concentric circles of worship that extend to all of creation. They are summoned to live from their acknowledgement of their debt of gratitude to Jesus and the One God, and thus to resist internal enticements to compromise or external pressures to deny the name to which they are to bear witness as faithful recipients of a patron’s favor.

Rev. 7.9-12 provides another such scene of people ‘from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages’ honoring God and the Lamb, again on the grounds of the salvation provided by these figures. Later scenes of giving honor to God, however, reflect the second cause for ‘respecting God’s honor’ introduced by the angel of 14.6-7, namely God’s ability to hold the world accountable before God and to exact satisfaction upon those who have slighted God through disregard of God’s honor and mistreatment of God’s loyal clients. After the sounding of the seventh trumpet, the inhabitants of heaven again worship God on account of God’s taking the reins of the government of the world, particularly for the enactment of God’s wrath against the nations, judging them, rewarding God’s servants and ‘destroying those who destroy the earth’ (11.18). A second hymn, sung now by those human beings who have remained loyal to God, declares that the enactment of God’s judgements must surely result in all fearing and honoring God’s name (15.3-4).

John’s opening vision of all creation honoring God and the Lamb, however, soon shows itself not to be a representation of things as they are. Rather, chs. 4 and 5 portray the cosmic order as it ought to be if all were to acknowledge God’s just claim to honor. Even within that vision, the hearer is told of the Lamb’s work redeeming a kingdom for God ‘out from every nation’, an expression which is echoed in the song of the redeemed in 7.9-12, where again the body of those ransomed are presented as a partial representation of humanity. There are other

centers of worship in John's world, most notably the cults of the traditional Greco-Roman pantheon and the cult of the emperor and the goddess *Roma*. The first angel's message, with which we began this section, itself follows closely upon the description of the emergence and enforcement of imperial cult (13.4, 8, 11-18). There is little evidence for a centrally organized enforcement of this cult during the reign of Domitian, and it appears that Pliny the Younger (governor of Bithynia under Trajan in 110-111 CE) was the first to use participation in the imperial cult as a test of loyalty in the trial of Christians.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, significant pressure could be brought to bear on individual Christians by their neighbors to return to the cultic expressions of solidarity and loyalty which marked the solid citizen of the province. John seeks to defuse the force of such pressures in light of God's exclusive claim to honor and God's unique ability to enforce that claim.

Here we enter into John's demarcation of the 'court of reputation'.<sup>30</sup> If honor was granted to an individual by others, one had to be especially careful in an environment in which multiple, conflicting definitions of honor were available to limit that body of 'others' whose evaluation mattered. Desire for the approval of people who held to other values could undermine an individual's commitment to a particular group's values. Group leaders like John had to focus the group members' desire for approval on the other members of the group and on supra-social entities like 'God',<sup>31</sup> and distance them from concern for the esteem or lack of esteem in which they were held by non-Chris-

29 Cf F G Downing, 'Pliny's Prosecutions of Christians: Revelation and I Peter', *JSNT* 34 (1988), pp 105-23

30 On this topic, see further deSilva, "'Worthy of his Kingdom'", pp 53-58

31 Plato thus speaks of living so as to achieve honor in the sight of God's court (Plato, *Gorgias* 526D-527D), as does Epictetus: 'When you come into the presence of some prominent man, remember that Another looks from above on what is taking place, and that you must please Him rather than this man' (*Diss* 1 30 1). This is a familiar device in the Jewish subcultural literature as well (cf Sir 23 18-19). Since God's opinion is mirrored in the group's evaluation (or, since the group's values provide access to information about God's opinion), the minority group becomes a more reliable, more important court of opinion. It matters more to have the approval of the group than of the wayward society (even if they are the majority, and even if they have the power to effect temporary hardship on the group). 4 *Maccabees* also makes much use of this device. The martyrs encourage one another by looking to the honor they shall enjoy before their ancestors in the faith (13 17) and are praised in regard to the esteem they enjoy before God (17 4-5).



tians. Only in this way could John insulate believers against the pull of their Greco-Roman neighbors' attempts to shame them back into conformity with the values and practices of the dominant culture. John accomplishes this largely through censuring outsiders as dishonorable people, and by setting them already under the disapproval of God.

After several episodes of divine judgement in chs. 8 and 9, John introduces those who are especially the targets of God's wrath:

The rest of humankind, who were not killed by these plagues, did not repent of the works of their hands or give up worshipping demons and idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot see or hear or walk. And they did not repent of their murders or their sorceries or their fornication or their thefts (9.20-21).

