

## APPRAISING THE MYTH OF NERO REDIVIVUS IN THE INTERPRETATION OF REVELATION

SIGVE TONSTAD  
Loma Linda University  
Loma Linda, California

### *Introduction*

According to the most widely accepted interpretation of the book of Revelation, the Emperor Nero, the Roman Empire, and the imperial cult in Asia Minor loom large in the symbolic foreground of the book, reflective of the conviction that John is addressing the historical situation contemporary to him. To Wilhelm Bousset, “the observation that the core of the prophecy in the Apocalypse refers to the then widely held expectation of Nero *redivivus* is in my opinion an immovable point that will not again be surrendered, the *rocher de bronze* of the contemporary historical interpretation against which all contrary points of view so far have been dashed to pieces.”<sup>1</sup> While Bousset’s view of the myth of Nero’s return in Revelation has occasionally been challenged, the tone of his statement implies that anyone wishing to question it runs the risk of having his or her reputation diminished, if not dashed to pieces.

This risk notwithstanding, the present essay will appraise the alleged role of the myth of Nero’s return in Revelation, arguing that neither the office of the emperor nor the imperial cult has the proportions to fully match the force of the symbols on which the derivation is based. As for the Roman Empire interpretation, the imitative aspiration of the power that appears on John’s prophetic screen (13:1-10) is poorly matched to the vulgarity of the Roman Empire. A well-preserved statue in the Museum of Ancient History in Istanbul is a case in point, featuring the Emperor Hadrian (117-138) in a striking pose, his right foot planted on the head of a prostrate, diminutive, and thoroughly vanquished subject. A power that flaunts its tyrannical character on the surface and up front does not tally with Revelation’s prophetic exposé, the thrust of which is to expose the imitative aspiration of the power it seeks to depict.

The imperial cult, too, runs afoul of the imitative features that are characteristic of the cult’s alleged counterpart in Revelation (13:11-18). Revelation sees a phenomenon rising from the earth, reporting that “it had two horns *like a lamb*” (ὁμοία ἀρνίῳ, 13:11). The alert reader will not miss the imitative inference, recalling that when Jesus steps into the picture in the most suspense-filled scene of Revelation, he appears in the form of a lamb (ἀρνίον, 5:6). The lamb-like aspiration of this phenomenon in Revelation is ill-matched to the violent character of the imperial cult. Presumably the “kinder, gentler” face of the imperial combination of statecraft and religion, the festive wrappings of the imperial cult nevertheless failed to conceal a crude delight in violence. S. R. F. Price points out that bloody combats in the form of gladiatorial games and animal fights became a popular part of

<sup>1</sup>Wilhelm Bousset, *Die Offenbarung Johannis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1906), 120, translation mine.

the cult.<sup>2</sup> Although these games were a peripheral addition to the traditional Greek cult ritual in Asia Minor, they were strongly Roman and unabashedly violent. Revelation's imagery, on the other hand, appears to envision a far more subtle subversion.

By way of first impressions, the mismatch between Revelation's symbols and imperial realities suggests that the Emperor Nero and the Roman Empire do not adequately express the character and program of the opposing side in the cosmic conflict that is depicted in the book. Indeed, the "imperial" view severely constricts the message of Revelation because it is insufficiently attentive to the influence of the biblical narrative on its story line. Even though the context of the Roman Empire remains important, the Roman focus should not be seen as the ultimate concern. With the aim of clarifying this point, recognizing the dominance of Nero and the Roman Empire in interpretations of Rev 13, this overview takes a look at attenuating features with respect to the Roman application.

#### *Revelation and the "Imperial" View*

The "imperial" view holds that the beast from the sea is the Roman Empire, particularly in its manifestation under the Emperor Nero and in the myth of Nero's return after his suicide (13:1-10).<sup>3</sup> The lamb-like beast from the earth is thought to represent the imperial cult in Asia Minor (13:11-18).<sup>4</sup> As hard evidence for this hypothesis, the mysterious number 666 is said to clinch the role of the Emperor Nero because the number 666, rightly deciphered in Hebrew lettering, is a coded number meaning *Neron kaisar* (13:18).<sup>5</sup>

Challenges to this view have been voiced with considerable persuasiveness,<sup>6</sup> so much so that defenders of the most widely held interpretation have begun

<sup>2</sup>S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 89.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Bousset, 360-362. William Barclay provides a representative and easily accessible presentation of this view ("Great Themes of the New Testament: Revelation xiii," *ExpT* 70 [1959], 260-264).

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Bousset, 365-366. Notable historical studies with respect to the scaffolding of this view are Lily Ross Taylor, "The Asiarchs," in *The Beginnings of Christianity*, vol. 5, ed. Kirsopp Lake and Henry J. Cadbury (London: Macmillan, 1933), 256-262; Price, *Rituals and Power*; idem, "Between Man and God: Sacrifice in the Roman Imperial Cult," *JRS* 70 (1980): 28-43; idem, "God and the Emperors: The Greek Language of the Roman Imperial Cult," *JHS* 104 (1984), 79-95; G. H. R. Horsley, "The Inscriptions of Ephesos and the New Testament," *NovT* 34 (1992), 105-168; J. Nelson Kraybill, *Imperial Cult and Commerce in John's Apocalypse*, JSNTSup 132 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996); Steven Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 5-131.

<sup>5</sup>Richard J. Bauckham admits of no ambiguity on this point: "The gematria does not merely assert that Nero is the beast: it demonstrates that he is" (*The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993], 389).

<sup>6</sup>Scholars who take issue with the "Roman" view are Ernest Lohmeyer, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, 2d ed., HNT 16 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1953), 110-119; Paul S. Minear, "The Wounded Beast," *JBL* 72 (1953): 93-101; idem, *I Saw a New Earth* (Washington: Corpus

to wonder aloud about its continued viability.<sup>7</sup> Interpretations that are less fixated on Nero—but no less anchored in historical realities contemporary to the author—suggest that the project of deciphering Revelation’s imagery is not completed even though abandoning Nero in favor of some other Roman emperor runs the risk of casting doubt on basic tenets in this interpretative approach.<sup>8</sup> Gerhard Maier’s comprehensive review of the history of the interpretation of Revelation, owing no debt to Bousset, concludes that “the contemporary historical (*zeitgeschichtliche*) interpretation has not brought more to the explication of the Apocalypse than to make available some background material from the time of its composition.”<sup>9</sup> Undeterred by Bousset’s confidence in the link between Revelation and Nero, Maier asserts that “the [myth of] *Nero redivivus* is anything but a *rocher de bronze* for interpretation; it is only a hypothesis, and a fairly clumsy one at that.”<sup>10</sup> Among substantive concerns that call the viability of the Nero hypothesis into question are (1) the absence of Nero in the earliest known interpretations of Revelation; (2) textual evaluations that are prejudicial to the theme of cosmic conflict; (3) the impact of the symbolic world of the first half of Revelation on the second half of the book; (4) the priority and ramifications of Revelation’s own terms; (5) the relationship of Rev 13 to the Synoptic Apocalypse; and (6) the slaughtered Lamb as the revealer of the divine character and government. Each of these concerns will be addressed in the following.

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Books, 1968), 118-119; R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. John’s Revelation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1963), 388-417; Mathias Rissi, *Time and History*, trans. Gordon C. Winsor (Richmond: John Knox, 1966), 65-70; Robert Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 253-265; James L. Resseguie, *Revelation Unsealed: A Narrative Critical Approach to John’s Apocalypse* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 56-57; David Barr, *Tales of the End: A Narrative Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge, 1998), 102-128; G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 686-691; Rick van de Water, “Reconsidering the Beast from the Sea,” *NTS* 46 (2000): 245-261. J. P. M. Sweet concedes legitimacy to the contemporary historical view but feels obliged to ask the question, “But is not this too trivial?” (*Revelation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979), 207-208).

<sup>7</sup>Hans-Josef Klauck, “Do They Never Come Back? *Nero Redivivus* and the Apocalypse of John,” *CBQ* 63 (2001): 683-698. The author, reviewing the traditional arguments in favor of the *Nero redivivus* hypothesis, lays his expressed concern to rest by predicting a healthy future for this interpretation.

<sup>8</sup>J. Neville Birdsall explores textual evidence that the number in Revelation originally was 616 and that the original historical referent was Caligula (“Irenaeus and the Number of the Beast: Revelation 13,18,” in *New Testament Textual Criticism and Exegesis. Festschrift J. Delobel* [ed. A. Denaux; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2002], 349-359). Josef Schmidt sees the Emperor Claudius as the imperial figure behind the number 666, retaining Nero in the picture as the second beast in Revelation (13:11) (“Die Rätselzahl 666 in Offb 13:18: Ein Lösungsversuch auf der Basis lateinischer Gematrie,” *NovT* 46 [2002], 35-54). Conjectural elements abound in both proposals.

<sup>9</sup>Gerhard Maier, *Die Johannesoffenbarung und die Kirche*, WUNT 25 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1981), 622.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 622. The present study finds itself in broad agreement with Maier’s conclusions (619-624).

