

## IMPERIAL PRETENSIONS AND THE THRONE-VISION OF THE LAMB: OBSERVATIONS ON THE FUNCTION OF REVELATION 5<sup>1</sup>

J. DARYL CHARLES  
The Wilberforce Forum  
Washington, DC. 20041

"[A] god has made for us this rest  
For god to me he [the emperor] shall always be; his altar  
Often a tender lamb from our folds shall imbrue."

--Virgil

"No one is so proud of himself that when he hears the name he can keep still; no, he stands up and chants and worships and joins in a twofold prayer, one for the Emperor to the gods, one for those who are his own to the Emperor himself."

--Statius

At the core of the Christians' dilemma in the first century was their refusal to adore the national gods and affirm Roman Imperial pretensions. Christian non-compliance in this regard constituted rebellion against the established order, at the center of which stood the emperor, hailed as *Kyrios*, "Lord," incarnate. Although conditions reflected up to the time of the writing of the Apocalypse suggest that Christians were not regularly martyred,<sup>2</sup> the writer foresees an ominous development. At issue is a clash of two irreconcilable worldviews. At its core, the

<sup>1</sup> Delivered at the 1993 International Congress of the Society of Biblical Literature, Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster, Münster, Germany.

<sup>2</sup> Notwithstanding the accounts in Tacitus and Suetonius of Neronian persecution. A. A. Trites ("*Martyrs* and Martyrdom in the Apocalypse: A Semantic Study," *NovT* 15 [1973] 77-80) has argued that the notion of "witness," not death, is still the primary sense of *martyrs* in the first century. Nevertheless, as noted by M G. Reddish ("*Martyr Christology in the Apocalypse*;" *JSNT* 33 [1988] 85-95), "witness" entails death in the Revelation; Christ is identified in the introduction of the Apocalypse as the "firstborn of the dead" (1:5). Moreover, the Lamb is portrayed four times as slain (5:6,9,12; 13:8) and wears a robe "dipped in blood" (19:13). This blood is generally thought to be his own, not that of his enemies.

Apocalypse represents a challenge to the Roman principate. The all-encompassing machinery of the *imperium Romanum* is utterly bewitching to the world (Revelation 13 and 17), leaving none unaffected; it thus calls for a prophetic consciousness.

The NT Apocalypse could well be called a "book of powers."<sup>3</sup> "War," "thrones," "might," "strength," "horns," "keys," "swords," "crowns," "scrolls" and "overcoming" permeate the visions of John.<sup>4</sup> Few dispute that up to the time of Christ Roman aristocracy found satisfaction in waging war as a means of personal enrichment, a fact certainly not lost on Jewish and Jewish-Christian apocalypticists of the first centuries B.C. and AD. In all of its wars (dating from the Alexandrian era), Rome was the aggressor.<sup>5</sup> In the struggle to live out the Christian faith in a first-century context where the role of the Roman *imperium* is unchallenged, John assures his audience that "the saints" will partake in the rule of *ho pantokrator*, the Almighty: "they shall reign on the earth."<sup>6</sup> The exact mode of mediating that rule, however, is quite antithetical to the brute Roman *kratos* ("might") exerted by the Caesar.<sup>7</sup> It is in this mediatory role of divine imperium that the key figure of the Apocalypse, the Lamb, emerges.

An enormous amount has been written concerning the "Kaisermystik" in an attempt by moderns to penetrate the ancient assumption that the divine operated through Rome,<sup>8</sup> with its concrete manifestation in the emperors. Was imperial worship a foremost religious phenomenon, or was it essentially political loyalty clothed in a quasi-religious garment?<sup>9</sup> Given the mix of political realities and the nature of religious

<sup>3</sup> T. Osborn, *The Lion and the Lamb: A Drama of the Apocalypse* (Geneva: WCC, 1988) vii.

<sup>4</sup> Given the importance of conquest/victory as a motif in Roman imperial propaganda, it is only natural that the visions of John incorporate this theme. "Conquering" and "reigning" appear throughout the Apocalypse but find their meaning particularly in the throne vision of 5:1-14.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. J. A. North, "The Development of Roman Imperialism," *JRS* 71 (1981) 1-9. Polybius (6.19.4) writes that no one could hold a political office in Rome before having completed ten military campaigns. First-century sources would seem to confirm the central importance of war in the Roman mindset. Military achievement, as conceded by Cicero, was the pre-eminent source of glory and fame (*De off.* 1.74,76-78,121). A helpful analysis of the Roman ideology of war and conquest in its development can be found in W. V. Harris, *War and Imperialism in Republican Rome 327-70 BC*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

<sup>6</sup> Rev 5:10; 20:6; 22:5.

