THE STRATEGIC AROUSAL OF EMOTION IN JOHN’S VISIONS OF ROMAN IMPERIALISM: A RHETORICAL-CRITICAL INVESTIGATION OF REVELATION 4-22

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Abstract
Using the near-contemporary insights of rhetorical theorists concerning the strategic evocation of emotion, this essay displays how John arouses feelings of gratitude, awe, indignation, and enmity throughout the visions of Revelation. John re-directs feelings of awe and gratitude toward God and the Messiah, resisting dominant cultural impulses to direct these feelings toward Rome and the emperor. He draws attention to the ways that Rome, the emperors, and local promoters of imperial cult violate God’s just requirements and lure or pressure others to violate the same, nurturing emotional responses of enmity and indignation toward Roman imperialism and its local manifestations. This serves, in turn, to promote critical distance between the Christian disciples and the domination systems of Roman imperialism and the mechanisms for the legitimation of the same, countering other voices in the churches urging a lowering of boundaries and greater degrees of cooperation with Rome’s economic, political, and ideological structures.

Among New Testament texts, Revelation has historically provoked perhaps the strongest emotional responses in readers. Yet in spite of Revelation’s

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emotionally evocative power, rhetorical critics (and other investigators) have given very little attention to analyzing this power and the textual means by which John exercises it. The present study continues the attempt to remedy this lack of attention. After a brief review of the methods to be employed in this study, the “visionary” chapters of Revelation will be examined with a view to answering three questions, all three of which are necessary for a fully “rhetorical” analysis of pathos: (1) Where might we suspect John of trying to arouse particular emotions among his hearers, and what particular emotions would these be? (2) What features of the text can we identify as likely to arouse these particular feelings, and on what basis can we make these claims (e.g., what evidence can we bring forward from the near-contemporary discussions of evoking emotions in the rhetorical handbooks)? (3) To what end is John (potentially) evoking this emotion at this place in the text?

This investigation focuses on the potential arousal of certain key emotions surrounding Rome and Roman imperialism among Revelation’s first audiences. John seeks to re-direct the positive emotions of awe and gratitude toward God and the Messiah, combating the dominant cultural impulses to direct these feelings toward Rome and the emperor. Instead, by calling attention to the ways in which Rome, the emperors, and local promoters of imperial cult violate God’s just requirements and draw (or pressure) others to violate the same, John nurtures responses of enmity and indignation toward these pillars of Roman imperialism and their local manifestations.

Such emotional responses will create the affective distance between the hearers and their politico-economic environment that will facilitate their acceptance of John’s counsel to enact the behaviors that make that distance

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2 Perhaps most famous in this regard is D. H. Lawrence’s spirited response to what he perceives to be John’s own unbridled indulgence in hate and envy (Lawrence 1980 [1931]), though even the casual reader comes away reporting that Revelation is, at the very least, a “scary” book.

3 See the survey of research in deSilva 2008a.

4 See also deSilva 2008b.

5 It is not claimed here that the idea that John arouses indignation and feelings of enmity is a new discovery, although this study may advance a more precise understand of the emotional response John seeks to evoke, whether truly “envy” (as suggested forcefully in Lawrence 1980 [1931], 87-88), “resentment” (Yarbro Collins 1984, 152-53), or “indignation.” The exploration of the mechanics of how adversative emotions are aroused, however, contributes new insights to the analysis of Revelation.
visible and give testimony about the value of that distance. In particular, appeals to *pathos* will support the summons of the glorified Christ to avoid food sacrificed to idols (and idolatry generally) and to avoid “fornication” (that is, entanglement with Roman economy and other facets of Roman domination), not buying into the pursuit of tainted wealth that other voices among the churches (e.g., “Jezebel,” the Nicolaitans, and the compromised believers in Laodicea and Sardis) promote. In a situation in which some voices are advocating lowering boundaries between the community and the society and moving toward a more accommodating position, arousing feelings of enmity strategically positions the audience *against* such a course of action.

In order to establish a firmer basis for the analysis of appeals to emotion in Revelation than “knowing them when we feel them,” this study relies heavily on the discussions of how to evoke emotions in Greek and Latin rhetorical handbooks. Aristotle’s *Art of Rhetoric* (2.2-11) provides a lengthy discussion of topics that an orator can use to build a case, as it were, for the provocation of an emotional response from the audience, covering a wide range of human feeling (anger, calm, friendship, enmity, fear, confidence, shame, shamelessness, favor/gratitude and its negation, pity, indignation, envy, and emulation). Cicero (*De Inventione* 1.53.101-1.56.109; see also *Rhetorica ad Herennium* 2.30.48-2.31.50) provides helpful supplementary discussions of topics that could be expected to arouse indignation and pity. The focus on topics, which can be discovered in the text, is especially helpful to the modern analyst, since we have access to the text, but not the performance (e.g., the emotional tone, demeanor, or gestures of the speaker—prominent features of Roman rhetoricians’ discussion of the subject).

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8 According to Steven J. Kraftchick (2001, 56), for Aristotle “ethos and pathos arguments are indeed arguments.... The πτώθη are emotions that can be caused in the audience by demonstrating to the listeners that the conditions for those emotions are present,” focusing those emotions, showing “that they are justifiable,” and finally suggesting “actions that are consonant with the emotions.”

9 See Kraftchick (2001, 47-57) for a succinct analysis of the differences between Greek and Latin rhetorical theory concerning appeals to the emotions.
The material in these classical handbooks has already been extensively employed in detailed analyses of appeals to pathos in other early Christian texts, particularly the epistolary literature (and the Pauline corpus in particular). No presumption need be made that John learned or consciously imitated these conventions. As a distillation of their authors’ observation of rhetorical practice and its effects, the handbooks provide near-contemporary evidence concerning how first-century audiences responded to particular rhetorical prompts (e.g., “topics”). Where an analyst discovers the presence of these prompts in a New Testament text, even one so far removed from the Greek oration as Revelation, he or she has a solid textual basis for presuming an emotional response on the part of the hearers, and receives an invitation to explore how this emotional reaction would help guide their response to the author’s discourse and serve his goals.

The point is often made that rhetorical criticism needs, in general, to take into account more recent theory. In terms of their attention to appeals to the emotions, however, recent rhetorical and speech theorists actually fall short of Aristotle. Moreover, in regard to the analysis of appeals to emotion (particularly in Revelation), we have not begun even to employ the insights of classical rhetorical theory to their fullest. This study, then, will focus on the insights of classical rhetoricians concerning how to build a case, as it were, for evoking particular emotions, using their insights heuristically to facilitate rather than constrain and limit explorations of the rhetoric of Revelation. The results, it is hoped, will provide at least a baseline study for more nuanced investigations of *pathos* in Revelation as scholars attend also to the task of expanding the methodological foundation for the investigation of appeals to emotions in ancient texts.

1. The Genuine That Exposes the Counterfeit: Revelation 4-5

John’s opening vision of the scenes of worship around the throne of God, while evoking important emotional responses in its own right, also lays a strategic foundation for the emotional responses John will seek to evoke in

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10 This method is employed in Johanson 1987; Watson 1988, 39-40, 71-86; deSilva 2000, 103-107, 151-52, 183, 210-214, 239-40, 343-54, 380; and several of the studies collected in Olbricht and Sumney 2001, which have substantially helped confirm and refine the methodological approach of the present essay.

11 Olbricht 2001a, 2; Classen 1992, 321-22.

12 Perelman and Olbrichts-Tyteca (1969), for example, give only passing attention to the subject. See the survey of, and conclusions concerning, the contributions of contemporary theory in Olbricht (2001a, 2-3).
regard to the emperors and the cultic expressions of loyalty and gratitude that formed so prominent a feature of the cultural and architectural landscape of the seven cities. Classical rhetoricians were keenly aware that, just as an opponent’s arguments had to be swept aside and attempts to establish superior credibility undone, so also the emotions he or she attempted to evoke in regard to a particular prospect or person would need to be replaced with emotions more conducive to one’s own agenda (Cicero, *De Oratore* 2.53.215-216; Quintilian, *Inst.* 6.1.18, 20, 46). As scholars investigating the imperial cult and propaganda in the cities addressed by Revelation have amply demonstrated, Christians in Asia Minor were exposed to many influences that sought to arouse feelings of awe and gratitude toward Rome and its emperors. John seeks to displace such feelings. Directing awe and gratitude back toward the Creator God and the Redeemer Lamb, the genuine Savior/divi filius, provides the groundwork for the evocation of indignation against the pretensions of promoters of the cult of Rome and the Augusti in the later visions.

Neither Aristotle nor the other rhetorical theorists treat the entire range of human emotions, and “awe” is one that appears not to have been deemed relevant or strategic for oratory in political, judicial, or civic assemblies (i.e., the forum, council chamber, and hall of justice). Awe constitutes, however, a primary emotional response generated by the religious rituals and impressive edifices, with their grandiose representations of deities, like

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13 “The orator’s purpose is to actually make the hearers feel in some of these ways, *and prevent them from feeling in other ways*, toward specific persons on given occasions and circumstances ... and to use these feelings to direct or influence their judgment” (Cooper 1996, 241, emphasis added). An audience’s potential previous emotional disposition is a contributing factor to the “rhetorical problem” that must be overcome.