### 1. The Absence of Nero in Early Interpretations of Revelation

While Nero and the Roman Empire still dominate the interpretation of Rev 13,<sup>11</sup> this model is not the oldest interpretation or the only one known. Maier begins his history of the interpretation of Revelation with fragments of the writings of Papias, preserved by Irenaeus and Eusebius, of which Irenaeus's work is the oldest.<sup>12</sup> While Irenaeus's indebtedness to Papias is acknowledged and is not in doubt,<sup>13</sup> Maier presents evidence that Papias's reputation as a chiliast is exaggerated and one-sided, thus enhancing Papias as a valued source. Most important, however, is that Nero and the Roman Empire are conspicuously absent in these early interpretations.<sup>14</sup>

Henry Barclay Swete finds the earliest mention of the Nero legend in connection with Revelation in the Latin commentary of Victorinus of Pettau, who died a martyr during Diocletian's great persecution.<sup>15</sup> Nero is unequivocally the historical referent for the wounded head in Rev 13:3 in the latest reconstruction of Victorinus's commentary,<sup>16</sup> but important caveats remain. As Johannes Haussleiter has shown, there are doubts concerning the recensions and the authenticity of Victorinus's commentary, notably a host of later interpolations attributed to Jerome.<sup>17</sup> Dating the first appearance of the Nero myth in interpretations of Revelation is therefore tenuous. What is certain at this point is that Nero is absent in the earliest available sources and that the first known interpretation to this effect must be dated no earlier than 300 C.E. and perhaps later than 400 C.E.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Bousset's view is maintained with minor variations, though with less rhetorical flourish, by a host of interpreters; cf. Henry Barclay Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John*, 3d ed. (London: Macmillan, 1908), 163-164; I. T. Beckwith, *The Apocalypse of John* (New York: Macmillan, 1919), 635-637; R. H. Charles, *The Revelation of St. John*, 2 vols., ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1920), 1:332-333; G. B. Caird, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 2d printing (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 164; Jürgen Roloff, *The Revelation of John*, trans. John E. Alsup (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 153-168; A. J. P. Garrow, *Revelation* (London: Routledge, 1997), 118-125; Bauckham, 384-452; Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 176-184; David E. Aune, *Revelation*, 3 vols., WBC 52 (Nashville: Nelson, 1996-1998), 2: 729.

<sup>12</sup>Maier, *Johannesoffenbarung*, 1, 41-44; cf. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* V.33.3.

<sup>13</sup>*Against Heresies* 5.33.4.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 5.25.1-30.4.

<sup>15</sup>Swete, 164.

<sup>16</sup>Victorinus, *Victorin de Poetorio sur l'Apocalypse*, trans. M. Dulaey, Sources chrétiennes 423 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1997), 106-107.

<sup>17</sup>Johannes Haussleiter, "Die Kommentare des Victorinus, Tichonius und Hieronymus zur Apokalypse," *ZKWL* 7 (1886): 239-257.

<sup>18</sup>Francis X. Gumerlock argues for early patristic support for the Nero hypothesis, but stops short of claiming that it is found in the *earliest* sources. His evidence from the *Liber genealogus* has 616 as the number in Rev 13:18, not 666, and the calculation is quite different ("Nero Antichrist: Patristic Evidence for the Use of Nero's Naming in Calculating the Number of the Beast [REV 13:18]," *WTJ* 68 [2006], 347-360). Gumerlock's suggestion that Irenaeus knew of the Nero

The absence of the myth of Nero's return in the earliest available material is all the more remarkable because the reference is attributable to a well-placed source, Irenaeus of Lyons, and particularly because Irenaeus struggles to find the meaning of the number 666 (13:18).<sup>19</sup> Even though little is known about him, Irenaeus has the essential biographical prerequisites to be a valued source for the view that reads Revelation as an allegory referring to Nero. Irenaeus established his reputation as the bishop of Lyons in France, but his birth place was Smyrna, one of the seven cities of Revelation.<sup>20</sup> It is likely that he was born no later than 140 C.E.,<sup>21</sup> not remote in time from the historical setting of Revelation and early enough for him to make the claim that Revelation "was seen not long ago but nearly in our generation, toward the end of the reign of Domitian."<sup>22</sup> According to Eusebius, Irenaeus had seen Polycarp in person as a young man,<sup>23</sup> and his commitment to the defense of orthodox doctrine is an additional reason to regard him as a significant source.

But the myth of Nero's return is absent from Irenaeus's horizon.<sup>24</sup> It does not occur to him that Nero at least ought to be one of the options for the meaning of the number 666 when he tests several suggestions of his own.<sup>25</sup> Gregory K. Beale rightly makes this omission one of his main arguments for questioning the Nero hypothesis, pointing out that "such a lack of consideration is striking since Nero's infamous reputation as a persecuting tyrant would still have been well known."<sup>26</sup> The reality and long-lasting viability of the myth of Nero's return is well attested in the *Sibylline Oracles*,<sup>27</sup> billed as "the missing link" and the bridge to the alleged appearance of the myth in Revelation.<sup>28</sup> If Book 5 of the *Sibylline Oracles* dates to the reign of

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identification cannot be substantiated.

<sup>19</sup>*Against Heresies* 5.30.1.

<sup>20</sup>Robert M. Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons, The Early Church Fathers* (London: Routledge, 1997), 2.

<sup>21</sup>W. H. C. Frend suggests the period of 130-200 C.E. as the best approximation for Irenaeus's lifetime (*The Rise of Christianity* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984], 244).

<sup>22</sup>*Against Heresies* 5.30.3.

<sup>23</sup>Grant, 2.

<sup>24</sup>Gumerlock's claim, 357-359, on behalf of an Irenaeus connection is speculative and not persuasive. Even if Irenaeus knew of the Nero hypothesis, which remains unlikely, Irenaeus's omission of the allegedly known alternative might be even more significant than the more likely scenario that he did not know.

<sup>25</sup>*Against Heresies* 5.30.3.

<sup>26</sup>Beale, 20. Beale, 719-721, offers a number of additional reasons for questioning the identification with Nero.

<sup>27</sup>*Sibylline Oracles*, trans. John J. Collins, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth, 2 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 1.317-472. The most relevant passages are 4.119-124, 137-139; 5.28-34, 93-110, 137-161, 214-228, 361-380; 8.40-74, 139-159; 12.78-93.

<sup>28</sup>Klauck, 683-698.

Hadrian (117-138) and Book 8 to the reign of Marcus Aurelius (161-180),<sup>29</sup> the references to the myth of Nero's return in these oracles demonstrate that it was still exercising minds well into the lifetime of Irenaeus.

Irenaeus's ignorance of, or indifference to, Nero and the myth of his return means that the one living closest to the historical realities said to be depicted in Revelation cannot discern what those standing far away claim to see with perfect clarity. From the point of view of later interpretations Irenaeus's shortcomings on this point make the Nero hypothesis a particularly daring example of what Frank Kermode with self-deprecating irony calls "the interpretative inadequacy of our predecessors."<sup>30</sup> In the eyes of posterity, Irenaeus's shortcoming must be that he did not understand and not that he forgot, although it also means that he failed to grasp the interpretation that believers living in his native territory of Asia Minor one generation earlier supposedly had taken for granted. Kermode, again, in another tongue-in-cheek comment on the alleged superiority of later interpretations, says with respect to interpretations of the Gospel of Mark that "[w]e shall become accustomed to the notion that the first person to misunderstand the content of Mark was the man who wrote it; and that eighteen centuries of interpretation intervened between the first writing down of the parables and the advent of interpreters who knew how to read them."<sup>31</sup> Irenaeus's apparent failure with respect to Nero and the number 666 suggests an analogous situation.

To Irenaeus, the horizon of Revelation and the number 666 does not lie in the past, but in the future. He has little confidence in those who immerse themselves in the subject, certain of their calculations, "and define the name they find as that of *him who is to come*."<sup>32</sup> When Irenaeus proposes that "the name Titan has enough persuasiveness and probability for us to conclude out of many names that it could well be *the man who is to come*,"<sup>33</sup> he is as tentative as he is careful to refer to a future yet unknown. "And another danger, no slight one, will ensue for those who have falsely imagined they know the name of the Antichrist," Irenaeus warns, "if they posit one name and he comes up with another, they will be easily seduced by him, as if the one they should fear were not yet present."<sup>34</sup> Aside from the fact that the myth of Nero's return seems to be absent from Irenaeus's interpretative options, his caution to interpreters has virtually fallen on deaf ears.

<sup>29</sup>Larry Kreitzer, "Hadrian and the Nero *Redivivus* Myth," *ZNW* 79 (1988): 92-115. Significantly, Book 8.65-74 predicts the return of Nero during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, who died in 180 C.E. (cf. Collins, *Sibylline Oracles*, 416).

<sup>30</sup>Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 17.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>32</sup>*Against Heresies* 5.30.1; translation from Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 176-177.

<sup>33</sup>*Against Heresies* 5.30.3.

<sup>34</sup>*Against Heresies* 5.30.1.