<sup>7</sup> Note the use of *kratos* or *ischys/ischyros* in the book: 1:5; 5:2,12,13; 6:15; 7:12; 10:1; 18:2,8,10,21; 19:6.

<sup>8</sup> S. R. F. Price, "Between Man and God: Sacrifice in the Roman Imperial Cult," *JRS* 70 (1980) 28, estimates that ca. 1500 items about the Imperial cult were published between 1960 and 1980 alone.

<sup>9</sup> In the wealth of literature on the Imperial cult, scholars generally have made a sharp distinction between politics and religion in assessing the nature of ruler-cults in antiquity.

pluralism in the first century, the answer would appear to lodge somewhere in between. Revelation 5, a throne-vision of the "Lamb," is key in the interpretation of the apocalyptic visions of John. In 5:1-14 the reader catches a glimpse of both the political ramifications of Imperial pretension as well as the religious implications of absolutist Imperial claims. Both kingly and priestly imagery are employed to reassure John's audience.

Attention has been drawn earlier in this century<sup>10</sup> as well as more recently<sup>11</sup> to the "polemical parallelism" between the Imperial cult and early Christianity. The language of adoration and worship associated with the former is transferred by the writer of the Apocalypse from a deified emperor to Christ. Most conspicuous in Revelation is the emphasis on ritual and ceremony.<sup>12</sup> Ritual demonstrates precisely where human loyalties are to be found.<sup>13</sup> To affirm the sovereignty of one is in fact to deny it to another. Worship, hence, is the confession of one's all. In the Apocalypse, the reader is confronted with an absolute antithesis; no compromise is possible. Since confession of one is clearly a negation of another, the Christian community is challenged with a dilemma stemming from claims of ultimacy by the Imperium.<sup>14</sup>

From a pragmatic standpoint, the offenses of Christians to the Imperial court were political and not religious per se. To the extent that it refused to confess the sovereignty of the Empire and, by representation,

<sup>10</sup> A Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East* (New York/London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1910) 346; also E. Stauffer, *Christ and the Caesars* (London: SCM, 1952) 174-91.

<sup>11</sup> P. Barnett, "Polemical Parallelism: Some Further Reflections on the Apocalypse," *JSNT* 35 (1989) 111-20.

<sup>12</sup> K.-P. Jorns, in *Das hymnische Evangelium* (Gutersloh: Mohn, 1971), has examined the liturgical character of the Apocalypse in a thorough manner. Earlier, O. A. Piper, "The Apocalypse of John and the Liturgy of the Early Church," *CH* 20 (1951) 17-18, had observed the liturgical links with the Psalms, Isaiah and Daniel. See, also, L. Hurtado, "Revelation 4-5 in the Light of Jewish Apocalyptic Analogies," *JSNT* 25 (1985) 105-6.

<sup>13</sup> Thus, Barnett, "Parallelism," 113.

<sup>14</sup> In koine the terms used to denote imperial sovereignty are *basileus/basileia* and occur ten times in the Apocalypse. An interesting hint at the conflicting claims of sovereignty surfaces in Acts 17:7, where Christians are depicted as "defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king (*basilea heteron*), one called Jesus." The tone here is one of contempt

The image (*eikon*) and legend (*epigraphe*) associated with the coin handed to Jesus constitute an element of religious symbolism that is best understood in the light of the Imperial cult. The coin probably read *TIBERIUS CAESAR DIVI AUGUSTI FILIUS AUGUSTUS* (thus, E. W. Madden, *History of Jewish Coinage* [London: Methuen, 1964] 247) and would have represented a test of allegiance. Jesus' answer was both a tacit renunciation of emperor worship (" . . . and unto God [render] the things that are God's") and an acknowledgement of contemporary political realities ("Render unto Caesar. . ."). The function of the image is simultaneously economic and religious. At root, the coin represented the intolerance of any rival images to power (see A. Wallace-Hadrill, "Image and Authority in the Coinage of Augustus," *JRS* 76 [1986] 85-87).

the emperor, the Christian Church was perceived as a menace to imperial unity and supremacy. Inasmuch as the Christians called Jesus *Kyrios/Dominus*,<sup>15</sup> the same title could not legitimately be ascribed to the emperor--a dilemma interpreted plainly enough by Pliny.<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, for the first-century Christian the matter comes down to a fundamental antithesis: *Divus Imperator* ("Emperor Divine") or *Christus Dominus* ("Christ the Lord"). Christians refused to acknowledge Caesar as god-man, while at the same time proclaiming Christ to be the God-Man who ruled even Caesar. Such de-sanctifying of the state was certainly not lost on the emperor himself. The Christian disciple is thus at root an imperial antagonist; one's devotion cannot be split.