15 The Letter of Jeremiah shows another spokesperson for the monolatry at the heart of the Jewish tradition seeking to defuse the power of the religious practices of the neighboring peoples to lead the Jews in Diaspora into feeling “awe” before their gods — “Therefore, do not fear them” is the constant refrain. See deSilva 2002, 217-221, and the literature therein cited.

16 Aristotle, and to an even more limited extent Cicero and Quintilian, discuss only “the range of emotions that the orator needs to know about in order to compose his public address with full effectiveness” (Cooper 1996, 251), and not necessarily the range of emotional responses appropriate to Christian (religious) discourse (Olbracht 2001b, 16). While Aristotle discusses “fear” (φόβος) at length, of course, the topics therein listed do not cross into the more positive experience of “wonder” or “amazement” mingled perhaps with caution that constitutes “awe.”
the Temple of Artemis, the Altar of Zeus, the Temple of *Roma et Augustus*, or the Temple of Domitian—religious contexts of great interest and concern to John, who seeks to maintain high boundaries between Christians and the frequenting of such cultic sites. It is an emotional response evoked by the court ceremonial and representation of earthly rulers. Esther’s response of being overwhelmed at the sight of Xerxes attests to the ways in which earthly monarchs represented themselves, and the “aura” that such representation created: “I saw you, my lord, like an angel of God, and my heart was shaken with fear at your glory. For you are wonderful, my lord, and your countenance is full of grace.” And while she was speaking, she fainted and fell” (LXX Esth 15:13-15 NRSV).

Roman imperial court ceremonial, and, more especially, the imperial cult with its representations of the emperor and its rites of adoration, sought to achieve no less an impact upon the provincials in Asia Minor. The colossal statue of Domitian (Titus?) in Ephesus, the presence of cult statues and temples throughout Asia, the execution of impressive processions and other rites involving these cult sites and simulacra, replete with choral associations singing hymns to the emperors as to gods, all sought to excite awe among the residents of the seven cities (and beyond), contributing thus to the popular legitimation of imperial rule.17

John’s vision of the glory of God displayed in the activity and arrangement of the beings that inhabit God’s court offers an antidote to feelings evoked in settings of imperial cult, a “counter-experience” of awe that will expose the other as counterfeit.18 The medium of apocalypse works very much in John’s favor here, since he can use it to invite his audience into the scene, to “see” the scenes and “hear” the choral adulation along with him.19 To the extent that our imaginations are engaged by John’s

17 See Price 1984 for a sensitive, emic interpretation of these phenomena. On the role of hymn singers in imperial cult (e.g., the organization of a choral society in Pergamum to “sing hymns to the god Augustus in the temple precinct dedicated by Asia”), see Kraybill 1996, 61-62 (citing *I. Eph.* 18d.11-14); Witherington 2003, 193; Brent 1999, 194-195.

18 Schüssler Fiorenza (1991, 123) similarly understands the scenes of heavenly cult to provide “a symbolic alternative to the splendor of the imperial cult,” and Russell Morton (2001, 105) perceives the resulting contrast to critique imperial cult as an encroachment on the prerogatives of the One God.

19 John presents himself as one who has indeed seen the things which he narrates, and makes frequent use of this device. The frequent use of the verbs “I saw” and “I heard,” which contributes to the impression that John has indeed had an authentic visionary and auditory experience (hence, to the *ethos* of the work as a divine revelation, a communication from the realm of the “really real”), also contributes to the power of his words to engages the
descriptions, our emotions will be the more directly aroused by the impressions made upon our imaginations.²⁰

John invites the audiences to see God seated upon God’s throne, projecting an aura resembling nothing on earth except its most precious gems and frightening natural phenomena (4:3, 5). God is surrounded by magnificent, supernatural orders of beings, including fiery attendants and cosmic priests,²¹ receiving together with the Lamb the praise and adoration of increasingly wider circles of beings until, finally, “every created being which is in heaven and upon the earth and under the earth and in the sea and all things in them” (5:13) join in adoration. Such a vision, if imaginatively engaged, cannot fail to arouse genuine awe in response. The vision of God and the Lamb, and of their adoration, trumps all the pretensions of human rulers and their pomp, their “aura.”²²

²⁰ Quintilian and Cicero both stress the speaker’s own genuine experience of particular emotions as an effective catalyst for the arousal of emotions in the hearers (Quintilian, Inst. 6.2.26; Cicero, De or. 2.45.189-2.47.197). Quintilian recommends the technique of vividly imagining the scenes about which one speaks as a means of conjuring one’s own emotions (Inst. 6.2.29-30; cf. also Rhet. Her. 4.55.68), to the point that one will “not so much narrate as exhibit the actual scene” (Inst. 6.2.32), even calling attention to the imagined “sights” as if pointing with his finger, inviting the audience to “see” what he wishes them to “see” in those spaces, as a means of emotionally engaging one’s hearers (Longinus, On the Sublime 15.1-2). John achieves this and more as he displays at length the scenes themselves before his audience, both as one who sees and hears the scenes himself and as one who enables them to see the same vividly before their own minds’ eyes.

²¹ On the twenty-four elders as a heavenly archetype for the twenty-four orders of priests and Levites in the earthly temple (1 Chron 24:4-6), see Witherington 2003, 117. The elders’ accouterments (harps, suggestive of Levitical duties in the Temple, and bowls of incense, suggestive of priestly duties in the Temple) strengthen this suggestion. I also prefer the identification of the “seven spirits” as seven archangels (as in Witherington 2003, 75), both on the basis of widespread parallels in Jewish representations of the heavenly court (Tob 12:15; T. Levi 2, though without enumeration of the archangels; Greek 1 Enoch 20:1-8) and internal parallels (compare Rev 1:4 and 8:2).

²² John does not, however, merely transpose imperial cult ceremonial figures into the heavenly worship (as suggested by Brent 1999, 204). Rather, John builds as well on a longstanding traditions of throne visions and depictions of heavenly worship and activity (Isaiah 6; Ezekiel 1; T. Levi 2-5; 2 Bar. 21:6-7). John crafts an alternative to the imperial
The experience of awe is layered with evocations of gratitude toward God and the Lamb. This, too, is strategic in regard to calling into question the cultic activities surrounding the emperors. The cult of Roma et Augusti was, perhaps first and foremost, a formal expression of gratitude toward Augustus and his successors. In the words of Nicolaus of Damascus, a contemporary of Herod the Great, people address Octavian as Sebastos “in accordance with their estimation of his honor” and “revere him with temples and sacrifices over islands and continents, organized in cities and provinces, matching the greatness of his virtue and repaying his benefactions toward them.” John will claim, on the contrary, that the gratitude merited by God and the Lamb preclude the offering of any similar, cultic honors to human “benefactors” (and will, indeed, sharply call into question the status of Rome and its emperors as in any way “benefactors” of the populations outside the city walls).

Gratitude is the response to expressions of favor or kindness. Aristotle provides an extended discussion of topics productive of χάρις, although within that discussion he freely moves back and forth between the various senses of that term used to capture both the benefactor’s feelings of favorable disposition and the beneficiaries’ reciprocal feelings of gratitude. Topics that amplify the importance of a favor or the magnitude of the favorable disposition behind it could be expected, within this reciprocal arrangement, to amplify feelings of gratitude in response. The topics that would prompt this response of gratitude are found chiefly in the hymns, which have an enthymematic quality in these chapters.

The first hymn (Rev 4:11) asserts that God deserves public acknowledgment (glory), honor, and power because (ὅτι) God has created all that is. The unstated premise that completes the logic would be derived from the universally held conviction that benefactors (among whom God is supreme, having given to all the ultimate benefactions of life, habitable and fruitful environment, and the like) merit a response of gratitude, which includes, typically, honor and service (the latter contributing to the

cult, to be sure, but not purely by way of “reaction formation,” though elements of this are present, for example, in the forms of the acclamations, which do not appear in the Hebrew Bible but are familiar from Roman imperial court ceremonial. See Aune 1983, 16, though Klaus-Peter Jörns (1971, 36) suggests that the Greek “worthy are you” is a derivation of the Hebrew “blessed are you” (Morton 2001, 100, n. 36).


24 An observation made and pursued in regard to Rev 5:9-10, for example, in Schüssler Fiorenza 1991, 61-62.
benefactor’s power base). Greco-Roman ethicists would concur that God (or the gods) merit worship for their benefactions (cf. Rhet. Alex. 1421b37-1422a2; Rhet. Her. 3.3.4), the difference being that John makes this claim in the context of the Jewish affirmation of one creator God who alone is worthy of worship, and whose beneficence in the gift of life requires a response of obedience to live that life in accordance with God’s commandments, including the prohibition of worshiping any other would-be divinity (on this connection, compare 4 Ezra 7:21-24; 8:59-61).