Finding the Nero hypothesis unconvincing, Ernest Lohmeyer sets the number 666 against an eschatological horizon.<sup>35</sup> R. C. H. Lenski sees it as a *human number* symbolic of fatally defective qualities.<sup>36</sup> Paul S. Minear simply warns that many interpretations of the number 666 have a limiting and distorting effect.<sup>37</sup> Robert S. Mounce is legitimately skeptical of a solution that “asks us to calculate a Hebrew transliteration of the Greek form of a Latin name, and that with a defective spelling.”<sup>38</sup> Safeguarding the concerns of the narrative reader, James L. Resseguie argues that Nero falls short of Revelation’s plot and symbolism.<sup>39</sup> To David Barr, the number 666 suggests an imitative multiple of the perfect number seven, signifying something that is “incomplete and imperfect.”<sup>40</sup> These views are less disparate than they might seem, with the suggestion that an eschatological horizon is in view, supported by the witness of Irenaeus long ago and by Lohmeyer in more recent times.

## 2. Textual Features

Scholarly consensus regarding the composition of Revelation has come a long way since the radical hypotheses of source critics during the nineteenth century. For instance, in 1882, the German scholar Daniel Völter argued that the main body of Revelation was composed of a *Grundschrift* consisting of nine distinct sections that he attributed to John Mark and of a secondary source consisting of eight sections composed by Cerinthus.<sup>41</sup> Völter claimed to find evidence for the handiwork of a first redactor working during the reign of Trajan (99-117 C.E.), and again of a second redactor during the reign of Hadrian (117-138 C.E.). The pretense of precision for such an elaborate scenario seems staggering by contemporary standards. Specifically, Völter saw Rev 14:6-7 as the work of John Mark. Revelation 14:9-12 was attributed to a redactor who worked during the reign of Trajan, and a second redactor added v. 13 during the reign of Hadrian.<sup>42</sup> The plausibility of this reconstruction was grounded in a contemporary historical (*zeitgeschichtlich*) view of Revelation’s composition and interpretation, each section reflecting events assumed to correspond to the textual fragment in question.

The unity of Revelation that was long denied is now taken for granted by most scholars, even though the assumption of unity represents a major shift

<sup>35</sup>Lohmeyer, 119.

<sup>36</sup>Lenski, 411-417.

<sup>37</sup>Minear, *I Saw a New Earth*, 123.

<sup>38</sup>Mounce, 264-265.

<sup>39</sup>Resseguie, 56.

<sup>40</sup>Barr, 128.

<sup>41</sup>Völter’s work was appropriately entitled *Die Entstehung der Apokalypse* (Freiburg, 1882); my source for his work is Bousset, 109-110.

<sup>42</sup>Cf. Bousset, 110.

in scholarly opinion concerning the origin and composition of the book.<sup>43</sup> Taking stock of discarded critical opinion, Richard Bauckham states that “the source-critics of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, who divided Revelation into a number of disparate sources incompetently combined by an editor, could do so only by crass failure to appreciate the specific literary integrity of the work as it stands.”<sup>44</sup> In striking contrast to these excesses, he suggests that “the more Revelation is studied in detail, the more clear it becomes that it is not simply a literary unit, but actually one of the most unified works in the New Testament.”<sup>45</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has reached the same conclusion. In her view, “the unitary structure of Rev. does not result from a final redactor’s arbitrary compilation but from the author’s theological conception and literary composition.”<sup>46</sup>

Theories with respect to redaction nevertheless persist, some of which are pertinent to the present inquiry. David Aune singles out three statements in Rev 13 as redactional,<sup>47</sup> choosing precisely the elements in the current text that suggest John’s primary concern to be the cosmic conflict and its instigator rather than the Roman Empire. John makes the transition to the vision of this chapter by noting that “[the dragon] took his stand on the sand of the seashore” (12:18). As the beast from the sea enters the picture, saturated with allusions to Daniel’s vision of the four world empires (Dan 7:1-7), the text states that “*the dragon* gave it his power and his throne and great authority” (13:2b). The surrogate function of the beast from the sea is evident in the disclosure that people’s fascination with the designated stand-in actually reflects devotion to the power that stands behind it. “They worshiped *the dragon*, for he had given his authority to the beast” (13:4a). Again, when the second beast emerges from the earth, the role of the dragon persists in the foreground. Revelation says of this beast that “it had two horns like a lamb and it spoke *like a dragon*” (13:11). Beginning with the introductory verse picturing the dragon on the seashore (12:18), this sequence has four references to the dragon and its role (12:18; 13:2b; 13:4a; 13:11b), all of which indicate that the dragon is a leading character in the unfolding drama and that the theme of cosmic conflict remains the determinant of the plot.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>43</sup>Aune retains a vestige of multiple sources in Revelation, scaling it back to a hypothetical first and second edition, but even this vestige lacks persuasive power, especially the claim that the hypothetical first edition “may well have been anonymous, perhaps even pseudonymous.” The putative “First Edition” is suggested to comprise Rev 1:7-12 and 4:1-22:5, the rest being the “Second Edition” (*Revelation 1-5*, cxx).

<sup>44</sup>Bauckham, x.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>46</sup>Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 159.

<sup>47</sup>Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 725-726; cf. also Charles, *Revelation*, 1:358.

<sup>48</sup>Aune notes that there are eight references to the dragon in Rev 12:1-17 (*Revelation 6-16*, 725-726). His claim that each mention of the dragon in Rev 13 is redactional sets up a contrast between chapters 12 and 13 that fails to convince. By qualitative as much as by quantitative criteria the dragon assumes undiminished significance in Rev 13.



Needless to say, the parameters for the narrative are significantly altered by the supposition that all the references to the dragon in this sequence are redactional,<sup>49</sup> with the implication that they are subservient elements and may be dispensable with respect to the plot in Rev 13. In addition to being wholly gratuitous in the light of the textual evidence, the assertion that “the dragon was not originally part of the two visions in 13:1-10 and 13:11-18” prejudices the theme of cosmic conflict in this section,<sup>50</sup> inviting the historical foreground of the Roman Empire to eclipse the biblical narrative as the subtext of the plot.<sup>51</sup>

A similar weakening of the cosmic-conflict theme results from construals of the *edóthe* language in Rev 13. John says of the beast rising from the sea that “it was allowed to (ἐδόθη αὐτῷ) make war on the saints and to conquer them” and that “it was given (ἐδόθη αὐτῷ) authority over every tribe and people and language and nation” (13:7). Here the dynamic translation of the NRSV attenuates slightly the repeated and carefully paired wording that on the one hand describes the activity of this power and, on the other hand, circumscribes the sphere of its operation, retaining, however, the permissive connotation of *edóthe*. The point here is that in both instances, a permissive meaning should be favored over reading *edóthe* as a simple and univalent circumlocution of divine activity.<sup>52</sup> This gives the translation “and it was allowed . . . and it was allowed” (13:7). In the case of the beast rising from the sea, it is decidedly not God who makes “war on the saints” (13:7); God is not the acting subject because such a reading makes mockery of the conflict in which the parties are embroiled.<sup>53</sup> It is the opposing side that thus afflicts the believers, and in this context *edóthe* denotes the freedom that is granted to the opposing side to show its true colors.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>49</sup>Ibid.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid.

<sup>51</sup>When the binding and release of Satan in Rev 20 force the interpreter to deal with him as a character in his own right, the bafflement of interpreters merely computes the consequences of failing to take his character seriously throughout the book. Since interpretations have banished him to an inferior role in the narrative, if not excised him altogether, there is little that can be brought to the unexpected complexity of Satan’s final demise (20:1-10); cf. Sigve Tonstad, *Saving God’s Reputation: The Theological Function of Pistis Iesou in the Cosmic Narratives of Revelation*, LNTS 337 (New York: T. & T. Clark, 2006), 41-54.

<sup>52</sup>Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, 743.

<sup>53</sup>Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati struggles to make the *edóthe*-constructions in 13:5-7 conform to the notion of *passiva divina* when in fact they are more appropriately, albeit shockingly, read as *passiva diabolica* (“Between Fascination and Destruction: Considerations of the Power of the Beast in Rev 13:1-10” in *Zwischen den Reichen: Neues Testament und Römische Herrschaft*, ed. Michael Labahn and Jürgen Zangenberg [Tübingen: Francke Verlag, 2002], 231). John ascribes agency to the opposing side in the conflict almost on the level of divine agency; thus, “the dragon . . . had given (*édoken*) his authority to the beast” (13:4), corresponding to the subsequent “the beast was given (*edóthe*) a mouth” (13:5) and “it was given (*edóthe*) to it to make war” (13:7). In these verses even the permissive connotation of *edóthe* falls short, serving instead as circumlocution for demonic agency.

<sup>54</sup>Cf. Matthew Black, “Some Greek Words with ‘Hebrew’ Meanings in the Epistles and the Apocalypse,” in *Biblical Studies. Essays in Honour of William Barclay*, ed. R. McKay Johnston and James F. Miller (London: Collins, 1976), 145-146; Steven Thompson, *The Apocalypse and Semitic Syntax*, SNTMS 52 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 14.