### *The Function of Revelation 5*

Chapters 4 and 5 of this apocalyptic drama mark the introduction of the Lamb. The audience is transferred in John's vision from the seven churches to the courts of the heavenly throne room to observe, in a liturgical context,<sup>17</sup> the pivotal event of history along with its ramifications. Here one notes two settings pervading John's vision: the throne and the altar. Everything occurring in chaps. 4-5 transpires between these two axes, suggesting that the vision contains both political and religious implications.

Initially, John sees a throne and "one sitting upon it" (4:2). It is significant that the action of God in chaps. 4-5 is foremost one of sitting--that is, of reigning and judging. Of the sixty-two occurrences of thrones in the NT, forty-six are found in the Apocalypse, with nineteen in these two chapters alone. The central fact that pervades heaven is the absolute authority of God,<sup>18</sup> and this authority flows *ek tes dexias tau kathemenou epi tau thronou*, "from the right hand of the one sit-

<sup>15</sup> Caesar was hailed as *Dominus* only from the time of Domitian on (a generation after Paul), although *Kyrios* was used of the Caesar in the East almost from the beginning.

<sup>16</sup> *Ep.*, 90.

<sup>17</sup> R. Deichgraber, *Gotteshymnus und Christushymnus in der fruhen Christenheit* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967) 46, 58, assumes that the picture of heavenly worship in chaps. 4-5 is reflecting to a certain degree early Christian worship, a notion advanced earlier this century by w: Bousset, *Kyrios Christos* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1921) 235. More importantly, the hymns of 4-5 function as counterparts to imperial court ceremony, an interpretive key briefly noted in n E. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987) 243. Given the allusions to Imperial liturgy from the early Christian era--e.g., in Dio Cassius (59.24.5) and Tacitus (Ann. 14.15)--this scheme needs to be explored further.

<sup>18</sup> One need only observe the various designations for God in these two chapters to see this forcefully illustrated: *ho kathemenos epi ton thronon* (4:2,3,9,10; 5:1,7;13); *ho pantokrator* (4:8); *Kyrios ho theos* (4:8); *ho en kai ho on kai ho erchomenos* (4:8); *ho kyrios* (4:11). *Ho theos*, *kyrios* and *ho pantokrator* embrace what *YHWH*, 'Adonay and 'El 'Elyon did in the OT.

ting on the throne" (5:1,7).<sup>19</sup> The supreme authority of God over the universe having been established, judgments thus proceed as an out-working in history (6:1-19:10).

Containing a view of history from the divine standpoint, the scroll<sup>20</sup> of Revelation 5 in essence represents the book of destiny. According to Roman stipulations, the sealing of a will was done in the presence of seven witnesses.<sup>21</sup> Viewed as such, history, which conceals the divine purpose, is irrevocable in accordance with the will of the Sovereign Lord. For this reason John weeps, since no one is able to loosen the seals to the scroll (5:3). The opening of these seals, which commences the judgments of 6:1ff, is achieved only through God's chosen agent, the Lamb of Revelation 5.

Traditional commentary has observed the progression of the Johannean visions in the Revelation--Jesus seen as both priest and king possessing sovereign authority, Jesus addressing the seven churches, then the throne-vision revealing Jesus' intercessory work as the "Lamb." Chapter 5, viewed in the contextual flow, is a crucial introduction to the vision of 6:1ff, in which the audience witnesses judgments poured out upon the earth. What has generally been absent from commentary on Revelation 5 is the literary-rhetorical-visionary strategy behind much of the imagery. The vision, as it turns out, is heavily imbued with "imperial" overtones. The "Lamb"--ie., the "Lion-Lamb" who is simultaneously "savior" and "conqueror"--is revealed in terms that are uniquely and painfully familiar to a first-century audience living in Asia Minor. Borrowing images and epithets suggesting conscious "polemical parallels," John portrays Jesus in a manner that causes even the glories of the Imperial throne to pale by contrast.

What were some of the political realities associated with Roman imperium that would have tested the mettle of Christians in Asia Minor? What were the consequences of Imperial claims to sovereignty? The task of interpretation, one discovers, is aided by attending to the social realities of life in the Eastern provinces.

### *The Nature and Permanence of Imperium*

The cult of an emperor, a "savior," is to be found in the seed of Rome early on. With city-states dying, *pax Romana* abroad and no significant nationalism to oppose it, Caesarism was but a logical political-religious

<sup>19</sup> On power, might and the "right hand," see Exod 15:6 and Ps 44:3; cf. also Ps 17:7; 48:10 and 138:7.