The majority of people in Greco-Roman society would have been regarded by John as idolaters (or worshippers of demons—in 1 Cor. 10.19-20 Paul argues that the worship of idols is synonymous with the worship of demons). Jews and Christians, who opposed the worship of idols, formed a distinct minority in the empire. As John's vision unfolds, however, it is the worshipper of idols who is in the minority. All the host of heaven and 'every creature in heaven and on earth and below the earth' know where the true center of the cosmos is, and thus where worship and adoration are properly directed. Contrary to what the public 'knowledge' about the cosmos and the virtue of piety posits as true, the worship of the Greco-Roman divinities does not bring one into line with the cosmic order. Such worship points one away from the center, such that one is no longer acting in accord with the hosts of heaven or the rest of creation. Moreover, such a one becomes a source of disorder, a disruptive force within society working murder, sorcery, fornication and theft. John is here turning back upon society's head the slander it heaped upon Christians. Subversive and vicious acts were being attributed to Christians as part of the dominant culture's attempt to marginalize the group as 'deviant'. Pliny the Younger, for example, expresses surprise when he failed to uncover even through torture the sorts of crimes he had been led to expect from Christians, such as cannibalism and orgiastic gatherings.<sup>32</sup>

In John's vision, however, it is this powerful majority who are the deviants, and who are shown to be in fact powerless when faced with the wrath of God and the Lamb (cf. 6.15-17). Those who refuse to

32. Pliny, *Ep.* 10.96; Justin, *First Apology* 3-12.

honor God as God deserves are themselves shown to be dishonorable on account of their impiety and injustice—their failure to give God his due as creator and Patron of all. John directs most of his attention to the dismantling of the imperial cult. In the ‘public discourse’, the emperor was a model of piety and an object of reverence (both aspects are held together in the title *Augustus* or, in Greek, Σεβαστός). He was the *Pontifex maximus*, the chief priest of the empire who mediated the favor of the gods. In John’s vision, the divine names which adorned the emperor were in fact ‘blasphemous names’ (13.1); his speech was a constant affront to the honor of God and the inhabitants of heaven (13.5-6). He is the instrument of Satan, the enemy of God and deceiver of the earth (12.9; 13.4).<sup>33</sup>

Those who participate in the emperor cult and the cults of the traditional deities are, in fact, offering worship to Satan (13.4) and have fallen victim to the deceptions of his agents (13.14). They, and not the Christians, are ignorant of the knowledge of whom to honor, which is dishonorable. They, and not the Christians, are ‘deviant’ when set against the cosmic order envisioned in Revelation 4 and 5. Moreover, as the visions continue, they are shown to be recalcitrant (9.20-21; 16.9, 11, 21), refusing to acknowledge their error and give God the honor due God, even after his judgements begin to be revealed. They are committed to error and impiety, cursing the name of God with their dying breaths (16.21). Since they lack essential virtues such as piety and justice, and will remain committed to vice, they are censured as dishonorable.

The Christian addressees of Revelation, therefore, must re-evaluate the opinion of such people. How can the believer desire to conform to what such people affirm as ‘honorable’ behavior, when they are shown to be ignorant of what is truly honorable?<sup>34</sup> How can the believer yield

33 On John’s ideological opposition to the emperor cult, see further E Stauffer, *Christus und die Caesaren* (Hamburg Friedrich Wittig, 1952), D Cuss, *Imperial Cult and Honorary Terms in the New Testament* (Fribourg Fribourg University Press, 1974), deSilva, ‘The “Image of the Beast”’

34 A similar strategy appears through the literature of subcultures and counter-cultures in the Greco-Roman world. Plato, for example, frequently contrasts the opinion of the many, who are not guided by a commitment to philosophical inquiry, and the opinion of those few who do examine reality in the light of philosophical truth. Approval of one’s life by the latter group alone is important (*Crit* 44C, 46C-47A). Seneca likewise teaches his pupil that the person seeking to ‘live according to nature’, and to gain ‘imperturbability’ (the chief ends of Stoic philosophy), will

to the pressures of his or her deviant society, when such acquiescence can only mean a share in God's wrath? John thus excludes the unbeliever from the 'court of reputation', leaving the believer to seek above all else the approval of God and Jesus, whose opinion of one's life matters most. The glorified Christ is the one to whom the churches must answer, and not society—the seven oracles make this abundantly clear. Believers are themselves called to take responsibility for deviancy in their midst (cf. 2.14, 20), and to exercise pressure within the group to motivate adherence to the group's norms.