The activity of the beast from the earth is likewise portrayed in the *edóthe* language that dominates descriptions of the opposing side throughout Revelation (13:11-18). This beast deceives those who dwell on the earth “by the signs that it is allowed to perform on behalf of the beast” (13:14). In fact, the beast appears to take the art of deception to an unprecedented level because “it was allowed to give breath to the image of the beast so that the image of the beast could even speak” (13:15). Reading this as mere circumlocution of divine activity, a contraction of agency that NRSV studiously and correctly avoids, plays down the reality of the opposing side and, more seriously, robs the opposing side of intentionality. Barr, sensitive to the narrative parameters, notes that “one of the most shocking things about this third story is that God is no longer the main actor. The dragon acts and God reacts. . . . [T]he only active verbs are those connected with the dragon. This is the dragon’s story.”<sup>55</sup> Moreover, this view dilutes the most significant explanatory element in the narrative, the reality of the cosmic conflict, a flaw that becomes particularly acute when the allusive horizon of the OT also recedes into the background.

It is therefore warranted to ask whether the beast from the earth really finds its true fulfillment in the imperial cult, as several interpreters argue in detail.<sup>56</sup> Are the “great signs” (σημεία μεγάλα) attributed to its activity merely examples of well-known “staged cultic wonders” in the form of moving statues and “lightning and amazing fire signs,” as Steven J. Scherrer suggests?<sup>57</sup> Is it really plausible that the historical sources documenting the gadgetry of the cult ceremonial, themselves never in doubt that it represented trickery, in this respect exceed John, who thought it was real?<sup>58</sup> Does John, whose overriding concern is to help the reader distinguish the true from the false, actually prove himself inferior to the pagan sources describing the same phenomena by falling victim not only to one but to two superstitions? Unlike Lucian, who does not believe in Satan and who understands that the signs and wonders of the cult are produced by means of mechanical manipulation, John naively holds to the false notion that the signs are real and that a supernatural agent is at work.<sup>59</sup>

The textual features identified above not only argue against unwarranted views of redaction, but also testify to the importance of the theme of cosmic

<sup>55</sup>Barr, 102.

<sup>56</sup>Steven J. Scherrer, “Signs and Wonders in the Imperial Cult: A New Look at A Roman Religious Institution in the Light of Rev 13:13-15,” *JBL* 103 (1984): 599-610; Price, 197; Kraybill, 26.

<sup>57</sup>Scherrer, 600-601.

<sup>58</sup>Scherrer, 601-602, with Lucian as his source, describes a “talking” god, the miracle made possible by connecting cranes’ windpipes together and passing them through the head of the statue, the voice supplied from outside. The difference between Lucian and Revelation, notes Scherrer, “is that Lucian rationalized his account, telling us it was all mere trickery, whereas John apparently believes that the wonders are real but that Satan is behind them.”

<sup>59</sup>Scherrer, 602, assumes a high degree of naiveté on the part of John and his fellow believers, adding a telling exclamation mark on this particular point: “We see in such texts that there seems to have been a general readiness on the part of many people to believe that certain statues under certain conditions could speak!”

conflict in Revelation. The text clings tenaciously to the OT as the source of its imagery, a possibility that proponents of the “Roman” view also grant, but fail to integrate.<sup>60</sup> In sum, these passages appear to seek a referent that is more subtle than Nero and more sophisticated than the contrivances of the imperial cult.

### 3. The Influence of the First Half of Revelation

The first half of Revelation sets thematic parameters that make it possible to attribute Irenaeus’s view to something other than amnesia, ignorance, or the “interpretative inadequacy” of an ancient source. The crisis addressed in the heavenly council in Revelation introduces a plot that is conceived in primordial and cosmic terms (5:1-4). This plot does not lead effortlessly to the myth of Nero’s return. In this respect, Irenaeus’s reading transmits on the same wavelength as that of the modern narrative reader. Both allow the text to exert a controlling influence on interpretation, and both perceive a story line and a plot that aim to portray the conflict between good and evil in ultimate terms. Neither Irenaeus nor the critical narrative reader finds the historical realities of the Roman Empire or the myth of Nero’s return to be a sufficient match for the symbolic world of Revelation. In the view of these readers the definitive horizon of Revelation’s vision lies beyond the contemporary historical scene because the expectation created by the text does not find enough in the contemporary situation to reflect adequately the parameters set by the textual narrative. It is on the strength of the textual trajectory and its expectation that Resseguie asks the damning question, “In what way is Nero the consummate opponent of Christ?”<sup>61</sup>

The question posed in the heavenly council (5:2), the ensuing suspense (5:3), and the tears of the Seer (5:4) in the first half of Revelation represent an instance of introspection that breaks the apocalyptic stereotype: it is a scene that has “background.”<sup>62</sup> Adela Yarbro Collins captures the apprehension when she writes that “the first four verses of chapter 5 imply that the heavenly council is faced with a serious problem.”<sup>63</sup> But the meaning of this scene does not lie fully exposed in the foreground or on the surface of the text, and the speech to which the reader is privy is not only a vehicle to externalize thoughts. As in Erich Auerbach’s keen reading of the Genesis account of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac, here, too, speech “serves to indicate thoughts which remain unexpressed.”<sup>64</sup> The search for an earthly corollary to the heavenly scene remains elusive. Specifically, the claims of the Roman Empire

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., 600, 604.

<sup>61</sup>Resseguie, 56.

<sup>62</sup>“Background” must be understood figuratively along the lines of Erich Auerbach’s reading of biblical narrative, referring to elements of depth that loom large in the narrative, but which are not expressed (*Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953], 7-12).

<sup>63</sup>Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Apocalypse*, NTM 22 (Dublin: Veritas, 1979), 39.

<sup>64</sup>Auerbach, 9.

and the myth of Nero's return do not rise to the level of the concern that is addressed before the heavenly council in the first half of Revelation.

On the contrary, the scene in the heavenly council appears "self-contained" and reflective of a concern known to itself and its immediate participants. This does not mean that it has no relation to history, but it signifies that what transpires in the heavenly council transcends the concern of the moment. The determinant of the narrative does not arise only in the concrete historical situation contemporary to John, framing a plot conceived in terms of the earthly situation. Even if "background" is reduced to questions of historical and biographical detail and not, as in Auerbach's use of the term, to thoughts and sentiments that remain unexpressed, the Roman Empire does not provide sufficient historical "background" to elicit a tremor large enough to cause the kind of alarm that is evident in the heavenly council. Instead, as argued more extensively elsewhere,<sup>65</sup> the issue before the heavenly council is grounded in a background that begins with the war in heaven (12:7-9), in the "biography" of the fallen "Shining One" (Isa 14:12-20), in the smear-campaign of the fallen opponent (Rev 12:9; 20:2),<sup>66</sup> and, above all, in the means adopted to make right what went wrong (Rev 5:6). Yarbrow Collins points the way, writing that "[i]n the context of the Apocalypse as a whole it is clear that the problem facing the heavenly council is the rebellion of Satan which is paralleled by rebellion on earth."<sup>67</sup>

Little is left of the influence of the scene in the heavenly council when the myth of Nero's return achieves the status of the climactic event in the cosmic conflict (13:3), or when the beast that looks like a lamb but speaks like a dragon is held to be the imperial cult (13:11). While this application is questionable on the terms of the symbols said to represent these candidates, it tends to trivialize the plot suggested by the scene in the heavenly council and to attenuate its own immediate grounding in the theme of cosmic conflict in Rev 12 (12:7-9).<sup>68</sup> If the head that "seemed to have received a death-blow, but its mortal wound had been healed" (13:3) reflects the myth of Nero's return, it takes as its fulfillment a phenomenon that can only relate to its counterpoint—the Lamb that looked "as if it had been slaughtered" (5:6)—on the level of parody.<sup>69</sup> This application preempts the possibility that the adversary in the cosmic conflict wages war not only by appearing as a parody of the truth but also by appropriating the hallmarks of Christ, producing a compelling counterfeit to "the faithful and true witness" of Jesus (3:14). In fact, the role attributed to the myth of Nero's return sets a standard for what the opponent in the cosmic conflict is capable of doing that falls short of the opponent's actual capacity. Revelation is reduced to a caricature of its own

<sup>65</sup>Tonstad, 124-143.

<sup>66</sup>The Greek *diabolos* is well translated as "the mudslinger" and is also a faithful representation of his character.

<sup>67</sup>Yarbrow Collins, *Apocalypse*, 39.

<sup>68</sup>Thus the question posed by Sweet, 207-208, "But is not this too trivial?"

<sup>69</sup>Cf. Caird, 164; Roloff, 155; Bauckham, 451.

message if interpretations stop short of envisioning fulfillment that is capable of appropriating the external ramifications of the death and resurrection of Jesus as constituent elements of itself.<sup>70</sup> Irenaeus's early reading derives from the latter perception and must be appreciated in this light. His outlook attributes "background" to the subject matter at hand, exemplifying a cautious approach to the symbols of Revelation. These symbols deserve a closer look on their own terms.