The second hymn (5:9-10) proclaims the Lamb worthy to take the book and open its seals (that is, to exercise judgment over the kingdoms of the world and usher in the kingdom of God and God’s Christ) because (ὁτι) the Lamb redeemed a people for God to constitute that kingdom by giving up his own life on their behalf, dramatically recalled in terms of being slain and giving his “blood” as the ransom, fulfilling at last the promise of the creation of a priestly kingdom at the cost of his own life. As such, the Lamb has acted clearly in the interest of the recipients rather than out of self-interest (Aristotle, Rhet. 2.7.2; Cicero, De or. 2.51.206), rendering an important service to people in significant need (“redeeming” or “ransoming” suggests a situation of significant distress), and thus fulfilled the basic conditions for the evocation of “gratitude” (χάρις, although Cicero calls this amor). Moreover, the Lamb “is the only one” who has attained such a significant benefit on behalf of humankind (Aristotle, Rhet. 1.9.38; 2.7.2). The uniqueness of this benefactor’s achievement is dramatically, rather than discursively, demonstrated in Rev 5:1-6. The episode of looking for one who is “worthy” to initiate divine judgment and the breaking in of God’s kingdom, the reported failure and the disappointment of finding anyone who is worthy, and the dramatic resolution as the Lamb is revealed constitutes a narrative development of the encomiastic topic of being the first or only person to succeed in a particular venture or achieve a particular end.

The passing over of other prominent “savior” figures available in the Mediterranean, especially the emperor, is no doubt salient. Augustus’s dominion was built upon the rhetoric of beneficence and beneficial

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25 The Lamb’s actions would also be seen as supremely noble in light of the criteria offered in Aristotle’s Rhetoric and the anonymous Rhetorica ad Alexandrum. The Lamb’s actions produced significantly good results (Rhet. Alex. 1426a22-23), were undertaken “not for his own sake, but ... for the sake of others” while in fact “neglecting his own interests” (Aristotle, Rhet. 1.9.16-17, 19).
achievement, as well as the rhetoric of enacting the will of the gods. Augustus and his successors enjoyed authority over the fate of the known circle of inhabited lands. The Lamb now stands up, having been slaughtered, as an alternative and superior picture of what it means to serve God’s design for humanity and to act as a perfect benefactor. The repetitive texture of Revelation reinforces this contrast, especially in regard to the Lamb and the Beast or Babylon competing for people “from every tribe and language and people and nation” (5:9; 13:7; 17:15). Where unique or outstanding achievement constitutes a claim to precedence, John’s claim on behalf of the Lamb is especially relevant to establishing Jesus’ claim to worship (as a human-become-God) as distinct from the worship of the emperors and members of their families (lauded as divi, humans-become-gods), who are not qualified, however, to step into the silence of Rev 5:3-4 to fill the void.

It is hardly accidental that the circles of praise, predicated upon God’s creation of all things (ὅτι σὺ ἐκτισάς τὰ πάντα, 4:11) should extend at last to “every creature” (πᾶν κτίσμα, 5:13). Since all have benefitted from God’s creative and life-sustaining activity, all properly stand before God in awe and gratitude. This is the norm, the proper order, that will be seen to be violated where people gather around their idols or around the image of the “Beast.”

2. The Unholy Scam: Revelation 12-13

Awe and gratitude are two emotional responses that local representations of imperial cult ceremony, presence, and propaganda sought to arouse among the local populace with regard to Roma and the Augusti. John’s vision of the glorified Christ (1:12-20) and the worship around the throne of God extending throughout the cosmos (4:1-5:14) provide an antidote, as it were, to the impressions potentially made by those local phenomena. The presentation of Rome and her emperors will also be such as to nullify feelings of awe and gratitude in their direction, replacing these with enmity and indignation. Against the cosmic backdrop, the war between the

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26 The Res Gestae Divi Augusti, prominently inscribed in public spaces, served such a dominion-legitimating function.

27 Kirby (1988, 199) also identifies the arousal of ‘the pathos of awe’ as a goal for, and result of, John’s opening narration of his vision of Christ.

28 Schüessler Fiorenza (1985, 192) argues that John seeks to “alienate [the audience’s] allegiances and affects from the present symbols of Roman power by ascribing to it images of degradation, ugliness, ultimate failure, and defeat.” This analysis of the
Dragon (Satan) and God and God’s people sets the stage perfectly in this regard.

“Friendship” is demonstrated by procuring goods for our friends insofar as lies within our power (Aristotle, *Rhet. 2.4.2*), and an act of beneficence is among the things said to create friendship (*Rhet. 2.4.29*). “We also like those who have done good either to us or those whom we hold dear” (*Rhet. 2.4.5*). If friendship is created by an act of beneficence (Aristotle, *Rhet. 2.4.2*), and if “we like those who have done good either to us or those whom we hold dear” (*Rhet. 2.4.5*), the opposite feeling—enmity—would be evoked by opposite actions, and a reminder of overt acts of hostility would serve to rekindle both the awareness and feeling of enmity. The author of the *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum* also names ill-treatment of oneself or one’s friends by some third party to be a prod to feeling enmity (ἐχθραὶ) against that third party (1440a30-35). Finally, enmity is predictably aroused against those who are shown to be enemies of our friends or benefactors (Aristotle, *Rhet. 2.4.4*, 6-7).

John does not need to work hard to demonstrate the enmity of the Dragon, who is *de facto* the enemy of God and God’s people and would readily be accepted as such within both Jewish and Christian culture. Nevertheless, John describes the Dragon’s activity in such a way as to remind the audience of this basic fact. The Dragon’s activity against the male child (12:4), who is clearly identified as Christ by the use of Ps 2:7 (Rev 12:5-6); his activity against the hosts of God (12:8), engaging in war against God; his identification with the historic enemy of humankind (the serpent, 12:9; the “Satan”); the deceiver of the same; and his hostile activity against the woman and, in particular, the rest of her offspring among whom the audience will surely find themselves reflected (“the ones keeping the commandments of God and holding the testimony of Jesus,” 12:17) all nurture a context conducive to arousing feelings of enmity against this figure.

Feelings of enmity against a well-established Enemy are applied to a potentially more ambiguous figure, a figure whom the majority of people around the Christian congregations and perhaps indeed some among these same congregations would have otherwise regarded favorably (even if only in the guarded, somewhat “demythologized” ways reflected in Rom 13:1-7; 1 Pet 2:13-17). Along with the Dragon’s gifts of “power and throne and great authority” (Rev 13:2), John ensures the transfer of the enmity and evocation of topics of enmity and indignation is intended to supplement and refine her seminal insights.
hostility felt toward the dragon to the Roman emperor *qua* beast from the sea, the friend of the audience’s enemy and of their great Ally’s enemy (cf. Aristotle, *Rhet.* 2.4.4, 6-7). Enmity is enhanced by depicting the beast from the sea continuing the Dragon’s agenda of making war against the saints and overcoming them (Rev 13:7; cf. 12:17), thus employing the topic that one feels enmity against those who attack one’s own (Aristotle, *Rhet.* 2.4.5; *Rhet. Alex.* 1440a30-35). In regard to this portrait of “a world at war”—an ironic one, to be sure, given public discourse about *pax* during this period—David Barr insightfully observes how such topics steer an audience away from “cooperation and compromise.”

The presentation of Rome’s emperors and, later in the same chapter, the local organizers of imperial cult as “beasts” helps augment feelings of aversion and enmity. The imagery, of course, is inherited directly from Daniel, which is only to say that the rhetorical effect of such a presentation of human rulers and kingdoms is not without precedent. The *Augusti* are presented as something monstrous, an aberration, prodigious in the worst sense, as when Philostratus’s Apollonius speaks of Nero as a beast (θηρίον): “I know not how many heads it has,” but it is nevertheless “more savage than the beasts of mountain and forest.” John invites his audience to regard their character and rule as something out of all harmony with the divine or natural order. Hiding the humanity of these figures also helps to

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29 Another trait borrowed from Daniel, esp. Dan 7:21 (Aune 1998a, 746).

30 Barr 1984, 40. John gives a preview of the beast’s hostility against God’s witnesses in Rev 11:9-10, which would evoke feelings of enmity in a preliminary way as the “beast” (whose identity has not yet been developed) injures figures who would be seen to be “friends” of the audience (11:9), adding insult to injury by denying them burial. The beast’s subjects’ celebration of what is clearly not in the interest of the audience (the deaths of some of its own, in some sense at least) further reinforces a sense of enmity between the audience and the beast’s followers (11:10).

31 The beast from the sea is, however, not Daniel’s fourth beast (as suggested in Witherington 2003, 181), although this is the case in 4 Ezra 12 and Josephus. Rather, it is a hideous hybrid of all four (deSilva 1991, 191, 203; Schüssler Fiorenza, 1991, 83; Aune 1998a, 779; Royalty 1998: 184). That in itself is quite a statement about Rome on John’s part, and one that finds a parallel working out in John’s blending together of elements of God’s prophets’ denunciations of multiple precedent cities and seats of empire like Tyre, Babylon, and even Jerusalem, in his denunciation of Babylon the Great.