<sup>20</sup> There are three scrolls in the Apocalypse: one for the churches (2:1), the sealed scroll of heaven (5:1-5, 7; 8), and the little scroll to be eaten by John (10:9-11).

<sup>21</sup> W. Sattler, "Das Buch mit sieben Siegeln. II," *ZNW* 21 (1922) 51. This could well be the justification for Jesus' title *ho martyrs ho pistos* (1:5).

development. The Empire had brought about the "solution"--"salvation" for the human race--and was thus worthy of popular adoration. Empire-adoration necessitated a personal symbol which the ancient city-state could not generate. In the Imperial cult resided the token of Imperial unity. The Empire was in effect a politico-ecclesiastical institution, a "church" as well as a state, not unlike its Eastern antecedents.<sup>22</sup> To be sure, Christianity was per se not opposed to the state; the Apostle Paul viewed it as divinely appointed with a civil function in the temporal order. Rather, it was Rome's pretense of *absolute* authority and ultimate allegiance that for the Christian disciple was intolerable; hence, the dilemma for the Christian community.

G. Hirschfeld,<sup>23</sup> W. S. Ferguson,<sup>24</sup> E. Barber<sup>25</sup> and H. Wagenvoort<sup>26</sup> have sufficiently demonstrated that the notions of *imperium* (the right of authority), *potestas* (efficacy, public authority) and *majestas* (sovereign authority) germinated not in the West but in the Orient. Though *imperium* is a Latin term, the underlying concept is universal: the state as a single, universal society with a god-son on the throne. While a military commander, according to Roman custom, would assume the title of *imperator*<sup>27</sup> following a victory in battle only *after* returning to the city, there is no genuine consensus among historians as to how this tradition developed; it remains somewhat obscure. Moreover, in the literature there is some disagreement as to whether the title was hereditary or not. Nevertheless, though Oriental in conception, *imperium* achieved deep roots in its Roman manifestation.<sup>28</sup>

T. Mommsen<sup>29</sup> has traced the etymology of *imperium* through the verbs *impero*, "to command," and *imperaro*, "to fertilize," based on usage by Cicero. Central to the notion of *imperium* is the idea of triumph, and by extension, increase/dominion. With universal achievement and consolidated power, Rome was the natural conclusion of imperialism.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>22</sup> See E. Barber, "The Conception of Empire," *The Legacy of Rome* (ed. C. Bailey; Oxford: Clarendon, 1923) 58-65.

<sup>23</sup> *Zur Geschichte des römischen Kaiserkultus* (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1888).

<sup>24</sup> *Greek Imperialism* (Boston/New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1913).

<sup>25</sup> "The Conception of Empire," in *The Legacy of Rome* (ed. C. Bailey; Oxford: Clarendon, 1923) 45-65.

<sup>26</sup> *Roman Dynamism: Studies in Ancient Roman Thought, Language and Custom* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1947).

<sup>27</sup> See H. Rosenberg, "Imperator," *Paulys Real-Encyclopaedie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft* (eds. G. Wissowa and W. Kroll; Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1914) 9.1139-54.

<sup>28</sup> For contrasting views on the nuances of Eastern-Western adaptation, see Hirschfeld (n. 23), pp. 832-35, and L. M. Sweet, *Roman Emperor Worship* (Boston: Badger, 1919) 41-44.

<sup>29</sup> *Römisches Staatsrecht* (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1887) 3.310.2.

<sup>30</sup> The meaning of the word *imperium* appears to have undergone a shift by the first century--from governance by magistrates and pro-magistrates (a ruling gift granted

The reason for the primacy of Julius Caesar in the establishment of the order of *imperatores* can be seen in the events of his career as well as the divine honors ascribed him subsequent to his death, chronicled by Suetonius and Dio Cassius. From 3 B.C., at the formation of the Octavian-Antony-Lepidus triumvirate, until the time of Diocletian, eighty-three places of consecration/deification were erected in Rome, indicating the relative influence of the Imperial cult. Augustus, as the inscriptions show, was being worshipped in the East as "a Savior . . . through whom have come glad tidings." While it is true that Augustus never allowed himself to be openly designated a god and worship of Augustus in Rome and Italy was nominally forbidden, the poets of his age--Propertius, Virgil, Horace and Ovid--were lavish in their praise of him as Deus.<sup>31</sup>

The pretensions of Caligula and Nero toward divinity are well known. Comparisons of Nero with Mithra and Tyche as described by Dio, with their ascription of supernatural qualities, are useful in illustrating how a Nero *redivivus* legend could flourish on a popular level.<sup>32</sup> The Flavian emperors, successors to the Julian dynasty, generally sought legitimacy by assuming divine status.<sup>33</sup> Tacitus<sup>34</sup> is convinced of divine manifestations in Vespasian and his offspring, while Josephus<sup>35</sup> refers to signs (*semeia*) of his imperial call and Dio Cassius<sup>36</sup> writes that portents and dreams (*semeia kai oneiroi*) long beforehand pointed to his sovereignty.