#### 4. The Priority of Revelation's Own Terms

The terms that most deserve to be examined relate to the description of the two beasts called upon to promote the dragon's program. Revelation says of the beast rising out of the sea that "one of its heads seemed to have received a death-blow, but its mortal wound had been healed" (13:3). The healing makes for stunning public relations: "in amazement the whole earth followed the beast" (13:3). Even though this verse is probably the strongest piece of evidence to those who see the myth of Nero's return in Revelation, it has a number of features that call the Nero interpretation into question.

First, as noted above, the language used to describe the mortal wound of the beast is identical to the most revealing and forceful portrayal of Jesus in all of Revelation. Just as Jesus appears as "a Lamb . . . as if it had been slaughtered" (ἀρνίον . . . ὡς ἐσφαγμένον, 5:6), one of the heads of the beast is represented "as if slaughtered unto death" (ὡς ἐσφαγμένην εἰς θάνατον, 13:3).<sup>71</sup> To Mathias Rissi, this parallel is best appreciated "in the context of the 'imitation motifs' within the Antichrist theme" rather than as a parody of Nero's suicide.<sup>72</sup>

Second, *sphazein*, the verbal element (13:3), is hardly the term one would use to describe a self-inflicted wound or a suicide because the word specifically

<sup>70</sup>History will not be at a loss to find examples where constellations of power pose not as a parody of Christ, but as his committed representatives. Michael Sells documents the role of the Orthodox Church as a source of inspiration to those who carried out the genocide in Bosnia (*The Bridge Betrayed: Religion and Genocide in Bosnia* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996], 81-82). On Orthodox Easter, 1993, Metropolitan Nikola, the highest-ranking Serb Orthodox Church official in Bosnia, spoke glowingly of the leadership of Radovan Karadzic and General Ratko Mladic as an example of "following the hard road of Christ." Richard Bauckham, conscious of the risk of reading Revelation merely as parody and wishing to extend the message beyond the application he takes as primary, sees it as "one of the deepest ironies of Christian history that, when the Roman Empire became nominally Christian under the power of the Christian emperors, Christianity came to function not so very differently from the state religion which Revelation portrays as Rome's idolatrous self-deification" (*The Theology of the Book of Revelation* [NTT; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993], 44).

<sup>71</sup>Translating ὡς ἐσφαγμένον that is common to Rev 5:6 and 13:3, NRSV has "as if it had been slaughtered" for 5:6 and "seemed to have received a death-blow" for 13:3; NKJV has "as though it had been slain" (5:6) and "as if it had been mortally wounded" (13:3); the NIV has "as if it had been slain" (5:6) and "seemed to have had a fatal wound" (13:3); the NASB preserves the same wording in English for the Greek term that is common to both verses, "as if slain" (5:6) and "as if it had been slain" (13:3).

<sup>72</sup>Rissi, 66.

connotes violence inflicted from without.<sup>73</sup> Nero, the murderer of his mother and of at least two of his wives and the perpetrator of unspeakable sexual crimes, approached his death at his own hand with all the fear and panic that his ungallant self-absorption was able to muster.<sup>74</sup> Rissi, again, sees in Revelation's language a term used that "simply forbids thinking of Nero's suicide, but rather a blow from an enemy's hand."<sup>75</sup> Here, too, the imitative aspiration of the beast from the sea, in Revelation's depiction, seems paramount.

Third, the fact that this beast is referred to repeatedly "as slain" points to a crucial constituent of its identity.<sup>76</sup> Just as the identity of the Lamb is inseparably linked to the fact of being slain (5:6, 9, 12; 13:8), so it is with the character of the beast from the sea (13:3, 12, 14). Fourth, even more than the *wound* is a constituent of the identity of the beast, it is the *healing* of the wound that is the source of the beast's amazing resurgence.

its mortal wound *had been healed* (13:3)  
 whose mortal wound *had been healed* (13:12)  
 that had been wounded by the sword and yet came back to life (13:14)<sup>77</sup>

As Minear points out, the emphasis on the impact of the healing of the wound makes the Nero hypothesis particularly vulnerable (13:3).

Now there is little evidence that the rumored resuscitation of Nero actually had any such effects. It did not induce either Roman citizens or Christians "to follow the beast with wonder." It did not enhance the seductive worship of the dragon, nor did it aid the dragon in his deadly war against the saints. In fact, the legend of Nero's pending return from Parthia was considered a threat to the empire and the line of emperors. If we are to understand the wounded head, therefore, we should look not so much for an emperor who died a violent death, but for an event in which the authority of the beast (and the dragon) was both destroyed and deceptively restored.<sup>78</sup>

The emergence of the second beast (13:11) raises additional problems with respect to the myth of Nero's return. If the first beast encroaches on the death and resurrection of the Lamb, the second beast, having "two horns like a lamb" (13:11), appropriates the most favored designation of Jesus in

<sup>73</sup>Loren L. Johns, "The Lamb in the Rhetorical Program of the Apocalypse of John," *SBL Seminar Papers* 37 (1998), 2:780.

<sup>74</sup>Edward Champlin, *Nero* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 1-6.

<sup>75</sup>Rissi, 66.

<sup>76</sup>Three times the reader is reminded of the fatal wound (13:3, 12, 14). Minear notes that although the wound is first assigned to one of the heads of the beast, a limitation that makes the Nero application more plausible, "it is later assigned twice to the beast itself (13:12, 14)" ("The Wounded Beast," 96), a more difficult proposition for the Nero hypothesis. Beale, 689, shows that, as with Christ's death and resurrection, the beast's recovery does not "nullify the very real deathblow."

<sup>77</sup>Translation mine; the force of *ζῆλον* in this verse is best seen as "to live again" rather than "to live" in the meaning of surviving; cf. also Rev 20:4-5, where *ζῆλον* is used of returning to life after death.

<sup>78</sup>Minear, "The Wounded Beast," 97.

Revelation, a lamb (ἀρνίον).<sup>79</sup> This appropriation suggests that the lamb-like beast carries out its subversion under cover of the connotation of this term and not merely as its caricature.<sup>80</sup> Aune is certainly correct that “this second beast is completely subservient to the first beast, all of the activities of the former are performed in the service of the latter; therefore, the first beast also dominates vv 12-18.”<sup>81</sup> This subservience is not only to the first beast as such, meaning the Roman Empire, but to “the first beast, *whose mortal wound had been healed*” (13:12), meaning the imperial office upon the projected return of Nero. Again, the second beast is not only concerned to make an image to the first beast as such, meaning the Roman Empire, but “an image for the beast that had been wounded by the sword *and yet lived*” (13:14), meaning the Roman Empire or the imperial office after Nero’s sensational return. If Nero is the quintessential historical referent for the first beast, Revelation’s description of the function of the second beast makes the beast from the earth entirely subservient to the myth of Nero’s return. And if the second beast represents the imperial cult, in itself a tenuous proposition, the care taken by Revelation to describe the relationship between the second beast and “the first beast, *whose mortal wound had been healed*” (13:12), strains the limit of what the historical projection of this power is able to generate.

An important characteristic of the beast coming from the earth touches on the issue that lies at the heart of the cosmic conflict to further devalue the myth of Nero’s return. John says that the beast from the earth “had two horns like a lamb and *it spoke like a dragon*” (13:11). As noted previously, whether viewed in purely creaturely terms or perceived on the terms of the biblical narrative, the dragon is identical with the serpent (12:9; 20:2), and it is justifiable to read that the lamb-like beast “*spoke like the serpent*.”<sup>82</sup> In the Genesis account of the fall, the serpent is dangerous because of what it says; its power to deceive is entirely dependent on speech (Gen 3:1-6). Revelation’s view of the serpent echoes and amplifies this characteristic, validating the contention that the foremost weapon of the opposing side in the cosmic conflict relates to what is said.

Speech is not an accidental attribute of the lamb-like beast in Revelation (13:11b). Indeed, the ability to speak and the content of the speech seem to be essential and defining characteristics and the reason why the second beast

<sup>79</sup>Traugott Holtz, *Die Christologie der Apokalypse des Johannes*, TU 85 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1962), 39. ἀρνίον refers to Jesus twenty-eight times in Revelation and is used once to designate the third member of the subversive triumvirate (13:11); cf. also Johns, 770.

<sup>80</sup>Bousset, 366, sounds less than persuasive when suggesting that John “an das Festland Kleinasiens gedacht haben,” assuming this geographical location to be the best explanation for the fact that the beast arises “from the earth.” Aune admits that “the identity of the beast from the earth is problematic,” and he points out discrepancies between the description of the lamb-like beast in Revelation and the purported fulfillment in the imperial cult (*Revelation 6–16*, 757).

<sup>81</sup>Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, 779.

<sup>82</sup>William Barclay, *The Revelation of John*, rev. ed., 2 vols. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1976), 2:98.

is also called “the false prophet” (16:13; 19:20; 20:10).<sup>83</sup> This quality on the part of the beast from the earth exemplifies and affirms that speech on the part of the opposing side is an important theme in Revelation.