32 *Vit. Apoll.* 4.38, cited in Bauckham 1993a, 410. Philostratus invokes the image of the Hydra, the many-headed (and thereby grossly unnatural) monster here; the myth of the monster who grows more heads than one can cut off seems to underlie the image of the beast who sustains and recovers from a “death wound” to one of its heads (Rev 13:3).
The Strategic Arousal of Emotion in John’s Vision

Alongside enmity, John generously employs topics evocative of indignation in his depiction of the Emperors and the promoters of their local cults. The essence of indignation is pain at undeserved good fortune, that is, seeing bad or unworthy people enjoy what ought, in all justice, be the reward reserved for the virtuous and worthy (Aristotle, Rhet. 2.9.1). The corollary involves seeing the good not receive what is due them: “If a virtuous party does not obtain what is suitable, we feel indignant” (Rhet. 2.9.11). Aristotle himself asserts that “indignation” is an emotional response of virtuous people and the product of good character: “we ought to be indignant with those who prosper undeservedly; for that which happens beyond a man’s deserts is unjust, wherefore we attribute this feeling even to gods” (Rhet. 2.9.1). Aristotle very carefully distinguishes envy from indignation, the former being a vicious characteristic (as it is indifferent to matters of justice, and potentially inimical to them) and the latter a virtuous one (as it is rooted in justice). Envy is pain at the deserved good fortune of another person (and can also be expressed as joy at the undeserved bad fortune of another), while indignation is pain at the undeserved good or undeserved bad fortune of others (Rhet. 2.9.5).

At this point, the significance of the visions of Revelation 4-5 as a strategic foundation becomes evident. The temporary power of the Dragon and the beast from the sea (12:12c; 13:2b, 5b) and the adulation they receive subvert any feeling of social obligation toward them as rulers and benefactors, and thus counter feelings of (positive) awe and gratitude.33

33 deSilva 1998a, 799; Carey 1999, 159.

34 Cf. deSilva 1998a, 797: “John seeks to arouse ‘indignation’ (νέμωσις) against Rome, a feeling Aristotle suggested would accompany the portrayal of some entity enjoying good fortune ‘contrary to all merit’, through his characterization of Rome’s imperialist activities as polluting and as fornication (Rev. 14.18) as well as John’s detailed listings of Rome’s injustices (16.18-19.4)”.

35 Anaximenes (Rhet. Alex. 1440a34-39), however, uses the term φόβος to designate the emotion aroused against “those whom we have shown to have been or to be or to be going to be undeservedly prosperous.” Despite the terminological confusion, it is clear that Anaximenes is describing something other than the base “envy” described by Aristotle, of which D. H. Lawrence (1980 [1931], 87-88), for example, accuses John: “How the late apocalyptists love mouthing out all about the gold and silver and cinnamon of evil Babylon! How they want them all! How they envy Babylon her splendour, envy, envy!.... How the apocalyptists would have loved to drink out of her cup! And since they couldn’t: how they loved smashing it.” “Indignation” in Aristotle’s sense is also not precisely the same as “resentment” (the term chosen alongside “fear” to name the two principal emotions evoked by John in Yarbro Collins 1984, 153), the usage of which can cover some aspects of indignation, but also envy and enmity.
from “the inhabitants of the earth” (13:3b-4) emerge as a parody of the cosmic enthronement of God and the Lamb and the adoration they receive from “every creature” (5:13). The parody is extended in the depiction of the beast having one head with a mortal wound, but restored to life, seeking to bring together people from “every tribe and people and language and nation” under its dominion (13:7), recalling the Lamb’s redemptive activity both in terms of being slaughtered, yet standing, and ransoming people “from every tribe and language and people and nation” (5:9). Whatever the mark of the beast is determined to represent (13:16), it is first and foremost a parody of the seal of God (7:2-3). As Greg Carey has perceptively observed, “John uses parody to unmask imperial hybris.... Parody is especially appropriate where appearances are deceptive; it is the perfect tool for revealing imperial pretensions.” Parody raises awareness of counterfeit.

In the context of this parody, John invokes topics of indignation in connection with the acclamations and adoration of the beast and his sponsor. The beast and Satan—God’s enemies and rivals of the Lamb where humankind is concerned—enjoy what they do not deserve, namely worship. Especially provocative in this regard is the speech placed on the lips of the beast worshipers, “Who is like the beast?” (13:4), a rhetorical question implying that there is no one equal to the beast, so great and powerful is this being. This phrase, however, is “stolen” from the context of the worship of God, even as worship offered to the beast and the dragon is worship “stolen”
from the God to whom it is uniquely due as creator of all that is, sharpening the impropriety and injustice of this beast-worship.\(^{40}\)

“Who is like the Beast?” (τίς ὁμοίος τῷ θηρίῳ; Rev 13:4)

“Who is like you among the gods, Lord? Who is like you, glorified among the holy ones?” (τίς ὁμοίος σοι ἐν θεοῖς, κύριε; τίς ὁμοίος σοι, δεδοξασμένος ἐν ἁγίοις; Ex 15:11)

“Lord, who is like you?” (κύριε, τίς ὁμοίος σοι; LXX Ps 34:10)

“O God, who is like you?” (ὁ θεός, τίς ὁμοίος σοι; LXX Ps 70:19)\(^{41}\)

Notably, the Hebrew prophets remembered the king of Babylon as a figure who harbored the arrogant ambition to rival God: “I will ascend above the clouds, I will be like unto the Most High” (ἔσομαι ὁμοίος τῷ υψίστῳ, Isa 14:14). Now “the whole earth” (Rev 13:3b-4) uses the language of acclaiming the unique dignity and power of the Most High to flatter the beast who carries “Babylon” on its back.

Indignation is further nurtured through several other topics and strategies. The “blasphemous names,” by which are intended “the titles and epithets used by Roman emperors, including κύριος, “lord,” σωτήρ, “savior,” and divi filius, “son of god,”\(^{42}\) present additional evidence that the emperors enjoy more than is their due, and this particularly at the cost of God and God’s Messiah receiving their due.\(^{43}\) Similarly, the beast himself

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40 Showing that an act adversely affects a defendant’s superiors gave “ground for indignatio” according to Cicero (Inv. 1.53.101; cf. also Rhet. Her. 2.30.48).
41 See also LXX Pss 85:8; 88:9, together with the more extensive lists taking the Qumran literature into account provided by Bauckham 1993a, 235; Aune 1998a, 741. Isaiah 46:6-7a (clearly reflected in Rev 1:17; 22:13) is also particularly relevant, presenting the phrase “Who is like” clearly in the context of an affirmation that there are no comparable divinities, thus negating competing objects of worship: “I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god. Who is like me?” This makes the application of the phrase (“Who is like?”) to the Beast (1) clearly a claim about its divinity and (2) clearly incompatible with the worship of the One God.
42 Aune 1998a, 734. See also Cuss 1974, 53-74.
43 It is possible to read John’s presentation of imperial cult as if it were a relatively recent innovation. Certainly John and his audience would have been familiar with the phenomenon of new divi emerging with the passing (or accession) of another emperor or
speaks ill of God and God’s hosts (Rev 13:1, 5-6), refusing to give God the honor that is God’s due and slandering instead.  

Quintilian suggested that the impropriety of an act “may be enhanced by considerations of the nature of the act, the position [status, relationship] of its author or the victim, the purpose, time, place and manner of the act” (Inst. 6.1.15). Here, the beast slanders his superiors, and the violation is further amplified by the author’s multiplication, as it were, of objects of this slander—not just God, but “God’s name” and “God’s dwelling” as well (13:6). John makes the beast’s activity seem as deplorable as possible (Quintilian, Inst. 6.1.15), speaking here not in terms of misdirected acclamations of other gods, but of “profaning” God, God’s name, God’s dwelling.

As for the beast from the land, feelings of enmity are, again, nurtured at once by the identification of this figure as a supporter of the enemies of God and the Christian community (one feels enmity toward the friends of one’s enemies). As “another” beast, who also speaks “like a dragon” (i.e., the words appropriate to Satan), he is presented from the beginning standing squarely in the enemy camp, as it were (13:11).

He actively diverts worship away from the One God toward the beast from the sea (now involving idolatry, as the “image of the beast” comes prominently into focus; 13:14-15), using deception (13:13-14; the same means that Satan has always used; 12:9; 20:3, 8, 10) and coercion (13:15, 17). The threat to those who do not worship the beast (murder, economic member of the imperial family. Aristotle (Rhet. 2.9.9-10) discusses indignation at the newly rich or powerful, rather than at those who have long been wealthy or powerful: “If two parties have the same good, men are more indignant with the one who has recently acquired it and owes his prosperity to it; ... the reason is that the latter seem to possess what belongs to them, the former not.” The innovation of giving cultic honors to new would-be gods, in competition with the cult of the “Ancient of Days,” might be subtly operative as well as a goad to indignation at the phenomenon.

An allusion to Dan 7:25a (cf. also 8:9-14; 11:36; Aune 1998a, 743).

So also Cicero, Inv. 1.53.101 (where an act against one’s superiors provokes indignation); Rhet. Her. 2.30.48.

Aune 1998a, 757: “Here ‘to speak like a dragon’ undoubtedly means that the second beast acted as the agent or plenipotentiary of the first beast,” who also represented Satan’s interests in the world.