Domitian, third of the Flavian rulers, became more the divine monarch. Acknowledged by the Senate as the son of a god and brother of divus (deity), he became the object of widespread worship, marking a departure from the moderacy of earlier Julio-Claudian emperors. In many respects his reign constituted a return to the excesses of Caligula and Nero. Coinage shows Domitian to have been designated *theos*. Pliny the Younger<sup>37</sup> notes that flocks of victims were sacrificed to Domitian, comparing the amount of human blood spilled to that of animal sacrifices.

by Jupiter), to Roman control of the world (*imperium Romanum*), that is, the power by which Rome waged war and subjugated its enemies as an empire.

<sup>31</sup> The name "Augustus," from *augere* ("to supply with increase"/"to augment"), implies personification towards deity.

<sup>32</sup> Growing interest in a return of Nero, attested to by Suetonius and Dio Cassius, would fairly accurately reflect the strength of the Imperial cult.

<sup>33</sup> See K. Scott, *The Imperial Cult under the Flavians* (Stuttgart/Berlin: Kohlhammer, 1936).

<sup>34</sup> Ann. 1.10.

<sup>35</sup> J.W. 1.23.

<sup>36</sup> 64.9.1; 65.1.2.

<sup>37</sup> *Paneg* 52.

According to Aurelius Victor,<sup>38</sup> Domitian's early years were relatively mild. Eusebius<sup>39</sup> places the assumption of the title *Dominus* in Domitian's sixth year of rule. A number of inscriptions have Domitian being referred to as *Dominus* and *Kyrios*. Dio Chrysostom<sup>40</sup> writes that Greeks and barbarians call Domitian "Lord and God," *despotes kai theos*, "though he in truth is a demon."<sup>41</sup> The poet Martial makes frequent use of *Dominus et Deus* in his writings.<sup>42</sup> In fact, the poets--notably Martial, Statius and Juvenal--did not hesitate to ascribe to Domitian the attributes of deity.

Sufficient evidence exists to show that Domitian did not hesitate to punish offenses against his person--ie., offenses against the state represented by him. A frequent test of loyalty required that sacrifices be made to the emperor. Understandably, this test was one in which Christians failed to revere the *divus* and *genius* of the emperor. In the Apocalypse, refusing to worship is an important sub-theme. Correspondingly, the conception of the Roman emperor as a beast in Revelation is not unique; in *Panegyricus* Pliny refers to the Caesar as *immanissima belua* ("a savage beast"),<sup>43</sup> *saevissimus dominus* ("a cruel lord")<sup>44</sup> and *incestus princeps* ("a defiled ruler").<sup>45</sup>

Temples and sacrifices constituted part of a nexus of cultic honors for the emperor--honors equivalent to those given to the gods. Sacrifices as a rule were made to the gods and *on behalf of* the emperors, though some exceptions emerged in time. Dio informs us that Tiberius and Claudius prohibited sacrifices to themselves; Gaius began similarly, then reversed this policy with regard to himself.

Generally speaking, Jews found no great problem sacrificing on behalf of the emperor until the revolt of A.D. 66.<sup>46</sup> For Christians, however, it was a delicate matter. Given their understanding of the once-for-all nature of Christ's sacrifice, commemorated regularly through the Eucharist, pagan sacrifice presented a dilemma for the Christian community. Thus, the refusal of contemporary sacrifice would be a major factor in the persecution of Christians.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>38</sup> *De Caes.* 2.2-3.

<sup>39</sup> *Chr. can.* 6.23.

<sup>40</sup> *Or.* 45.1.

<sup>41</sup> See K. Scott, "Dio Chrysostom and Juventius Celsus," *CP* 29 (1934) 66.

<sup>42</sup> E.g., *Epig* 7: 5.5; 7.2; 8.82; 9.28, etc.

<sup>43</sup> 48.3.

<sup>44</sup> 52.7.

<sup>45</sup> 52.3.

<sup>46</sup> E. Schurer, *The History of the Jewish People* (rev./ed. G. Vennes et al.; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1978) 2.360-62.

<sup>47</sup> This assessment agrees with Tertullian, (*Ad nat.* 1.7.8-9; *Apol.* 10.1), who writes that the Christians did not honor the gods or sacrifice to the emperor. For an appraisal of the Christian dilemma vis-a-vis Imperial sacrifice, see Price, esp. pp. 36-37.