The trumpet sequence in the first half of Revelation features this theme allusively in connection with the eschatological battle under the sixth trumpet. For all their frightening appearance the power of the horses ultimately belongs in the category of speech. “For the power of the horses is *in their mouths and in their tails*; their tails are like serpents, *having heads*; and with them they *inflict harm*” (9:19). In the maze of bizarre imagery describing demonic activity at its zenith, the author is straining to achieve a degree of precision with respect to the character of the opposing side. The visual impact of his imagery is so overwhelming that it threatens to eclipse the subtle auditory implication. Nevertheless, when the hyperbole of the representation is reduced to its material essence, it leaves the interpreter to ponder the faculty of speech that is implied by these symbols.

The beast from the sea shares in the attributes of the dragon and is featured as the dragon’s mirror image.<sup>84</sup> Like the dragon the beast from the sea has seven heads and ten horns (12:3; 13:1), and the scarlet color of the beast mirrors the red color of the dragon (12:3; 17:3). What is said to be a characteristic of the beast from the sea, however, must also be seen as a trait of the dragon, an attribute of the “Shining One” in his fallen state. The relationship is reciprocal even for characteristics that are not explicitly delineated with respect to one or the other. For this reason, the mouth and the faculty of speech that stand out in the description of the beast from the sea reflect the character and program of the dragon. Heinrich Schlier writes observantly that “a significant distinguishing mark of the beast is its mouth,”<sup>85</sup> and Jürgen Roloff notes that “the beast’s most important organ is his mouth.”<sup>86</sup> This assessment is readily confirmed by the text.

The beast was given a mouth uttering haughty and blasphemous words (13:5).

It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, those who dwell in heaven (13:6).

Assuming that the blasphemous character of the speech represents the illegitimate claims of the Roman Empire in general and the aspirations of the revived Nero in particular, Roloff asserts that “the blasphemous aspect of these speeches lies not in the direct slander of God but in the actual pretension of putting itself in God’s place.”<sup>87</sup> This commonly held view is

<sup>83</sup>Rissi, 67.

<sup>84</sup>Roloff, 156, writes that the beast “that rises from the deep is, to a certain extent, the dragon’s mirror image.”

<sup>85</sup>Heinrich Schlier, “Vom Antichrist: Zum 13. Kapitel der Offenbarung Johannis,” in *Theologische Aufsätze. Karl Barth zum 50. Geburtstag* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1936), 117.

<sup>86</sup>Roloff, 157.

<sup>87</sup>*Ibid.*, 157.



reflective of a contracted horizon within which the historical foreground of the Roman Empire overshadows the biblical narrative, eclipsing the full range of the blasphemy that is native to John's terms.<sup>88</sup> Instead, and critical to the message of Revelation, the mouth of the beast cannot be seen in isolation from the agency and program of the dragon. Given that "the dragon gave it his power and his throne and great authority" (13:2), the unrestricted mandate granted to the beast indicates that the latter is commissioned and equipped to fully represent the dragon. This relationship makes the mouth the most important organ of the beast because it was and is the most important organ of the serpent. What is done by the beast whose "mortal wound was healed" (13:3) becomes revelatory of the opposing side in the cosmic conflict, and the qualitative parameters of the speech have a consistent focus.

On the semantic level, the language describing the speech of the beast has a wider range than what is admitted when the scope is confined to the Roman Empire. There is far-reaching theological content to the speech because the beast blasphemes "his name and his dwelling" (13:6), suggesting an assault on God's character and government and not only an attempt to arrogate to itself prerogatives belonging to God. When the full range of the meaning of "blasphemy" (βλασφημία) is retained, the implication is to "slander, revile, defame" the other person and "to speak in a disrespectful way that demeans, denigrates, maligns" whoever is the subject matter of the speech.<sup>89</sup> If the relationship between the one "who is called the Devil and Satan" (12:9) and the beast is kept in mind, this does not come as a surprise because the attribute of slandering is the most representative characteristic of the satanic opponent. The two beasts in Rev 13 are not Satan; they are his surrogates and representatives, but their actions are representative of the character of the concealed commissioner in the same way that the slaughtered Lamb discloses the character of God. What comes out through the speech of the beasts, then, continues along the ideological trajectory established by "the ancient serpent."

On the intertextual level, the agency of "the ancient serpent" in the cosmic conflict is inseparable from, and depends on, the role of the serpent in the Genesis story of the fall (Gen 3:1-6; Rev 12:9; 20:2). In the Genesis account, the entire drama and the fateful outcome revolve around the serpent's crafty speech, the content of which can only be characterized as misrepresentation and malicious slander.<sup>90</sup> Speech is now seen to be as central to the activity of the beast in the eschatological drama in Revelation as to the serpent in the original alienation between human beings and God in the Garden of Eden.

<sup>88</sup>Schlier, 117, maintains, correctly, I believe, that the content of the speech is misrepresentation and malicious talk about God and not merely self-aggrandizement on the part of the sea beast.

<sup>89</sup>BDAG, art. βλασφημέω.

<sup>90</sup>R. W. L. Moberly provides a compelling exposition of the import of the serpent's subversive rhetoric in Genesis ("Did the Serpent Get It Right?" *JTS* 39 [1988]: 1-27).

On the compositional level, the speech of the beast from the sea echoes and interacts with the scene marking the joy that breaks out in heaven upon the defeat and expulsion of the rebel (12:7-9).

Rejoice then, you heavens and *those who dwell in them!* (12:12)

It opened its mouth to utter blasphemies against God, blaspheming his name and his dwelling, that is, *those who dwell in heaven* (13:6).

In the first of these scenes (12:12), the occasion is the joy elicited by the expulsion of Satan, signifying the curtailment of his influence in heaven. In the second scene (13:6), John specifies that the speech of the beast from the sea directly contradicts the outpouring of joy in heaven and the evidence on which the heavenly joy is based. The earthly activity of the beast has a heavenly reality as its point of reference, resonating with a theme internal to the book of Revelation. On the basis of the dragon's commission, the beast from the sea is engaged in a desperate attempt at negating the heavenly point of view, trying to neutralize the victory of the Lamb and to make it of no consequence. Here, if nowhere else, there is evidence that the songs in Revelation are set in a triangular context and come with a triphonal ring: The voice of proclamation and the voices of acclamation compete with the voice of accusation, the latter coming from the earth to which the fallen opponent is now confined.<sup>91</sup>

All three members of the subversive triumvirate are thus endowed with the faculty of speech. For the ancient serpent, speech is the means by which he misrepresents God, occasioning the original alienation between God and human beings (Gen 3:1-6). The trumpet sequence in Revelation depicts this feature in qualitative terms (8:2-11:19); the power of the demonic horde "is in their mouths and in their tails; their tails are like serpents, having heads; and with them they inflict harm" (9:19). In the beast from the sea the mouth is the most distinctive organ, and its aim is made manifest by what it says (13:6). The beast from the earth looks like a lamb, but its true character is revealed by the faculty of speech, and it speaks like the serpent (13:11). The mortal wound and the "resurrection" of the sea beast infringe on the most exclusive and hallowed identity marker of the Lamb (13:3), and the appearance of the beast from the earth imitates the Lamb (13:11). These striking features make the myth of Nero's return and the role of the imperial priesthood seem inadequate for the parameters set by the text,<sup>92</sup> and they make the message

<sup>91</sup>Cf. Klaus-Peter Jörns, "Proklamation und Akklamation: Die antiphonische Grundordnung des frühchristlichen Gottesdienstes nach der Johannesoffenbarung," in *Liturgie und Dichtung*, ed. H. Becker and R. Kaczynski (Sankt Ottilien: EOS Verlag, 1983), 187-208.

<sup>92</sup>Two other textual parameters also point beyond the myth of Nero *redivivus*. Upon the removal of the male child to heaven, John writes that "the woman fled *into the wilderness*" (12:6a). The location seems significant and is specified twice; the woman "was given the two wings of the great eagle, so that she could fly from the serpent *into the wilderness*" (12:14). The connotation here is clearly to mark the wilderness as a place of refuge. Later, as John is invited to witness the exposé of the great prostitute, he writes that "he carried me away in the spirit into a *wilderness*" (17:3). The wilderness metaphor is now the location of a woman that is pictured as a prostitute. "When I saw her, I was greatly amazed," John writes, better translated, "I was appalled." The

of Revelation point, like Irenaeus's interpretation, not to the myth of Nero's return, but to an expectation more in line with the Synoptic Apocalypse in the Gospels and to the Antichrist motif elsewhere in the NT.<sup>93</sup>

### 5. The Relationship of Revelation to the Synoptic Apocalypse

It is beyond doubt that there is a "Synoptic" awareness in Revelation, applying to a number of scattered statements in the book.<sup>94</sup> R. H. Charles shows that the events accompanying the breaking of the seals unfold in the same sequence as the eschatological woes in the Synoptic Gospels, indicating a broad similarity of outlook.<sup>95</sup> Whether the latter parallels are due to direct dependence of Revelation on the Synoptic Gospels, derive from a common apocalyptic tradition,<sup>96</sup> or stem from "the apocalyptic discourse of Jesus,"<sup>97</sup> they suggest a shared perspective. These observations increase the likelihood that the "essential consistency of eschatological thought" that has been claimed for the NT includes Revelation.<sup>98</sup>

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wilderness location of the exposé and the stunned reaction of John suggest that he is witness to something that flies in the face of his expectations. Again, as the woman flees from the serpent, "the earth came to the help of the woman" (12:16). This role gives *the earth* a positive connotation as an ally or a protector. However, when the third member of the subversive triumvirate emerges, John sees it "coming out of the earth" (13:11). This, too, violates what is anticipated, suggesting that the satanic subversion comes from where it is least expected. On both counts the tension and bivalence of these metaphors convey prospects that are not matched by the myth of Nero's return and the role of the imperial cult.