Suggestions regarding the identification of the “beast from the land” have included the emperor himself, the provincial governor, the koimen of Asia (which figured prominently in the promotion of imperial cult), and the imperial priesthood in Asia (Aune 1998a, 736). The latter is preferred by Aune, following Cuss (1974, 96) and Beasley-Murray (1974, 216). Titles of these priests, including “high priest of the goddess Roma and the emperor.
enfranchisement) arouses feelings of enmity as the second beast, like the first beast and the Dragon before him, injures the Christian communities. At the same time, these sanctions also potentially arouse indignation, since a particular misdeed (here, the promotion of idolatrous cult, contrary to God’s prime directive) has been perpetrated by force and violence (13:15), and the influence of wealth (13:16-17). The beast’s use of deceptive measures to make the cult of the image of the beast more impressive, and thus make the counterfeit seem more real, also nurtures indignation against the whole complex of ruler cult. The “special effects” specifically manufacture the impression of “merit” where none exists.

The local manifestations of imperial cult seek to foster ongoing awe and gratitude toward the emperor and Rome. John replaces these feelings with indignation, enmity, and anger in order to support his agenda for Christian presence in Roman Asia: critical witness, with no room for idols, no room for assimilation to, and support of, the mechanisms of imperial legitimation.

3. The Harlotry and Violence Around Us: Revelation 17-18

John creates one of the most memorable—and negative—pictures of Rome in extant literature. Like the picture of the emperor and provincial organization in chapters 12-13, the picture of Rome in chapters 17-18 is crafted to foreground the multiple levels of injustice that inhere in Roman

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Caesar Augustus, son of a god,” would have been particularly offensive to Christians like John (Friesen 1993, 77-81).

48 Cicero, *Inv.* 1.53.102; the parallel in *Rhet. Her.* 2.30.48 focuses merely on the heinousness of the act.

49 On the use of special effects in pagan cults, see especially Scherrer 1984 as well as the review of literature in Aune 1998a, 762-64. The use of special effects (13:13-14) in this cult is akin to those employed in the story of Bel, as the priests of idolatrous cults attempt to defeat the accusation that the gods they serve are not “living” because they cannot eat or speak (cf. Rev 9:20-21; on Bel, see deSilva 2002, 240-42). The fact that calling down fire from heaven was used to demonstrate the genuineness of the God of Israel in a contest against Baal (1 Kings 18:38-40) makes its use here fall somewhere between the ironic and the studiously subversive (see Duff 2001, 122).

50 That the first hearers, at least, would have identified Babylon with Rome has been widely accepted since Wilhelm Bousset (1906, 358-65, 418-26), and is accepted here as a starting point. Despite the occasional attempt to read the picture of “Babylon” as a critique of Jerusalem, the evidence for the first hearers’ identification of Babylon with Rome has steadily increased. See, for example, the extensive evidence David Aune marshals for the natural identification of a city sitting atop seven hills, or a city being named “the great city,” with Rome in the first century (1998a, 944-945, 959; see also Aelius Aristides, *Or.* 26.3 and the classical references provided in Strecker and Schnelle 1996 at Rev 17:18.)
imperialism, so carefully muted in public discourse, with a view to arousing feelings of enmity against the Roman domination system and indignation at its practices, propaganda, and successes.\footnote{1}

John uses the techniques of personification and character delineation \((Rhet. Her. 4.50.63; 4.53.66)\) in his portrait of Rome, presenting the seat of empire in the guise of a (successful, high-end) prostitute.\footnote{2} This choice has subjected John to trenchant criticism in recent decades, but it must be remembered that he is also looking at (or at least remembering) another portrait of Rome as a woman—as a stately goddess, as in the temples to \textit{Roma et Augusti} in Ephesus and Pergamum, the temple to \textit{Dea Roma} in Smyrna, or on the reverse of many first-century Roman coins.\footnote{3} It is specifically this public image of Rome that he wishes to address (or, perhaps better, re-dress). John had also inherited the prophetic tradition of speaking critically of cities and nations as “prostitutes,” which provided an effective overlay for the image of \textit{Roma} as goddess.\footnote{4} It is also widely recognized that John presents Babylon and the New Jerusalem as foils for one another, much as the portraits of the worship around the heavenly throne (chs. 4-5) and the worship surrounding the beast (ch. 13) formed a telling diptych, with the result that John can be seen to draw on the “two women \textit{topos}” in his portrayal of Rome, using its traditional resources and inherent logic to arouse aversion for partnership with Rome.\footnote{5} This technique again allows John to portray Rome as a counterfeit society, a distorted image, a parody of

\footnote{1} The negative side of Roman imperialism in Asia Minor has been amply documented in other studies, the arguments of which will not be repeated here. See especially Kraybill 1996; Howard-Brook and Gwyther 1999.

\footnote{2} The tendency of some modern critics of John to import modern structures of prostitution, in which the women are indeed victimized by their purveyors (and thus accusing John of blaming the victim in this vision), unhelpfully obscures the fact that “Babylon” is very much in business for herself, solicits her own clientele in this portrait, and drinks in the full share of the profits.

\footnote{3} Aune 1998a, 922. Magie 1950, 2:1613-14 provides a list of cult sites of \textit{Roma} and \textit{Roma et Augustus}. The discussion of the \textit{Dea Roma} coin in Aune 1998a, 920-22, provides a very helpful background to John’s impressionistic redrawing of the same. Hylen (2003, 215) suggests that this coin actually presents \textit{Roma} as a male warrior, but the extra fold in the toga (as well as the iconography of \textit{Roma} generally as a female warrior) tells against this interpretation.


\footnote{5} See the excellent study by Barbara Rossing (1999). The gendered guise will be largely dropped in ch. 18, where we see the city itself rather than the personification of the city known from contemporary iconography.
the divine vision for a community that nurtures justice and wholeness, creating critical distance and the potential for arousing indignation at the power and position Rome occupies, hindering God’s ideal as it does.\textsuperscript{56}

Quintilian’s advice concerning the arousal of feelings of revulsion, aversion, indignation, and the like certainly applies to John’s portrait of Rome: “The best way however for the accuser to excite the feelings of the judge is to make the charges which he brings against the accused seem as atrocious or, if feasible, as deplorable as possible” (\textit{Inst.} 6.1.15). Presenting Rome as a prostitute and her international influence and dealings as “fornication,” as “trafficking” with a harlot (17:1, 2, 5; 18:3), certainly puts the facts of Roman imperialism in “as deplorable” a light “as possible,”\textsuperscript{57} while at the same time arousing revulsion at the idea of (continued) entanglement with Rome. This was a major point of contention among certain of the seven churches (notably Pergamum and Thyatira, but also rich Laodicea), where such “fornication” also appears as a (metaphorical) practice promoted or tolerated by other Christian teachers.

A great deal of chapters 17-18 is dedicated to naming the crimes perpetrated by Babylon and depicting the consequences that should properly follow such crimes (but have not as yet!), with the result that the overall emotional effect of these chapters will be to arouse indignation against the position and success Rome currently enjoys. This is aroused, again, in order to dissuade the Christians addressed by John from those practices that lead them into partnership with this ugly system of domination and economic exploitation, maintaining instead a vocal, critical distance in the form of witness and non-participation in key activities. Adela Yarbro Collins finds John to present the following charges against Babylon, which she helpfully observes will mitigate against the evocation of pity in the portrayal of her judgment: “(1) the idolatrous and blasphemous worship offered and encouraged by Rome, especially the emperor cult; (2) the violence perpetrated by Rome, especially against Jews and Christians; (3) Rome’s blasphemous self-glorification; and (4) Roman wealth.”\textsuperscript{58} Each of these is

\textsuperscript{56} See the detailed comparison in Duff 2001, 88-89.

\textsuperscript{57} See Aune 1998a, 930-31 on commercial trade and political alliances here as prostitution (with important precedents in Isa 23:17 in regard to Tyre and Nah 3:4 in regard to Nineveh): “Such alliances inevitably had significant economic, social, and religious implications and usually worked to the detriment of the kingdoms involved.” John may have been thinking of the effects of Roman “alliances” with Judea, and the former’s manipulation of the latter’s domestic affairs, since 63 BC.

\textsuperscript{58} Yarbro Collins 1980, 203.
developed by John in such a way as to arouse indignation or, alternatively, to contribute to the alleviation of the positive feelings of awe and gratitude that public discourse sought to maintain in regard to Rome.

The first and third charges emerge from a number of details in the text. Rome is presented in close connection with “the beast” who is “full of blasphemous names” (17:3), an alliance that reinforces enmity against Babylon as a participant in the promotion of unmerited cultic honors. The cry of the seafarers, “Who is like the great city?” (τίς ὁμοία τῇ πόλει τῇ μεγάλῃ; 18:18) also recalls the rhetorical question used in acclamation of the beast (Rev 13:4), an acclamation “taken” from the acclamation of the One God non pareil. The linking of Rome with the emperors in cultic worship throughout Asia Minor is here subtly (and, in the case of the lament of the sailors, ironically) recalled in ways that remind the hearers that Rome also claims for itself—and receives—what is due the Creator God alone.59 Related to this charge is the presumption inherent in the public discourse about Rome as the “Eternal City,” Roma Aeterna,60 claiming for Rome what has never belonged to any kingdom or empire before her (most explicitly in Rev 18:7-8), signaling Rome’s refusal to learn the lessons of history and apply them to a more humble and humane rule. Appropriately, John’s principal resource for such a philosophy of history would come from the visions of Daniel 2 and 4, where Daniel is seen trying to teach the king of Babylon these very lessons (see especially Dan 2:21; 4:32). The “attitude” inherent in such public discourse, then, is presented here as a cause for indignation.