As judge of the world, God is indeed able to preserve God's honor and the honor of God's loyal clients. God's vindication of the witnesses is an important episode in this regard (11.3-13). These two unnamed witnesses are vested with divine authority and power, and call the inhabitants of the Greco-Roman world to repentance. Their relationship to the society can only be described as antagonistic, and the people breathe a great sigh of relief when the Beast strikes the witnesses down. Indeed, they 'gloat' over their unburied corpses, celebrating with one another even as they subject the bodies of the witnesses to the most profound shame, namely to leave them unburied (11.9-10; cf. Sophocles' *Antigone*). The verdict of the dominant culture, however, is not the final word on the honor of the witnesses, for God raises their dead bodies to life and exalts them to the heavens 'while their enemies watched them' (11.12). This assurance of public vindication in the sight of one's detractors is crucial. Notably, God's vindication of his servants' honor is intimately linked with God's establishment of God's own honor, for the sequel shows the onlookers struck with fear and giving 'honor to the God of heaven' at last (11.13).

Following the episode of the two witnesses is the hymn offered to God at the sounding of the seventh trumpet, which again shows how the manifestation of God's 'wrath' and his meting out of punishments to God's enemies and rewards to God's 'servants, the prophets and saints and all who fear [God's] name' is linked to God's reception of honor (11.15-18). Honoring God now leads to honor on that day when God's wrath is poured out. There was an intimate relationship between

not give any weight to the honor or disgrace that the uninitiated show the student of philosophy (*Constant.* 13.2, 5). Indeed, the uninitiated majority are like children, whose behavior one does not regard as insulting since it stems from immaturity and ignorance (*Constant.* 11.2-12.1).

anger (wrath) and honor as evidenced, for example, in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (2.2.1, 8)

Let us then define anger (οργη) as a longing accompanied by pain for a real or apparent revenge (τιμωρια) for a real or apparent slight (ολιγωρια) [People] are angry at slights from those by whom they think they have a right to expect to be well treated such are those on whom they have conferred or are conferring benefits (ευ πεποιηκεν η ποιει) and all those whom they desire or did desire to benefit

God's wrath in Revelation is the anger of a slighted benefactor, whose favor met not with gratitude but with rejection and affront, both in the form of idolatrous worship and in the form of violence against God's loyal clients. Hence, the manifestations of God's wrath in the form of judgements (the plagues of Revelation and so forth) are expected to result in the acknowledgement of God's honor: 'Lord, who will not fear and glorify your holy name? All nations will come and worship before you, for your judgements have been revealed' (15.3-4). The final, celebratory hymn honoring God in 19.1-8 shows how God's judgement of the social order of Rome upholds God's honor and reliability—honor, because God has not tolerated the affronts of an idolatrous and self-glorifying regime, and reliability, because the clients of God, who entrusted their honor to God as they fell victim to society's machinery of social control, are at last vindicated.

These assurances of God's care for the honor of the believer appealed to the confidence of those Christians in danger of shameful treatment or worse at the hands of the dominant culture. As the tension between church and society escalated (as it assuredly would if John's advice were followed, rather than the preaching of the Nicolaitans), believers would be enabled to endure society's verdict upon their lives as dishonorable, or even worthless, in the knowledge that God's own honor demanded that God vindicate God's clients. The final vision in Revelation, that of the New Jerusalem, the place where God's servants receive their full honor and reward, is also the place where God's servants will worship God face to face (22.3-4). Citizenship there, however, is enjoyed only by those whose first thought, in this life, was concern for God's honor rather than for one's safety or comfort within the dominant culture (the 'cowardly' and 'unreliable' clients of 21.8). John thus weaves into his vision the dual considerations of concern so to live as to preserve God's honor and assurance of God's care for the believer's honor—both are pillars of his rhetorical strategy, supporting

his call to remain faithful to the minority culture's values and preserve its identity.

*'Fallen, fallen is Babylon': The Censure and Future Degradation of Rome*

The message of the second angel consists in the declaration that 'Babylon the great is fallen', attributing her demise to her censurable behavior: 'she has made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication' (14.8). We have seen how John censures the behavior of those who engage in idolatrous worship; with the message of the second angel we turn to John's censure of the Roman order itself. Rome laid claim to (or, rather, the spokespersons of the dominant culture claimed for Rome) a highly honorable position in the divine scheme. Rome was the city selected by the gods to rule forever, to usher in a new Golden Age of peace and prosperity, to extend law and order to the far reaches of the known world.<sup>35</sup> John challenges Rome's claim to honor at every point, protesting to the contrary that the Roman order was a dishonorable and vicious order diametrically opposed to virtue as embodied by God's standards.