As a rule, Imperial worship in Rome began at death,<sup>48</sup> at which point the rank of *divus* would be ascribed. In the provinces, however, it began with accession to the throne. In the Apocalypse, the scene is the Eastern provinces with widespread persecution implied.<sup>49</sup> Worship of the "Beast" forms a critical test; confession and witness (*martys*) are essential.<sup>50</sup> Chapter 5 offers the reader glimpses into the clash between two power structures--that of the Roman *imperium* and that of the "Lion-Lamb."

*The Lamb and the Imperium: "Polemical Parallels"*

5:1-5

In accordance with the Roman custom of preparing and sealing a testament in the presence of seven witnesses, John sees a "scroll" (*biblion*), "having been sealed with seven seals." The precise nature of the scroll of 5:1ff, "written on the inside and outside; has engendered no little speculation. Explanations are varied: (1) an inner (invisible) and outer (visible) side of salvation history,<sup>51</sup> (2) a "double-document" common to antiquity, which allowed the use of the outer copy as a summary of the contents<sup>52</sup> and/or means to prevent falsification,<sup>53</sup> (3) a testament,<sup>54</sup> (4) a copy of the Torah,<sup>55</sup> and (5) a document serving simultaneously as a bill of divorce for Jerusalem and nuptial contract for the New Jerusalem.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Ruler-worship had its roots in gratitude and loyalty. An intensification followed, due to the mystique surrounding the Imperial throne. This process is examined in A. D. Nock, "Deification and Julian; *JRS* 47 (1957) 115-23.

<sup>49</sup> 2:18-10,13; 6:9-11; 7:14; 12:11; 13:15; 16:6; 17:6; 18:24; 20:4.

<sup>50</sup> In Pergamum (cf. Rev 2:12-17), with the authorization by Augustus in A.D. 29 to build an Imperial temple, the cult is widely known to have thrived in the first century. In the second century, it was succeeded by Ephesus. P. Prigent ("Au temps de l'Apocalypse. II. Le culte imperial au I<sup>er</sup> siecle en Asie Mineure," *RHPR* 55/2 [1975] 216) has noted that the character of the cult in Asia Minor was provincial, not merely local. Annual assemblies were held, over which a provincial "high priest" presided. On inscriptions the high priest is frequently mentioned--e.g., "the High Priest of the temple of Asia which is at Pergamum." These regular ceremonies were an effective means of maintaining government in the provinces. Under Tiberius' rule, the provincial assembly of Asia adopted a resolution to build a temple dedicated to the emperor, though Tiberius balked at the proposal. Tacitus reports that Smyrna (cf. Rev 2:8-11) was chosen as the site, with four other cities (including Laodicea) excluded by the Roman senate.

<sup>51</sup> E. Riesner, *Das Buch mit den sieben Siegeln* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1949) 55.

<sup>52</sup> K. Staritz, "Zu Offenbarung Johannis 5.1," *ZNW* 30 (1931) 157-70; also C. Roller, "Das Buch mit sieben Siegeln," *ZNW* 36 (1937) 98-113.

<sup>53</sup> E. Lohse, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (NTD 11; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966) 40.

<sup>54</sup> W. Sattler "Das Buch mit sieben Siegeln. II," *ZNW* 21 (1922) 51.

<sup>55</sup> L. Mowry, "Revelation 4-5 and Early Christian Liturgical Usage," *JBL* 71 (1952) 75-84.

<sup>56</sup> J. M. Ford, "The Divorce Bill of the Lamb and the Scroll of the Suspected Adulteress: A Note on Apoc. 5,1 and 10,8-11," *JSJ* 2(1971) 136-43.

More important than form,<sup>57</sup> however, is content. From the divine standpoint, history has already been "recorded" by the Sovereign One, before whom all principates--past, present or future--must bow. The burning issue for John in 5:1-5 is who can mediate history. John's intense "wailing" (*eklaion poly*, v 4) reflects the critical impasse: human inaccessibility to an understanding of the divine purpose in history.

It was commonplace for the poets to wish the emperor a long life, often using excessively flattering language. At issue was the emperor's worthship, his "worthiness" as the absolute sovereign who sat on the Imperial throne.<sup>58</sup>

### 5:6-7

Chapters 4-5 reflect an eastern notion that had penetrated the Empire, and 5:7 with its focus on the activity around the throne is highly illustrative. Nero had built for himself a rotunda that represented the cosmos. This structure rotated day and night.<sup>59</sup> The middle region of the rotunda was the region of the sun.<sup>60</sup> Roman poets appealed for Nero to take his seat exactly in the middle of the universe, otherwise the cosmos would lose its equilibrium.<sup>61</sup> From this position the emperor judged, determining the fate of humans. He thus fulfilled the role of *fatorum arbiter, ho pantokrator*, ie., the cosmic god of fate.