John exposes these pretensions in his vision of Rome’s demise, which will reveal the emptiness of Rome’s claims on its own behalf and the persistent truth that all human domination systems run their course. Every seat of empire, no matter how prosperous at its peak, will one day sit as a ruin, and Rome will be no different (Rev 18:2). In the course of this display, John gives attention to sweeping aside feelings of awe in regard to Rome, such as the public discourse and iconography sought to maintain. John presents himself as a model of recovery in this regard. At first, he “marvels” at the sight of the figure of Roma (“And, seeing her, I was awestruck with a deep awe,” 17:6b). The angel questions him as to “why” he marvels (17:7a), promising to show him the revelation of the mystery and fate of “the

59 Aune (1998a, 936) has also marshaled substantial evidence to suggest that the “abominations” with which Babylon has filled her cup represent idolatrous practices.
60 See discussion in deSilva 1998b, 99; Witherington 2003, 221.
woman” as a remedy to such “marveling,” such “awe.”

“Marveling” is what the inhabitants of the earth do in regard to the whore and the beast (17:8; cf. 13:3b, 8); it is the emotional response of people “whose names are not written in the book of life.” The scene of Roma Aeterna, stripped, naked, devoured by her allies, and burned up (17:16-17) provides the final antidote to any such feelings of “awe.”

Attention is given throughout Revelation to Rome’s violence, the second of the charges noted by Yarbro Collins: “I saw the woman drunk with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the witnesses of Jesus” (Rev 17:6; see also 18:23b-24). This is, first, a topic of enmity. John reminds the Christians that Rome has savagely hurt “our own,” amplified by the image of drinking blood to the point of intoxication, recalling the Levitical prescriptions against drinking blood as an abomination and evoking general taboos against cannibalism (this is, after all, human blood). The strange blending of “blood” with the effects of wine suggests that Babylon engaged in this slaughter for her own wanton amusement and enjoyment (getting a “rush,” as it were, out of doing injury to God’s friends). By depicting the suppression of Christian witness in such provocative terms, and presenting

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61 Aune (1998a, 927), however, suggests that John’s reaction here is a standard feature of the literary form of ekphrasis, in which the narrator is left to puzzle over the significance of the image he views until an interlocutor relieves him of his confusion by explaining the work. It is noteworthy that one of these narrators is left θαυμάζον, “wondering,” about a depiction of Hercules (Lucian, Hercules 4) and another describes a statute of Lysippus as a θαυμά, “a marvel” (Callistratus, Imagines 6), giving Aune strong lexical support for his reading of 17:6. However, the inhabitants of the earth also experience “amazement” as they witness the woman riding the beast (17:8; cf. 13:3), amazement (surely not, in this case, puzzlement) that found expression in the worship of the beast and the dragon (13:4), something that does not escape Aune’s notice (1998a, 940). While Aune’s observations about literary form, then, argue strongly for “puzzlement,” the immediate and broader literary context necessarily color any “puzzlement” with a more sinister “amazement” that can draw one’s focus away from true objects of worship. See also Bartsch 1989, 25-27.

62 The substantial debate concerning this scene (see, e.g., the conversation begun in Pippin 1992 and carried forward in Hylen 2003) appears to turn on the degree to which the interpreter/analyst reads it through the lens of the political critique and forecast for which the figure of the prostitute serves as a vehicle (which is surely the lens that John would have the reader continue to hold before herself or himself) as opposed to allowing the figure (a woman) to displace the reality for which it stands. The image, of course, is not itself without precedent, appearing in Ezek 23:25-29 where Jerusalem is personified and presented as a woman stripped naked, with the survivors of Jerusalem being burned to death (Aune 1998a, 956-57).

63 Royalty (1998, 190) speaks of the details of this verse “increasing the pathos of this vision,” but not specifying which emotion is being augmented, how, or to what end.
the victims as virtuous witnesses of Jesus who did not merit such ill treatment, John has also woven in two topics evocative of indignation (cf. Quintilian, Inst. 6.1.15).

John has previously raised awareness of Rome’s violence. The vision of the martyrs crying out under the altar in Rev 6:9-11 calls attention to righteous people not getting what they deserved in life, having been killed by (it will be revealed) the beast’s representatives and Babylon for their faithful testimony concerning the One God and what that God requires of God’s creatures. Their evident pain at the absence of destructive judgments upon the empire in the present time signals, moreover, that the perpetrators still enjoy what they do not deserve as long as they remain free from God’s punitive intervention. The violence and injustice, moreover, must continue against God’s righteous ones for a time (6:11b), heightening feelings of enmity and indignation against the powers of this world. By giving voice to these victims, John has incidentally employed the strategy of placing “fictitious speeches in the mouths of our characters” and calling “the dead to life,” presumably to testify against the ills they have suffered or to rail their own indignation against the accused, thereby contributing to the arousal of indignation among the audience (Quintilian, Inst. 4.1.28).64

These same victims express relief when justice is finally given (16:5-7).65 If such plagues are indeed, as angel and martyrs affirm, what the inhabitants of the earth deserve, these inhabitants have not yet met the punishment that is their due, and hence still enjoy undeserved good fortune.

64 That which arouses pity at the fate of the victim (Quintilian, Inst. 6.1.18), moreover, could be expected, reciprocally, to arouse indignation against the perpetrator.

65 The judgment upon Babylon, the beasts, and their followers is closely linked with the topic of God’s “wrath.” The prominence of God’s own experience of anger (ἵματα, 6:16, 17; 11:18; 14:10; 16:19; 19:15; θωμός, 14:19; 15:1, 7; 16:1, 19; 19:15) would support the audience’s response of indignation. God’s anger is prompted by the ingratitude of the inhabitants of the earth shown in their return of insult and disobedience rather than the proper return of worship and obedient service (see Aristotle, Rhet. 2.2.3; 2.2.17). It is prompted by the violence done to God’s faithful servants, who are the victims of the attacks of the dragon, beasts, and their followers (Rev 1:9; 2:13; 6:9-11; 11:7; 12:17; 13:7; 16:5-6; 17:6; 18:24; see Aristotle, Rhet. 2.2.23). God’s anger is unabated, moreover, in the face of these perpetrators’ recalcitrance (indeed, their continued provocation of God through abusive speech, ἐβλασφήμησαν, 16:9, 11, 21, and through affronting behaviors, 9:20-21; repentance would be seen to evoke mildness, the abatement of anger, cf. Aristotle, Rhet. 2.3.5; Quintilian, Inst. 6.1.14). The audience sees God’s anger as a response to God not receiving what is in keeping with God’s merits (cf. Aristotle, Rhet. 2.9.11), with the result that these images are likely to further fuel their response of indignation against those who behave so unjustly toward God.
The distance between the “justice” envisioned in Rev 16:15-17 (and 17:1-18:24, for that matter) and Rome’s present experience of the hearers of Roman prosperity continues to nurture indignation. It is perhaps in this light that we should hear Rev 18:20: “Rejoice over her, heaven and holy ones and apostles and prophets, because God judged your case against her.”

“Rejoicing” here is probably not the gloating or taunting of the vicious, but the experience of relief enjoyed by the victims who first suffered the brutality of a repressive regime, and suffered again to witness that regime prospering and successfully promoting its lies about its crimes for so long. Moreover, since this relief belongs still to an unrealized future for John and his audiences, it is less likely that he is truly striving here to arouse “rejoicing” as a response to Rome’s fall, so much as indignation against the crimes perpetrated by this domination system that go, as yet, unpunished. In other words, the invitation to the narrative victims to “rejoice” at as-yet-unrealized events works upon the flesh-and-blood hearers rather differently, calling attention to what is still wrong in the present (hence, here, arousing indignation: the plaintiffs have not yet been given justice; the defendant still enjoys privilege and power to which she is not entitled).

The final charge pertains to the Roman imperial economy, which John portrays as structured chiefly to benefit Rome. This emerges first in the figurative portrayal of Rome as a prostitute as John calls attention to her luxurious clothing (“purple and scarlet”), adornment (“gold and precious stones and pearls”), and luxury goods (not just a cup, but a “golden cup”; Rev 17:4), and is reinforced by the denunciation of Rome for “indulging in her excesses” (18:5) and her “luxuriating” (18:3). It emerges as well from the extensive focus on the cargoes that flow from the ports throughout the known world, taking both the staples (like grain and oil) and the luxury items away from the provinces to satiate the cravings of the population of a single city (18:12-13).

66 On the question of what factors would lead hearers to “hear” this injunction as the conclusion of the hypothetical lament placed on the lips of the sailors by the “voice from heaven,” or as that heavenly being speaking in his own voice, see deSilva 2008c, 362-66.