Prominent among the charges levelled against Rome is the charge of wanton violence against God's servants. The goddess *Roma* is presented as a polluted whore, 'drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus' (17.6). In her was found 'the blood of prophets and of saints, and of all who have been slaughtered on earth' (18.24), a fact that calls out for divine vengeance (18.20; cf. 6.9-11; 16.5-7). She is not the sustainer of peace, but the source of violence and unjust bloodshed.<sup>36</sup> Rome claimed honor ('she glorified herself,' 18.7) beyond what was rightly hers to claim; she spent on herself wealth in proportion to a status that did not belong rightly to her (her 'luxury', 18.3, 7). She is censured for assuring herself and her subjects of her

35. Such propaganda appears in Virgil's fourth *Eclogue* and the sixth book of his *Aeneid*. Coins bearing the iconographic representation of Rome as a beneficent goddess show John's 'unveiling' of this figure to be all the more striking and subversive. See R. Bauckham, 'The Economic Critique of Rome in Revelation 18', in *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993), pp. 338-83 (343-50).

36. A similar critique of Roman power is placed on the lips of the British chieftain Calgacus by Tacitus: 'Robbery, savagery, and rape they call "government"; they make a wasteland and call it "peace"' (Agr. 30).

perpetual well being in the ideology of *Roma Aeterna* ('I rule as a queen; I am no widow, and I will never see grief', 18.7), a form of arrogance violating God's power to allot kingdoms their periods and their ends (cf. Dan. 2.21; 4.26; 5.21). Rome sits as 'the great city that rules over the kings of the earth' (17.18), exercising that rule, however, in opposition to the rightful claim of Jesus as 'ruler of the kings of the earth' (1.5). Ultimately, it is not the Christians who, in opposition to Roman imperial ideology, act seditiously, but the supporters of Rome who rebel against the rule of the Most High and his Anointed.

Rome extends its power and influence not through enlightened policy but through deception (18.23), through the intoxication of the ignorant (17.2). Partnership with Rome is a sign again of being 'taken in' by the agents of Satan, of being kept ignorant of the truth. Such ignorance was regarded by Greco-Roman philosophers, at least, as a dishonorable, servile state.<sup>37</sup> John thus invites the believers once again to assess the activity and opinion of the majority of their neighbors. He wants his audiences to see them as deceived, aberrant individuals, whose hostility toward the Christian confession should be understood as an expression of their error. Connection with Rome, moreover, is labelled 'fornication' and pollution (17.2, 4; 18.3; 19.2). It brings defilement, a stain upon one's honor, rather than opening the door to the acquisition of things honorable.<sup>38</sup>

John avers that Rome is not the 'eternal city' chosen by the gods to rule forever, but rather stands under God's imminent judgement, sentenced already to destruction. God's wrath and vindication of the honor of the 'apostles, saints, and prophets' against the city which made lofty but false claims to honor and affronted God through her 'sins' is certain. This must change how the hearers weigh 'advantage' and

37 Cf. Dio, *Or* 14.18 'Therefore we are forced to define freedom as the knowledge of what is allowable and what is forbidden, and slavery as ignorance of what is allowed and what is not. According to this definition, there is nothing to prevent the Great King, while wearing a very tall tiara upon his head, from being a slave and not being allowed to do anything that he does, for every act that he performs will bring a penalty and be unprofitable. But some other man who is regarded as a slave and is so called, who has not once but often, if it so chance, been sold, and if it should so happen, wears very heavy fetters, will be more free than the Great King.'

38 One might here go on profitably to explore the connection between remaining 'unsoiled' and receiving approval and praise from God and Jesus throughout Revelation (cf. 3.4-5, 7.14, 14.1-5, 21.27).

'security'—if they accept John's message, these are clearly not to be found in alliance with Rome or the dominant culture. The Roman order is itself censured as a dishonorable, vice-ridden system, connections with which mean pollution and defilement rather than enfranchisement and profit. Whatever smacks of seeking peace with Rome becomes a partnership in her sins (18.4) and in the punishments that must ensue. The path to advantage and safety is the path of separation from her sins, even if that should bring marginalization or worse in the present.

*'Those who worship the beast and its image': The Path to Dishonor in Revelation*

The third angel is given a disproportionately long message—one which may therefore have been of special importance for the hearers of Revelation:

Those who worship the beast and its image, and receive a mark on their foreheads or on their hands, they will also drink the wine of God's wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger, and they will be tormented with fire and sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and its image and for anyone who receives the mark of its name (14.9-11).

Not only is the worshiper of the beast subjected to physical punishment (itself an expression of dishonor),<sup>39</sup> but the disgrace of such punishment is highlighted by the presence of an honorable audience—the holy angels and the Lamb bear witness to the degradation of the idolaters, and the public nature of this punishment makes the disgrace all the more bitter. The rhetorical impact of such a message upon the hearers is clear: participation in the imperial cult, whatever benefits it might bring in terms of relieving tension between church and society now, would ultimately lead to disgrace and disadvantage.