In contrast to the lifegiving bull imagery typical of pagan mythology and distinctive of the Imperial sacrificial cult, John sees a lamb. In keeping with the Jewish notion of redemption by means of blood, sacrifice in the Apocalypse is viewed as the curious mode of conquest. Further, the Lamb has died a violent death (*sphazo*, 5:6, 9, 12; 13:8), thereby establishing total identification with all the saints who are suffering. The impact of the Lamb both intensifies the contrast to the pagan sacrificial system as well as the persecution motif so characteristic of the Jewish apocalyptic genre.

Revelation 5, however, is not foremost a description of the Lamb's nature; rather, it defines his role. He in fact conquers in line with the lion's character, a point that is not lost on John's audience, which is enduring the trials of living under Imperial dominion. The homed Lamb<sup>62</sup>

<sup>57</sup> On the very Jewish notion of "heavenly books," see the section "Divine Foreknowledge and Keeping," in J. D. Charles, *Literary Strategy in the Epistle of Jude* (London/Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1993) 99-101.

<sup>58</sup> On the emperor's "worthiness," see the discussion of 5:8-10 and 11-14.

<sup>59</sup> Note the ministry of the living creatures (4:8) and of those coming out of the tribulation (7:15)--continuing "day and night"--and, in contrast, the torment of those worshipping the beast (14:11) as well as the devil himself (20:10)--"day and night."

<sup>60</sup> Cf. 21:23 and 22:5.

<sup>61</sup> H. P. L 'Orange, "Cosmic Kingship in the Ancient World," *The Sacral Kingship* (Leiden: Brill, 1959) 487.

<sup>62</sup> The Lamb's wrath, contra R H. Charles (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John* [ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1926] 1.142-43), is not out

seen by John possesses lion-like power--indeed, perfected power (5:6, "having seven horns") with which to wage war, which is essential to the establishing of his kingdom.<sup>63</sup> The dragon and the beast (12:3 and 13:1) are no match for the Lion-Lamb, who exercises might in all the earth and subdues nations with an iron scepter (19:15). Written on the robe of this Conqueror is the title *BASILEUS BASILEON KAI KYRIOS KYRION*, "King of Kings and Lord of Lords." Notably, it is because of sacrifice, in stark contrast to the military conquests hailed by the Caesar, that the Lamb is clothed with authority and mediates history.

5:8-10

Verse 8 is reminiscent of an ancient cultic scene in the Jerusalem temple, with the choir of Levites in psalmic praise and the priest offering incense at the altar.<sup>64</sup> It also has a notable parallel in the Imperial cult, particularly in key cities of the Eastern provinces. Cultic practice normally consisted of a "high priest" presiding over the burning of incense and the killing of a bull.<sup>65</sup> Libations and ritual cakes were used on occasion. Hymns of praise were sung by a choir standing beside the altar during the sacrificial ritual.<sup>66</sup>

Liturgical dramatists (*hierophantes* and *sebastophantes*) performed an imperial drama, spoke of imperial mysteries and displayed sacred objects,<sup>67</sup> while *theologoi*, "speakers of divine things," offered short sermons in praise of the emperor. These often coincided with the lavish praise of the poets. Statius registers standard Imperial acclamations:

You are worthy to surpass the Trojan centuries and years of Euboean  
dust. . . 68  
O glory added to Latin fame, you whom. ..Rome desires to be hers forever.  
..Hail, great parent 0 the world. . .

In spite of Rome's claim to supersede all national and cultural boundaries, Christ even more than Caesar transcends racial, cultural, and ethnic barriers-and this by means of sacrifice, not subjugation. In

of keeping with his character but concurrent with the homed lamb of Jewish apocalyptic expectation.

<sup>63</sup> 1:9; 11:15; 12:10.

<sup>64</sup> Hurtado, "Analogies," 105-6.

<sup>65</sup> Price, "Sacrifice," 29-30.

<sup>66</sup> Especially helpful here is coinage from Pergamum dating to the late first century. Perhaps the best description of a local Imperial festival from antiquity is provided by an inscription from Sparta (see M. I. Rostovtzeff, "L'Empereur Tibere et le culte imperial," *RHR* 163 [1930] Iff).

<sup>67</sup> See H. W. Pleket, "An Aspect of the Emperor Cult: Imperial Mysteries," *HTR* 58 (1965) 331-47.

<sup>68</sup> Statius, *Silv.* 1.4.123.