67 As suggested in Yarbro Collins 1980, 203.

68 Aelius Aristides (To Rome 11-13) provides a strikingly similar portrait of the provinces being literally stripped bare, given the volume of goods brought to the capital city. Aune (1998b, 981) observes that John uses polysyndeton here to “produce the effect of ‘extensiveness and abundance by means of an exhaustive summary’ (BDF section 460); i.e., it rhetorically emphasizes the conspicuous consumption of Rome,” her “profound materialism.” Yarbro Collins (1984, 153) observes that John’s manifest “is purposely
In part, this “view” of the Roman economy counters the feelings of gratitude toward Rome (that is, toward Roman rule and imperialism) by drawing attention to the pervasive self-interest that underlies Roman rule.\(^69\) Roma is an anti-benefactor, whose influence and interventions ultimately seek to secure self-serving ends. John includes no notice of anything Rome has done purely on behalf of her subjects.\(^70\) The emphasis on luxury, intemperance, and conspicuous consumption also nurtures indignation, as Rome is seen to consume more of the world’s goods than is the share of any one city, and this often to the detriment of the provinces under her far-from-beneficent rule.\(^71\)

At the close of this vision, the angel presents a closing summary of Babylon’s crimes (18:23b–24). Rome is guilty of “the blood of prophets and saints ... and all the slain upon the earth,” naming not only the violence targeting Christian dissenters but the violence of conquest and suppression of revolt upon which empire is ultimately founded.\(^72\) Rome is guilty of spinning a web of propaganda and supplying enough of a share in the rewards to deceive the majority of inhabitants into viewing empire as a good

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selective and perspectival,” emphasizing luxury items. However, John does in fact list “fine flour and grain” in 18:13, drawing attention to the fact that even the more mundane cargoes in the shipping lanes manifest the injustice of the system, supplying some 200,000 families in Rome with their “regular ‘dole’ of free grain,” also a (parasitic) luxury when provincials paid high prices for grain and sometimes had none” (Kraybill 1996, 107-108).

69 See Aristotle, Rhet. 2.7.5: “It is possible to make out that there is no favour at all, or that those who render it are not actuated by benevolence; for it can either be said that they do, or have done so, for their own sake, in which case there is no favour.” Cf. also Cicero, De or. 2.51.206, 208.

70 A defender of Rome might ask whether or not this a “fair” critique, pointing, for example, to Rome’s marshaling of resources to relieve famines and rebuild cities after earthquakes in Asia Minor, or to its effective elimination of piracy and brigandage from the Mediterranean basin. John might respond, however, that all such “beneficence” was undertaken ultimately to serve Rome’s interests, safeguarding her supply in the lands of production and in transit to her lap.

71 The economic situation in 6:6 might also contribute to the arousal of indignation, since production and markets have been so mismanaged on account of the demands of the imperial economy (and the ruling consideration of the profitability of certain crops for export over others for internal consumption) that hard-working people are unable to purchase the food they need simply to feed their families. See, on this point, Schüssler Fiorenza 1991, 63.

72 “Christians were only a small minority among countless victims of the great imperial beast,” and John is able to step back to “take a panoramic view of the carnage” in 18:24 (Kraybill 1996, 200).
thing, even as a divinely ordained state of affairs. Rome’s greed is evidenced in the merchants rising to positions of power and influence through the increase of trade (cf. Jer 51:49). Again, the prominence of topics featuring Rome giving to people contrary to their due and enjoying itself more than is its due should be expected to arouse strong feelings of indignation. John provides ample reason, then, for his hearers to allow their passions against Rome to be excited by such calls to (imaginative) action as 18:5-6, with their explicit arousal of desire for “payback,” which is essentially the goal of indignation.

4. Such a Pity?

The thoroughness with which John indicted Rome and the detail with which he relates the anticipated judgments to fall upon Rome have led critics to surmise that John has no sense of the tragedy, the human loss, connected with the events he describes: “there is nothing in Revelation 18 to conceal John’s glee over the catastrophe.” But there are cues in the text that suggest that we ought not perhaps to hear unmitigated glee in John’s narrative voice. Indeed, several noteworthy critics have suggested that

73 Aune (1998a, 994) dismisses (rightly, in my opinion) readings of 18:6 that suggest that angels or some characters other than the obvious (“my people”) are the ones invited to “pay her back double” as examples of theological-ethical convictions trumping the meaning of the text. However, it is noteworthy that Christians are not actually given any role in the punishment of beasts or Babylon other than to keep their necessary (ideological and behavioral, if not geographical) distance until God or Christ intervenes. Yarbro Collins’s insight that Revelation stirs up these feelings so as to resolve them and allow for their release as the disciples await God’s future intervention is helpful in this regard (Yarbro Collins 1984, 152-53). However, many in the audience simply need to be made to feel this desire for vindication and acknowledge its just basis in Rome’s practices, so that they will cease to entertain notions of co-existence, even collusion. Many among John’s audience appear to have forgotten that Rome ever spilled so much Christian blood (and so comfortably at times!), and to be willing to let bygones be bygones in order to get on with a life. Rather than reflecting a commendable pursuit of Christian forgiveness, however, John avers that this course of action amounts to abandoning the witness to the unjust and impious practices that, in part, it is the survivors’ duty to remember and protest.

74 Carey 1999, 156-57.

75 Even 18:20, the one verse that comes closest to supporting Carey’s claim, could be read quite otherwise than an expression of glee, for example, as an acknowledgment of vindication, the “rejoicing” that comes from relief from living with the lingering pains of injustice (martyrs) and with the official “spins” that deny any wrongdoing (indeed, that affirm the contrary) and thus deny even the reality of injury.
Revelation 18 is more expressive of pity and regret over Babylon’s fall. A rhetorical analysis of John’s potential evocation of topics of pity can help us discern whether John evokes the overtones of regret at the inevitable as the upper harmonics of his arousal of indignation, or rather a more ethically questionable delight in human suffering.

Robert Royalty has suggested that the form of Revelation 18 resembles the monody, a Greek lament expressing pity, suggesting that the form of the chapter itself might have disposed the hearers to temper their responses of indignation, anger, and enmity with pity. Beyond issues of form, the content of Revelation 18 aligns with topics evocative of pity at several points. At the very least, John takes a rhetorical risk to describe the calamities that will befall Babylon so thoroughly and as sensitively as he does, for it creates the necessity on his part and on the part of the audience of reminding themselves that the piteous calamity they are witnessing is in fact deserved.

Contrasting “the prosperity ... once enjoyed” with “what evils they now suffer” (Cicero, *Inv.* 1.55.107; see also Quintilian, *Inst.* 6.1.23) was held to be productive of pity, although John has so carefully positioned the audience to regard the fall of Babylon as deserved, even necessary, that pity would not be automatically excited (Aristotle, *Rhet.* 2.8.2). Babylon is “in distress contrary to all expectation,” another topic potentially evocative of pity (Cicero, *Inv.* 1.55.108). The political and military might of Rome gave no hint of such forthcoming collapse. Moreover, the repetition of the phrases “in a single day” and “in one hour” (18:8, 10, 17, 19), together with the image of the millstone sinking into the sea (18:21), all stress the suddenness, and hence unexpectedness, of this dramatic reversal. Babylon’s speech (18:7-8), preceding the first instance of the topic of suddenness, shows her obliviousness to God’s standards and power to enforce them through judgment, and hence drives home the fact that the catastrophes come “contrary to all expectation.” John again mitigates the arousal of pity, however, by showing that Babylon’s lack of awareness is culpable insofar as she has violently silenced those who bore witness to the truth about her practices in the light of God’s commandments (Rev 17:6; 18:24).

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76 E.g., Caird 1964, 227; Beckwith 1919, 285; Glasson 1965, 105; Kiddle and Ross 1946, 365, 370-73. See Yarbro Collins 1980, 186 n. 4 for a complete list, though she herself concludes that John neither seeks to arouse true sympathy nor bitter joy.

77 Royalty 1997, 615.

78 John uses the technique of prosopopoia effectively throughout this chapter (cf. Quintilian, *Inst.* 4.1.28).
Amplifying the misfortune by viewing it from a variety of angles provided another means of drawing out pity. A father’s grief could be amplified by talking about the different pleasures he had from his child’s life, which would no longer be enjoyed, as well as the joys that he would now never have, the child’s life having been prematurely ended (Cicero, *Inv.* 1.55.107). Alternatively, a catastrophe could be broken down into discrete, lamentable experiences, each one of which could then be presented “to view one by one, so that the auditor may seem to see them, and may be moved to pity by the actual occurrence, as if he were present, and not by words alone” (Cicero, *Inv.* 1.55.107).

John’s extended monody engages this topic in a number of ways. First, he allows the audience to see Babylon’s fall from the perspective of the various parties who are affected by the loss (kings, merchants, seafarers, 18:9-20), giving voice to their lament, as well as the stark silence resulting from the sudden and permanent absence of music, crafts, and new beginnings in Babylon (18:22-23).\(^{79}\) John mitigates the power of these laments to evoke pity by presenting the kings unsympathetically as those “who fornicated with her and indulged in excess with her” (18:9),\(^{80}\) as well as by underscoring the obvious self-interest on the part of other “mourners” (18:11, 15, 19),\(^{81}\) which distances them from, for example, the displays of wife and children being brought out, in tears and wretched attire, to evoke pity for the defendant (Quintilian, *Inst.* 4.1.28).