<sup>93</sup>The so-called "Synoptic Apocalypse" is found in Mark 13:1-37; Matt 24:1-51; Luke 21:5-36. The Antichrist theme in 1 John (2:18-26; 4:1-3) and the promised unveiling of "the lawless one" in 2 Thessalonians (2:1-12) espouse ideas that are clearly related to the eschatology of the Synoptic Apocalypse. George R. Beasley-Murray provides a comprehensive catalogue of the determined and almost incessant attempts to absolve Jesus of responsibility for the eschatological outlook reflected in the Markan rendition of this apocalypse, unsuccessfully, as he interprets the evidence (*Jesus and the Last Days: The Interpretation of the Olivet Discourse* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993]).

<sup>94</sup>Louis A. Vos finds direct employment of sayings of Jesus and likely dependence on the Gospels in Rev 1:3a (Luke 11:28); Rev 1:7 (Matt 24:30); Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22 (Mark 4:9, 23; Matt 13:9; Luke 8:8); Rev 3:2-3; 16:15 (Matt 24:42-43; Luke 12:39-40); Rev 3:5c (Matt 10:32; Luke 12:8); Rev 3:20 (Mark 13:29; Matt 24:33); Rev 3:21 (Luke 22:28-30; Matt 19:28); Rev 13:10 (Matt 26:52b) (*The Synoptic Traditions in the Apocalypse* [Kampen: J. K. Kok, 1965], 54-111).

<sup>95</sup>Charles, 1:158-60; cf. also John M. Court, *Myth and History in the Book of Revelation* (London: SPCK, 1979), 43-53. Charles, 1: 160, first discredits a number of very specific referents contemporary to the author and proposed by interpreters prior to him for the events depicted under the seals before suggesting other tentative alternatives of his own.

<sup>96</sup>Lohmeyer, 58.

<sup>97</sup>Vos, 54-111.

<sup>98</sup>C. E. B. Cranfield, "Thoughts on New Testament Eschatology," *SJT* 35 (1982): 510.

Although not decisive, it is nevertheless of more than passing interest that Jesus in the Gospels seems unconcerned about the Roman Empire.<sup>99</sup> Moreover, the Synoptic Apocalypse appears to be preoccupied with a threat rising from within the believing community. In Mark, the warning to “beware that no one leads you astray” (Mark 13:5; cf. Matt 24:4; Luke 21:8), is followed immediately by the prospect that “many will come *in my name* and say, ‘I am he!’<sup>100</sup> and they will lead many astray” (Mark 13:6). Whatever the meaning of “in my name,” it suggests a horizon that is not defined by imperial politics in the first century. “False messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, the elect,” warns the Markan Jesus (Mark 13:22; cf. Matt 24:24). While what is projected in these Synoptic sayings makes use of the same words and phrases that are used in Revelation, indicating a convergent perspective, the trouble it envisions does not relate to an external threat.

The following comparison suggests that the overlap in terminology also may signify conceptual and situational common ground.

Revelation	Synoptic Perspective (Mark 13)
it <i>deceives</i> the inhabitants of earth (πλανᾷ, 13:14)	they will <i>deceive</i> many (πλανήσουσιν, 13:6)
It performs great <i>signs</i> (σημεῖα μεγάλα, 13:13)	And produces <i>sign</i> and omens (σημεῖα καὶ τέρατα, 13:22)
From the mouth of the <i>false prophet</i> (ψευδοπροφήτου, 16:13)	<i>False prophets</i> will appear (ψευδοπροφήται, 13:22)

According to this comparison, Revelation and the Synoptic Apocalypse use virtually identical terminology for their respective eschatological scenarios, envisioning influences that will deceive (πλανᾷ), signs (σημεῖα) that will have a persuasive impact, and a role for a false prophet (ψευδοπροφήτης) either in the singular or in the plural.<sup>101</sup> These verbal and conceptual parallels are complemented by qualitative parameters that align the two eschatological outlooks even more closely. In Mark, Jesus takes the signs and wonders of the deceptive influence to be of such a quality as “to lead astray, if possible, the elect” (Mark 13:22; cf. Matt 24:24).<sup>102</sup> In Revelation, the false prophet

<sup>99</sup>van de Water, 246.

<sup>100</sup>William Lane observes that the enigmatic Ἐγὼ εἰμί usually translated “I am he” (Mark 13:6) should be “understood to constitute a claim of dignity which finds its significance in God’s own self-designation” (*The Gospel of Mark* [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974], 456-457).

<sup>101</sup>Charles, 1:342-343, accepts that these terms originally come from the Synoptic Apocalypse and possibly from an even older Jewish apocalypse, but that the meaning of the terms is transformed to fit the myth of Nero’s return.

<sup>102</sup>C. E. B. Cranfield argues that Jesus’ words have a bifocal perspective that cannot be limited to Messianic pretenders prior to the fall of Jerusalem (“ST. MARK 13,” *SJT* 6 [1953]: 300-301). Likewise, Timothy J. Gedder maintains that the “polysemantic” or bifocal perspective with respect to the end is pervasive and deliberate on the part of the author (*Watchwords: Mark 13*

“performs great signs, even making fire come down from heaven to earth in the sight of all” (13:13). This signifies exceptional and spectacular powers, a phenomenon where subtlety and imitation unite to bring about manifestations that are more spectacular than the feats of the imperial cult. The force of this statement is further enhanced by the fact that, with respect to Revelation, it is an allusion reminiscent of the confrontation between Elijah and the prophets of Baal.<sup>103</sup> The two sides in the OT conflict agree to subject the merits of their claims to verification or rejection by a sign, and both agree to abide by the proposition that “the god who answers by fire is indeed God” (1 Kgs 18:23-24). Only the God of Elijah is able to perform this feat (1 Kgs 18:38), thereby serving to authenticate the credentials of Elijah’s cause and ministry. Fire from heaven has real persuasive impact in Revelation, too, but in the meantime the goalposts have been moved. It is not God but the deceiving power that answers by fire in the end-time drama (13:13-14).<sup>104</sup>

Aside from implying means that go infinitely beyond the gadgetry of the imperial cult ceremonial,<sup>105</sup> the imagery of fire coming down from heaven is apiece with Mark’s concern that “the very elect” could be misled by the signs and wonders. Sweet’s question is to the point, “But if this *beast* represents propaganda for the emperor cult, how could it be lamb-like enough to deceive Christians?”<sup>106</sup> Whether the agents of deception claim the mantle of Jesus as in Mark (Mark 13:5), have the stigmata of the slain Lamb like the beast from the sea (13:3), or look like a lamb-like beast from the earth (13:11), Revelation and the Synoptic Apocalypse appear to envision a similar level of sophistication to the deceptive influence and an impact that is proportional to its approximation to the genuine. This weakens the supposition that “the false prophet” in Revelation must be understood in terms of a parody, epitomized by the imperial cult. “The delimitation of this second beast with a priestly cult of John’s day, whether it be the heathen priesthood or the imperial priesthood of the provinces is too restrictive,” concludes Louis A. Vos.<sup>107</sup> The alternative interpretation reckons with the implications of the imitative features that are highlighted no less in Revelation than in the Synoptic Apocalypse. “At the end Satan’s attack must be launched from a beachhead within the Church, where the earth-beast not only carries on priestly activities but displays the credentials of a prophet,” writes Minear.<sup>108</sup> Beale comes to the almost

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in *Markan Eschatology*, JSNTSup 26 [Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989], 235).

<sup>103</sup>Cf. Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, 759; Beale, 709.

<sup>104</sup>Sigve Tonstad, “The Limits of Power: Revisiting Elijah at Horeb,” *SJOT* 19 (2005): 253-266.

<sup>105</sup>Sweet, 214.

<sup>106</sup>Morna Hooker takes the conditional “if it were possible” to imply that “it is possible” (*The Gospel according to St Mark*, BNTC [London: A & C Black, 1991], 317). This prospect assumes great subtlety as to the character of the deceptive influence.

<sup>107</sup>Vos, 133.