The believer faced, and would increasingly face throughout the second century, pressure from members of the dominant culture to participate in the imperial cult. John acknowledges that refusal to

39. J. Pitt-Rivers, 'Honour and Social Status', in J.G. Peristiany (ed.), *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1965), pp. 21-77 (25): 'We should start by noting the intimate relation between honour and the physical person... Any form of physical affront implies an affront to honour since the "ideal sphere" surrounding a person's honour... is defiled.'

participate would remain a threat to the believers' temporary safety and honor. Rev. 13.7 speaks of the beast's power to make war on God's servants and to kill them; in 13.15-17, economic disenfranchisement and execution are posited as the result of non-compliance with the demands of the dominant culture; in 20.4-6, the hearer encounters a large company of 'those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and to the word of God', who 'had not worshiped the beast or its image'. In light of the milder pressures faced by the recipients of Revelation, and this prospect of increasing pressure from outside, the Nicolaitans' proposal of a Christianity that allowed for 'eating food sacrificed to idols' might have seemed to many an advantageous course of action.

John responds to this sort of proposal, however, with a stark picture of the greater disadvantage that would accompany the path of accommodation. Just as he will not allow the believer to accept the claim that the emperor is a benefactor and mediator of divine favor (ch. 13), so he will not allow the believer to view even feigned participation in the machine that legitimates the emperor's rule as advantageous. The seven oracles strongly reinforce this appeal through their use of praise and censure (components of each of the oracles). By issuing commendations and condemnations from the mouth of the glorified Christ, John affirms for the hearers what behaviors are honorable and what are shameful in the eyes of the group. Prominent among the causes for censure before him who 'searches minds and hearts' (2.23) is the compromise of separation from idolatrous worship (2.14-15, 20). This finds its complement in the praise of those who 'hold fast to my name' and 'do not deny' Jesus' name (2.3, 13; 3.8).

The social pressure to deny the name is great, extending even to the point of the lynching of Antipas, who remained loyal to his patron even unto death (2.13). Nevertheless, John argues by means of his visions that the path to safe co-existence with the dominant culture becomes the path to danger and dishonor before the court of God, the court which ascribes the eternal verdict.<sup>40</sup> As idolaters in general are targeted

40. Cf. Plato, *Gorgias* 526D-527A: 'I consider how I shall present my soul whole and undefiled before the judge in that day. Renouncing the honours at which the world aims, I desire only to know the truth, and to live as well as I can, and, when I die, to die as well as I can... And I retort your reproach of me, and say, that you will not be able to help yourself when the day of trial and judgement, of which I was speaking, comes upon you; you will go before the judge, the son of Aegina,



specifically as objects of God's wrath and judgements (9.20-21; 16.9, 11), so those who fail to resist society's pressure to offer honor to those who stand opposed to God tread the path to eternal dishonor. Those whose names are 'not found written in the book of life'—identified earlier as those who participate in the universal cult of the emperor (13.8)—are thrown 'into the lake of fire' (20.15). Those who are 'cowardly' and 'faithless' (21.8), who do not endure the pressures courageously out of loyalty to their Divine Patron, lead the list of those excluded from the New Jerusalem and found in 'the lake which burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death' (cf. 21.27; 22.15). While not speaking in the idiom of an oration, John nevertheless presents a refutation of his opponents' proposal of the path to advantage. Dishonor, disfavor and destruction await those who show greater care for the demands of the dominant culture than for the honor of the One God and their debt of gratitude to the Lamb.

*'How honorable are those who die in the Lord from now on':*

*The Path to Honor*

What, then, is the path to honor in Revelation? What would the hearer of Revelation understand to be the truly advantageous course of action? Those who stand in God's favor (5.8; 8.3-4; 22.21) and under God's protection (11.18; 16.6-7; 18.20; 20.9) are regularly referred to in Revelation as ἅγιοι, 'saints' or 'holy ones'. This group is defined as 'those who keep the commandments of God and hold fast to the faith of Jesus' (14.12; cf. 12.17). Being identified as a 'saint' gives one a claim to honor before God's court, and the hearer is immediately pointed to the importance of obedience to God's commands (the first of which, notably, prohibits the worship of other gods and the practice of idolatry) and steadfastness in one's commitment to Jesus.

The makarism which closes the episode of the three angels also points suggestively toward what is held out as 'honorable' or as a sign of divine favor in Revelation:

And I heard a voice from heaven saying, Write this: 'Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord henceforth.' 'Blessed indeed,' says the Spirit,

and, when he has got you in his grip and is carrying you off, you will gape and your head will swim around, just as mine would in the courts of this world, and very likely someone will shamefully box you on the ears, and put upon you any sort of insult.'