John dwells significantly on the topic of separation from relationships and the pleasures they bring. This emerges first in 18:14, although somewhat ironically insofar as the focus is solely on deprivation of material goods rather than social relationships.\(^{82}\) It is more sensitively evoked in John’s narration of the joys that would no longer be experienced in Babylon (18:22-23a)—the “sound of harpists and musicians and flutists and trumpeters,” “craftsmen of every art,” “the sound of the mill,” “the light of a lamp,” and “the sound of bridegroom and bride,” which are all

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79 In this regard, I find Carey’s observation that “the mourners are silenced” (Carey 1999, 157) to be problematic. It is rather remarkable, on the contrary, that John gives them such room to speak at all, to arouse, potentially, pity and regret that things must be so.

80 Yarbro Collins 1980, 195.

81 So Aune 1998a, 998.

82 Cicero’s twelfth topic for evoking pity is the elaboration of the “separation from someone .... when you are torn away from one with whom you have lived with the greatest pleasure, for example a father, son, brother, or intimate friend” (*Inv.* 1.55.109).
unobjectionable facets of Babylon’s civic life.\textsuperscript{83} This elaboration of the “deserted city \textit{topos}” invoked in 18:2\textsuperscript{84} calls attention to these wholesome facets of society that will be lost, the needless “waste” that Babylon will have brought about in its reckless collision course with the God of justice.\textsuperscript{85} John thus adds a more fully tragic dimension to the scene, a more “human” dimension to what is otherwise a caricature of Roman society. In anticipating the relief that will come with the collapse of a global domination system, John does not fail to acknowledge the personal tragedies in the stories of weddings that would never happen, songs of joy that would never be sung, and productive crafts that would cease to be practiced. It is this segment of the lament that would most potentially arouse pity for the people in Babylon, who are caught up in her fall, and, indeed, John does nothing to mitigate such pity at this juncture. Such an emotional response would balance indignation against the “system,” as it were, with a concern for witness to call the individuals out from that system before it is too late. In this way, indignation is allowed to do its complete work, reinforcing a sense of incompatibility and separation (and, indeed, the return to the topic of Rome’s crimes in 18:23b-24 reinforces this and assures that pity will not be misdirected toward the “system”), while the topics evocative of compassion help the audience remain sensitive toward the ordinary people who exist within and under that system, perhaps serving to fuel the witness and evangelism that certain noteworthy scholars understand to be so critical to John’s larger agenda (i.e., to bring about the conversion of the nations).\textsuperscript{86}

5. Ethical Evaluation of John’s Evocation of Emotions

Quintilian speaks of the practice of \textit{deinosis} (δεινώσις), by means of which “the force of eloquence ... awakens emotions which either do not naturally arise from the case or are stronger than the case would suggest.” Such a

\textsuperscript{83} Howard-Brook and Gwyther (1999, 172) suggest that the cessation of music in Babylon in Rev 18:22 signifies that “the imperial cults and local cults will be silenced.” While, on the one hand, this cannot be ruled out insofar as musical instruments might have accompanied cult hymns and the silencing of all music necessarily includes the silencing of cultic music, neither the Jewish Scriptural precedents (Isa 24:8; Ezek 26:13) nor the specific content of Rev 18:21-24 support the suggestion that John is particularly targeting music in pagan cults here.

\textsuperscript{84} Aune 1998b, 1012.

\textsuperscript{85} Kraybill (1996, 24 n. 2) also regards these verses as a frank admission that much that is productive and beautiful will be lost with Rome’s fall.

\textsuperscript{86} E.g., Schüssler Fiorenza 1991, 79; Bauckham 1993b, 103.
practice amplifies “things unjust, cruel or hateful” beyond what the offenses would actually merit, falling into the ethically questionable realm of manipulating emotions for the sake of achieving one’s goals for or through the audience (Quintilian, *Inst. 6.2.24*), even if it requires moving “the minds of the judges ... away from the contemplation of the truth” (*6.2.5*). Does John overstate his case? Does he engage in exciting the emotions of enmity and indignation beyond what Rome’s practices would naturally merit? Or does he make a sufficient case to justify the emotional responses he seeks to arouse?

In approaching this question, it is significant that several voices bear witness against Roman domination using very similar language and to a very similar degree. The authors of the near-contemporary apocalypses, *4 Ezra* and *2 Baruch*, use language and amplitude very similar to John’s as they set forth their own experience of Roman imperialism.

The author of *2 Baruch* denounces the “nations” in general for their exploitation and violence, and their misuse of creation and failure to honor the God who provided creation and its fruits: “But now, ye peoples and nations, ye are guilty because ye have always trodden down the earth, and used the creation unrighteously. For I have always benefitted you, and ye have always been ungrateful for the beneficence” (*2 Bar. 13:11-12*). He further indicts “Babylon” (Rome) for its imperialistic expansion and the sufferings this policy brought upon the subject peoples. Conquest, in turn, facilitated the widespread dissemination of Rome’s “wickedness” (*2 Bar. 36:8*). The end of the cedar is to be burned (*37:1*). In the interpretation of the vision of the cedar tree, Rome’s pride and insolence come to the fore, as well as its suppression of “the truth” (*2 Bar. 39:5-7*).

In *4 Ezra*, the Messiah indicts Rome for its establishment of rule through violence and terror, and for its widespread destruction of fruitful communities in the name of conquest. Rome is upbraided for its oppressive exercise of that rule, for the perversion of justice and the use of deceit, and for its enmity against “those who tell the truth,” and for its insolence and pride (*4 Ezra 11:39-12:1*). The author anticipates the day when the world will be “freed from your violence” and “refreshed and relieved” by the removal of the terrible burden of Roman imperialism. Moreover, the author of *4 Ezra* regards the Flavian emperors as the empire’s most oppressive rulers, who “sum up [the eagle’s] wickedness” (*4 Ezra 12:23-25*). The foregrounding of the Messiah’s judicial role in both *2 Baruch* and *4 Ezra*...
suggests that multiple communities experienced Roman rule as an intolerable situation of injustice for which there was simply no appeal save the appeal to God’s court.

The authors of the third and fourth of *Sibylline Oracles* also attest to the experience of economic exploitation at the hands of Rome, especially from the perspective of the province of Asia. Even Tacitus, as fully implanted within the dominant culture and strata of power and privilege as one could be, knows how Roman domination looks from the margins: “Robbery, savagery, and rape they call ‘government’; they make a desert and call it ‘peace’” (*Agr. 30*).

When John forcefully gives voice to the cost of imperialism, he adds his voice to a chorus of voices that the dominant cultural rhetoric seeks to drown out, whether by volume or violence. The multiplicity of witnesses (which, again, extends to non-Jewish, non-Christian witnesses) suggests that John appropriately (if colorfully) draws attention to the underside of Roman imperialism rather than engaging in *deinosis*. He has identified a number of features of Roman imperialism that he can justifiably criticize—even demonize—on the basis of the Jewish Scriptural tradition on which he takes his stand. This is not to say that John “fairly” represents the sum total of Roman imperial interventions in Asia Minor. John’s presentation is certainly one-sided. He does not say all that could be said about the experience of Roman rule in Asia Minor, particularly its positive contributions (although John might well question whether Rome’s motives for “helping” the provincials in terms of famine relief, development, provision for safety for trade on land and sea were altruistic or self-interested). Nothing is said about the emperors’ beneficence, about the establishment and maintenance of peace, or about improvements in provincial life under Roman rule. All elements of imperial ideology that promote gratitude toward the *Augusti* or legitimate their rule (e.g., as the vessels chosen by the gods to bring peace and rule of law) are suppressed or subverted. But in what John *does* say, he resonates with a significant number of contemporary witnesses that would corroborate his case.

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88 See, for example, *Sib. Or.* 3.350-352: “However much wealth Rome received from tribute-bearing Asia, Asia will receive three times that much again from Rome and will repay her deadly arrogance to her”; *Sib. Or.* 4:145-148 (late 1st century CE), in connection with return of Nero (4.137-139): “Great wealth will come to Asia, which Rome itself once plundered and deposited in her house of many possessions. She will then pay back twice as much and more to Asia, and then there will be a surfeit of war.” These are helpfully cited in Bauckham 1993a, 379, 382.
6. Conclusion

Classical rhetorical theorists help the modern interpreter pinpoint the topics and strategies by means of which a first-century text produced within the Greco-Roman world (which includes the texts collected within the New Testament) potentially prompts emotional responses, discerning what those responses would be and enabling further theorizing about the ways in which those responses advance an author’s rhetorical goals. John dampens any feelings of awe or gratitude toward Rome and its emperors among his audiences, re-directing these responses to God and the Lamb. In their place, he evokes feelings of enmity and indignation toward Roman imperialism at its center and in its local manifestations, which in turn position his audiences to accept his summons to maintain critical distance and witness, and to avoid any behaviors that suggest support for, or toleration of, a domination system whose ideology and practices stand condemned before the Creator God and God’s Anointed.

Works Cited


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