<sup>69</sup> Statius, *Theb.* 1.22.

the mind of John, the significance of this transcendent reality is that his audience will one day "reign on the earth"--in a day, that is, when the tables of power will be turned.

5:11-14

The poets and *theologoi* did not hesitate to ascribe to the emperor attributes of the godhead--*numen* (divine power), *aeternitas* (immortality), *radios* (divine rays), *iubar* (effulgence), *invictus* (invincibility), genius and magnus.<sup>70</sup> According to Martial,<sup>71</sup> Domitian's *numen* exerted itself not only over man, but over inanimate objects as well as animals and beasts (cf. the tripartite division of the universe in v 3 and similar description of universal praise to the Lamb in v 13). *Vere dignus*, "Worthy art thou," was the common tribute paid to the emperor in celebration of his arrival.

Given the highly visible nature of military triumph that was so essential in achieving Roman fame, it was not uncommon for the Caesars to take on bynames. The titles most commonly found on inscriptions--for example, *GERMANIGUS*, *PANNONIGUS*, *INVICTUS*, *BRITANNICUS* among the Julian emperors and *IUDAIGUS*, *GERMANIGUS*, *SARMATICUS* and *PARTHICUS* among the Flavians<sup>72</sup>--reinforce how deeply ingrained *gloria* was to Roman political consciousness. To the ancient mind, *gloria* is a *virtus*, a strength. It is unique to the character of humans and distinguishes us from beasts, while at the same time securing the favor of the gods (Tacitus).<sup>73</sup> Along with fortune (*tyche*), it constituted in the Roman mindset one of two great principles of governing, demanding both honor and praise.<sup>74</sup> Thus, achieving *gloria* is in the supreme service of the state.<sup>75</sup>

Justification for the second *axios*-hymn in 5:12 thus finds its parallel in the Imperial cult. And while the actions of the Lamb and the Caesar are diametrically opposite, the heavenly audience/choir ascribes to the Lamb perfect honor-qualities that cause the *gloria* of the Caesar to pale by comparison: *dynamis* ("power"), the inherent capability or authority that can be exerted; *ploutos* ("wealth"/"riches"), the effect of his might; *sophia* ("wisdom"), the depth of resource whereby the universe

<sup>70</sup> See E. J. Dolger, "Die Kaiservergoetterung bei Martial und 'die heiligen Fische' Domitians," *Antike und Christentum* 1 (1929) 167-68.

<sup>71</sup> Epigr. 9.61.

<sup>72</sup> See P; Kneissl, *Die Siegestitulatur der romischen Kaiser* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1969) 27-57.

<sup>73</sup> *Hist.* 4.17.

<sup>74</sup> *Hist.* 2.82 and *Ann.* 16.6. Tacitus notes that to reject honor shows a lack of confidence; thus, one must strive for the highest in reputation (*Ann.* 4.38).

<sup>75</sup> Augustine is well known to have opposed the Roman notion of *gloria* because it put the love of men over the love for God (*Civ. Dei* 5.14).

is governed;<sup>76</sup> *ischys* ("strength"), wielded force; *time* ("honor"), a worth far exceeding that of the Roman emperor; and *doxa* ("glory"), the robe of kingly/imperial majesty.<sup>77</sup> In the Apocalypse, these attributes qualify the Lamb and reconcile his portrait in the minds of the Christian community with that of the Lion in 5:5. In truth, he is perfect deity.

### *Conclusion*

Rev 5: 1-14 constitutes a decisive moment in the apocalyptic visions of the seer. This scene, framed in a liturgical context, marks the introduction of the "Lamb," a paradoxical figure in the Apocalyptic drama who embodies the notions of regal splendor and, curiously, sacrifice and atonement. Sundry "polemical parallels" are employed by the writer with a view of underscoring the transcendent nature of the Lamb. The glories of the Caesar pale in the light of the Lamb's resplendence. Inasmuch as the Lamb is acclaimed as "worthy" of all majesty and honor, based on his opening of the scroll's seals, the stage is thus set for the outworking of the Lamb's imperial might: judgments upon the earth. Having been reassured by claims of sovereignty that rightfully belong to the Lamb, the reader is hence given the proper perspective with which to interpret the ensuing visions of judgment.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. Prov 8:14-16.

<sup>77</sup> An almost identical list of attributes, with the exception of *charistia* for *ploutos*, occurs in 1:12 in the context of Lamb-worship.

This material is cited with gracious permission from:

The Criswell College  
4010 Gaston Ave.  
Dallas, TX 75246  
www.criswell.edu

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: [thildebrandt@gordon.edu](mailto:thildebrandt@gordon.edu)