'that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them'  
(14 13)

In a lucid essay, K.C. Hanson has distinguished between 'blessings' and 'makarisms' in the following way: blessings are 'formal pronouncements...bestowing God's positive empowerment'<sup>41</sup> while makarisms 'represent the public validation of an individual's or group's experience, behavior, or attitude as honorable'.<sup>42</sup> He thus proposes that the opening of a 'beatitude' be translated not 'blessed' or 'happy' or 'enviable', but 'how honorable'. Makarisms, therefore, articulate 'socially ideal behavior and commitments', or, those 'conditions and behaviors which the community regards as honorable'.<sup>43</sup> I would consider this argument basically correct, with a single, minor nuance. Hanson bases his observations concerning the difference between blessings and makarisms on the work of W. Janzen, who rightly depicts a makarism as public affirmation that an individual (or group) has been blessed by God in receiving some 'positive empowerment' from God. I would suggest, therefore, that a makarism could also be introduced by the formula 'how favored' in those instances where the sense of receiving a divine benefaction (rather than embodying some virtue or attribute valued by the group) is stressed. The only distinctive here is between those who are μακάριοι in the sense of receiving some favor from God and those who are μακάριοι because they have acted in ways that the group deems honorable.

In this passage, the most extreme experience of society's disapproval and censure, namely execution, is pronounced a mark of honor within the community and before the court of God.<sup>44</sup> When dying is a sign of being held in esteem by God and favored, what pressures can the outside world bring to bear on one's commitment? Again the proximity of the Christian culture and philosophical culture impresses itself upon us: 'The man over whom pleasure has no power, nor evil, nor fame, nor

41 Hanson, 'How Honorable! How Shameful! A Cultural Analysis of Matthew's Makarisms and Reproaches', *Semeia* 68 (1996), pp 81-111 (85)

42 Hanson, 'How Honorable', p 90

43 Hanson, 'How Honorable', pp 93, 100-101

44 While this verse has been used effectively as a text for funeral anthems, thus being applied to those who may not have experienced a violent death on account of their Christian commitment, the context of Rev 13 1-14 13, together with such other expressions of violent death as 20 4-6, suggests that John has this primarily in mind in the makarism of 14 13

wealth, and who, whenever it seems good to him, can spit his whole paltry body into some oppressor's face and depart from this life—whose slave can he any longer be, whose subject?' (Epictetus, *Diss.* 3.24.71; LCL). In a similar fashion, John arms the believer to yield up his or her life so as to remain a faithful witness to the divine patron, transforming society's ultimate expressions of shame into a claim to honor.

Readers of Revelation have noted that John preserves a set of seven makarisms, strung throughout his visions.<sup>45</sup> As we look to these, other elements of the 'path to honor' emerge:

Blessed (favored) is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed (favored/honorable) are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near (1.3).

See, I am coming like a thief! Blessed (honorable) is the one who stays awake and is clothed, not going about naked and exposed to shame (16.15).

And the angel said to me, 'Write this: Blessed (favored) are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb' (19.9).

Blessed (honorable) and holy are those who share in the first resurrection. Over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him a thousand years (20.6).

See, I am coming soon. Blessed (honorable) is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book (22.7).

Blessed (honorable) are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates. Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and fornicators and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood (22.14-15).

Two makarisms (1.3; 22.7) label the one who 'keeps' the words of Revelation 'honorable' and 'favored'. These frame the whole of the book, pointing to the acceptance of the view of the world disclosed therein and the call to remain exclusively loyal to the Lamb and separate from the idolatry and luxury of the dominant culture as the way to stand honored in God's sight and to remain within God's favor. The

45. See, e.g., Ford, *Revelation*, p. 374; Mounce, *Revelation*, p. 43; Talbert, *The Apocalypse*, p. 13.

makarism of 16.15 connects honor with eschatological readiness in a manner strikingly similar to Mk 13.32-36: readiness for Christ's return, and preparation so as not to be 'exposed' on that Day of Judgement, makes one honorable. The invitees to the Lamb's Marriage Feast are 'favored'. The literary context of this makarism, set at the close of the hymns celebrating the judgement of Babylon, reinforces John's call to remain separate from the Roman order, to remain 'chaste' and 'undefiled' through avoiding collusion with the idolatrous dominant culture. Such are those who are privileged to attend this eschatological banquet.

The remaining two makarisms (20.6; 22.14) also hold up as honorable and favored those who have experienced society's verdict of 'dishonorable' on account of their loyalty to Jesus. The first of these makarisms appears at the close of the vision of those who 'had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God', who had not 'worshiped the beast or its image' (20.4). These whom society most marginalized and execrated (through execution) God most favors, for these share Christ's thousand-year reign, are consecrated as priests to God and Christ, and are preserved from divine punishment (the 'second death'). Those who 'wash their robes' had been encountered earlier in Revelation at 7.14, and the hearers' understanding of this image may be even further refined by the commendation of those who 'have not soiled their clothes' (3.5). The cleansing or soiling of garments takes the hearer into the language of purity, of boundaries which are to be observed, and hence again of keeping oneself 'pure' in commitment to the One God and the Lamb and 'undefiled' in terms of collusion with the world which rebels against the One God. Those who 'wash their robes' come through the 'great ordeal' (7.14), having suffered not the plagues of God but the pressures of society.

These seven makarisms are part of John's larger program of outlining for the members of the seven churches the path to honor before God's court. John speaks of the believer's honor in terms of their appointment to priesthood (1.6; 5.9), and frequently refers to God's loyal clients (those who would receive approval and reward rather than punishment and disgrace at God's Judgement) as 'saints' (ἅγιοι), a term common to early Christian texts. In Revelation, however, these terms, which resonate with conceptions of 'holiness', 'consecration', and 'separation' from the profane, further reinforce John's equation of the community's

maintenance of high boundaries between church and society with the honor of the believer.<sup>46</sup>

The seven oracles which preface the main body of the apocalypse, as we noted earlier, contain extensive sections of praise and censure, further delineating for the hearers what gives them honor in God's sight and what detracts from their honor. Perseverance in Christian witness and investment within the believing community are chief causes for commendation (2.2a, 3, 19; 3.8b), and John is careful frequently to transform the experience of marginalization at the hands of the representatives of the dominant culture into a claim to honor within the group (which is recognized by the glorified Christ, the coming Judge of all). The Smyrnaean believers' endurance of censure (2.9-10) and the Pergamene believers' loyalty even in the wake of the lynching of Antipas (2.13), measurements of the disrepute in which the larger society holds such deviants, receive Jesus' affirmation—an acknowledgement of honor which is witnessed by the churches throughout the province. The poverty of the Smyrnaean believers, a sign of their lack of patronage networks and marginalization within the economy of the city, becomes a sign of their true wealth in Jesus' eyes (2.9a); the Laodicean Christians, who claim honor on the basis of their wealth (3.17a), find their claim rejected by Jesus and receive censure instead for their failure to be useful to him (3.15-16).

In each of these seven oracles, the believers are called to 'overcome' or to 'conquer'. The possibility of victory lies before them, and great promises are made 'to the one who overcomes' to stimulate the hearers' ambition to seek these honors (2.7, 11, 17, 26-28; 3.5, 12, 21). Those who 'overcome' will be affirmed by Jesus before the court of God—the Lamb will bear witness to their loyalty and honorable character (3.5); those who resist the enticements to ally themselves with Rome's rule will receive a share in Christ's rule (2.26-28a; 3.21). John does not allow believers to see themselves as victims of society, but gives them an active role in their encounter with the dominant culture. Accommodation will mean defeat and shame; treading the path of fidelity to God will constitute honorable victory over the world. What is 'overcoming' in Revelation? John will clarify the behaviors that constitute 'victory' as his visions unfold.

46. On John's interest in heightening sectarian tension and group boundaries, see further deSilva, "The 'Image of the Beast'", pp. 207-208; and 'Social Setting of the Revelation', pp. 296-302.

The first model of 'overcoming' is the 'Lion of the tribe of Judah', whose victory won for him the unique privilege and honor of opening the sealed scroll by which God's judgements are enacted. The acclamation of the Lamb, however, locates this victory in his redemptive death—his endurance of execution (slaughter, 5.9). A second type of conquering appears in the hymn of 12.10-12, where Satan's defeat is attributed not to the prowess of 'Michael and his angels' (12.7) but to those who 'did not cling to life even in the face of death' (12.11). Holding fast to the 'word of their testimony' and the 'blood of the Lamb' even to the point of death is not a mark of defeat at the hands of Satan's agents, but of victory over the Dragon.<sup>47</sup> This pattern of 'overcoming' is reinforced in 15.2, where 'those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name' gather before the throne of God to celebrate God's justice and their deliverance. Conquering the beast and its image, however, means resisting the pressures to worship the beast (cf. 13.15-17), even if it entails accepting execution (cf. 20.4-5). The path to honor—to the enjoyment of victory and its rewards before God's court—is the path of separation from the dominant culture and resistance to its efforts to 'reform' the Christians. It is not honor in the eyes of the idolatrous society that matters, but honor before God and the holy angels. John urges the addressees so to live here that, when 'their deeds follow them' to God's court, they shall be found loyal clients who have held the honor of God most dear.

### *Conclusion*

Through visionary rhetoric, John deals rather directly with the topics of 'eternal honor and safety' as opposed to 'temporary honor and safety'.<sup>48</sup> The seven oracles to the churches invite the believers to seek the greater honor that Jesus has prepared for the faithful. The visions consistently move the hearers to identify with (and thus seek to embody the behaviors of) those who are honored before God's court, and to avoid those courses of action that, while they will lessen the tension

47 On this transformation of the meaning of 'conquest', see further Barr, 'Apocalypse as Symbolic Transformation', pp 41-42

48 The distinction between 'temporary' and 'eternal' advantage is a familiar Jewish and Christian variation on the theme of Greco-Roman orators comparing two courses to determine which is the more advantageous. Cf. *4 Macc.* 15.2-3, 8, 25-28, Heb. 10.32-34, 11.25-26, 13.13-14, 2 Cor. 4.16-18

between themselves and society, will ultimately lead to open and lasting disgrace before God and the holy angels. At stake quite explicitly in Revelation is the honor of God and the honor of Christ, and a strong message of the vision is that the believer's honor is only secure insofar as that believer honors God and God's Messiah, even when the cost is high and results in temporary disgrace in the world's eyes. In Revelation, as in other early Christian texts, marginalization and disgrace at the hands of society on account of commitment to the Divine Patron becomes a source of honor and assurance of favor within the Christian culture. Visionary rhetoric allows the believer to consider his or her choices and investments more directly in light of eternity, and in so doing clarifies for the believer the necessity of commitment to do as the Spirit directs.<sup>49</sup>

It has been impossible to exploit fully the potential of the investigation of honor discourse as outlined in earlier articles.<sup>50</sup> I have been able only to highlight the broader contours of John's use of honor discourse, hopefully raising the possibilities of the reader's developing this investigation further. The connections between the exploration of honor discourse and the larger exegetical task are already becoming apparent. Sensitivity to the cultural cues of honor refines our thinking about key lexical terms, such as the meanings and, perhaps more importantly, the impact upon the hearers of such terms as 'blessed'. We learn more about what it means to 'fear' God in Revelation, namely nurturing respect for God's honor and caution concerning affronting God and failing in one's obligations to one's divine benefactor. We come to understand God's 'wrath' not as a psychological deficiency but as a culturally contextualized expression of God's honor. Awareness of honor scripts helps us to look at the broader literary context of a given passage in a new light. We are enabled, for example, to trace the development of 'paths' to honor and dishonor, to discern the cumulative effect of each step along this path proposed by Revelation. Investigation of honor discourse relates directly to the rhetorical analysis of the text, opening up new avenues for the exploration of Revelation's

49. Revelation thus allows a critique of the dominant culture and of the necessity of yielding to the demands of that culture by viewing the machinery of society *sub specie aeternitatis* (cf. P.L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* [New York: Doubleday, 1967], p. 97, on the de-alienating potential of religion).

50. See the larger program described in deSilva, 'Worthy of God's Kingdom', pp. 50-59; and 'Investigating Honor Discourse', pp. 493-516.

impact upon the hearers, the directions in which John seeks to move them, and the means by which he seeks to motivate them. Finally, this investigation connects with the study of the social setting of the group in its historical context. It helps us, for example, to delineate its relationship to other groups more precisely. When death is a sign of favor and honor in the sight of the counterculture, then the dominant culture's mechanisms of social control will be powerless, being viewed not as an ascription of dishonor but as the path to honor to be courageously endured, through which one can 'overcome', achieve the 'crown of life', and be invested with authority and a position on a throne. The increasing number of martyrs throughout the second and third centuries, and the veneration of such figures, testifies to the importance and pervasiveness of such 'social-engineering' strategies within the early church.

#### ABSTRACT

While Revelation resists analysis in terms of classical rhetorical criticism, investigation of honor discourse allows the interpreter to begin to unravel the strategies of persuasion brought to bear by the visionary upon his audiences. John is intensely interested in the question of whom to honor, and at what cost that honor is to be safeguarded. His visions employ topics of advantage and disadvantage (native to deliberative oratory), as well as models of admirable and censurable behavior (native to epideictic oratory), in an attempt to promote the path of loyalty to the Christian counterculture and its abhorrence of idolatrous forms of worship as the virtuous path which gives one nobility in the present and honor and safety in the future. A close reading of honor discourse in Rev. 14:6-13 becomes the anchoring point for an analysis of the rhetorical impact of the whole.





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