<sup>108</sup>Minear, *I Saw a New Earth*, 119.

identical conclusion, stating that “this imagery [Rev 13] and background suggest deception within the covenant community itself.”<sup>109</sup>

The subtle and persuasive character of the opposing force underlies the accompanying call for discernment on the part of those who are exposed to its stratagems, and this call is heard as much in Revelation as in the Synoptic Apocalypse.<sup>110</sup> In fact, the call for acute discernment may be the element that unites the end-time perspective in the Synoptic Gospels most intimately with that of Revelation, implying that they have the same perception of the opposing power and share the same view of the end. According to Timothy J. Geddert’s analysis of the Markan Apocalypse, the call to look beyond appearances integrates this chapter with the rest of the Gospel of Mark, and it makes discernment the quality by which to prevail in the face of attempts to subvert the truth.<sup>111</sup> Keen awareness of what is genuine is therefore basic to the believer’s armory in the Synoptic perspective. Mark concentrates “on the twin and inseparable themes of ‘discernment’ and ‘discipleship,’” says Geddert.<sup>112</sup>

Discernment and discipleship are similarly and inextricably linked in Revelation. While this connection is not unique to Revelation,<sup>113</sup> the discipleship envisioned in Revelation is distinctive in that it takes the divine character as its pattern. Acquiescence to captivity and death on the part of the disciple has the slaughtered Lamb as its pattern and standard, and this ideal is nowhere more explicit than in the believer’s response to the deceptive and coercive ways of the eschatological beasts (13:9-10).<sup>114</sup> *John holds in common with Mark the conviction that it is only by attention to the means used by the respective claimant that its true character is discerned.*<sup>115</sup> Geddert says of Mark’s message that “there

<sup>109</sup>Beale, 708. This possibility is enhanced by the related perspective in 2 Thess 2:1-12, where Paul envisions “the falling away” (ἡ ἀποστασία) before the parousia of Jesus; cf. David Wenham, “Paul and the Synoptic Apocalypse,” in *Gospel Perspectives: Studies of History and Tradition in the Four Gospels*, ed. R. T. France and David Wenham (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981), 2:345-375.

<sup>110</sup>The call for discernment is the watchword to each of the seven churches (Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22), as well as to the situation created by the false trinity described in Rev 13 (13:9). “Let anyone who has an ear listen,” however, is sounded for similar reasons and with equal intensity in the Synoptic Apocalypse (Mark 4:9, 23; Matt 13:9; Luke 8:8).

<sup>111</sup>Geddert, 59-87. He argues, 59, that in Mark the ordinary term βλέπω is “part of a subtle call to ‘see’ what is below the surface of events, discourses and texts.”

<sup>112</sup>Ibid., 257.

<sup>113</sup>Bruce Longenecker demonstrates a similar connection between apocalyptic disclosure and discipleship in 2 *Esdras* [4 Ezra] (2 *Esdras* [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995]), but the quietism in 2 *Esdras* seems predicated on expected retribution and vengeance whereas the believer’s stance in Revelation is to exemplify the character of the divine government.

<sup>114</sup>Cf. Rev 12:17; 13:10; 14:4, 12. Perhaps the connection between discernment and discipleship is best exemplified in the description of believers as those who “follow the Lamb wherever he goes” (14:4).

<sup>115</sup>In Revelation, the beast from the sea has the stigmata of Jesus’ death and resurrection, but it speaks maliciously about God and makes war against the believers (13:5-7). The wonder-working beast from the earth looks like a lamb but speaks like the serpent and is entirely dedicated

must be understanding, and the prerequisite for understanding is faithful discipleship.”<sup>116</sup> For both, however, the reverse is also true: discernment is a prerequisite for authentic and persevering discipleship.

Verbal parallels, conceptual convergence, and the shared emphasis on understanding diminish the utility of the myth of Nero’s return and the role of the imperial priesthood in the interpretation of Revelation. These proposed referents for the two beasts in chapter 13 seem as inadequate for the message of Revelation as the Roman Empire is a remote concern in the Synoptic Apocalypse.

#### 6. The Issue in Revelation 13

The “explicit summons to attention”<sup>117</sup> in Rev 13 ties the content of this chapter closely to the value that is singled out as the object of enmity in the cosmic conflict (13:9-10; cf. 12:17; 14:12). When the grounding of these verses in the storyline of Revelation is observed, it pulls the concern of Rev 13 further from its captivity to the myth of Nero’s return. Instead, the theme of cosmic conflict and its contested value remain in the foreground. The triple “if anyone” and the dialogical character of the exhortation focus squarely on the means to which the believer must be committed.

1. “If anyone has an ear, let him hear” (13:9, NKJV)
2. “If anyone is to go into captivity, into captivity he will go” (13:10ab, NIV). “If anyone is to be killed with the sword, with the sword he will be killed” (13:10cd, NIV).
3. “This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints” (13:10e, NIV).

These statements aim not only to clarify what is at stake, but also to convey great urgency.

1. The passage signals an interruption in the narrative with the narrator directly addressing the audience. It represents a call for discernment, furnishing an example of intent that belongs, in Kermode’s phrase, to the category of “aural circumcision.”<sup>118</sup>
2. The second element highlights the value that the believer must accept in order to prevail in the conflict, presented as “a prophetic oracle in the form of a maxim.”<sup>119</sup> Here the existence of textual variants must be frankly

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to promoting the cause and prestige of the beast from the sea (13:11-15). In Mark, Jesus has given his followers the means to discern the true from the false in a context where the false imitates the true (Mark 13:23).

<sup>116</sup>Geddert, 258.

<sup>117</sup>Jan Lambrecht, “Rev 13,9-10 and Exhortation in the Apocalypse,” in *New Testament Textual Criticism and Exegesis: Festschrift J. Delobel*, ed. A. Denaux, BETL 161 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2002), 333-347.

<sup>118</sup>Kermode, 3.

<sup>119</sup>Aune, *Revelation 6–16*, 730.

acknowledged,<sup>120</sup> but the arguments in favor of the Nestle-Aland rendition reproduced above are nevertheless compelling,<sup>121</sup> and the emphasis that goes with this wording fully justifies the call for discernment that precedes it. While the awkward and almost absurdly redundant character of this construction seems disturbing at first sight, it adds force to the message as if to express a constitutional principle. No one has improved materially upon Charles's proposed translation: "If any man is to be slain with the sword, he is to be slain with the sword."<sup>122</sup> Indeed, the notion that this statement reaches to the core of what must be accepted and internalized is supported by the suggestion that it has a decretal character,<sup>123</sup> expressing "a command to do what is decreed."<sup>124</sup> Death in this context is not decreed by fate, but by the principle to which the one who is about to suffer death is bound by virtue of his or her commitment to the divinely ordained commission.<sup>125</sup>

3. The concluding exhortation heightens the sense of standing face to face with a matter of essential importance: "This calls for patient endurance and faithfulness on the part of the saints" (13:10e, NIV). Addressing a situation that calls for perseverance and faithfulness,<sup>126</sup> it also lays bare the essence of the faith for which Revelation contends. The contested value that is to be safeguarded is only partly appreciated if the injunction is limited to the Roman Empire and the specific context of the myth of Nero's return.

<sup>120</sup>Charles, 1:355-356, discusses the three most significant alternatives, all three of which relate mainly to whether the best reading of 13:10cd should be εἴ τις ἐν μαχαίρῃ ἀποκτανθῆναι δέϊ αὐτὸν ἐν μαχαίρῃ ἀποκτανθῆναι as in Nestle-Aland, or εἴ τις ἐν μαχαίρῃ ἀποκτενεῖ δέϊ αὐτὸν ἐν μαχαίρῃ ἀποκτανθῆναι, for which there is also significant attestation.

<sup>121</sup>Charles, 1:355, is unequivocal that A is the correct reading as reflected in Nestle-Aland. Aune supports Charles's position (*Revelation 6-16*, 719, 731), as does Beale (705-706). Factors in support of the preferred reading in Nestle-Aland are the superiority of A with respect to the text of Revelation; the parallel emphasis in 13:10ab as compared to 13:10cd; the allusive background of the text in Jeremiah (LXX Jer 15:2; 50:11); the preference for the more difficult and least "doctored" reading.

<sup>122</sup>Charles, 1:356. Aune translates it: "If anyone is to be slain with the sword, he will be slain with the sword" (*Revelation 6-16*, 731). This makes for better English than Charles's translation, but it obscures the repetitive and decretal character of the protasis and the apodosis in the Greek text. The NIV and the NJB adopt similar translations on the basis of the preferred text in Nestle-Aland.

<sup>123</sup>Beale, 706.

<sup>124</sup>Lambrech, 334.

<sup>125</sup>This outlook and emphasis contrast sharply with the translation of the NRSV: "If you are to be taken captive, into captivity you go; if you kill with the sword, with the sword you must be killed" (13:10). Not only does this rendition introduce a jarring disjunction between the two like-sounding phrases, but it also conveys ambivalence with respect to whether the principle in question is to encourage resignation in the face of persecution or to decree vengeance on the persecutor. It should be rejected for the general reasons noted above and specifically because it reflects the logic of *ius talionis* that does not fit the context. The KJV and the NKJV reflect the same textual *Vorlage* as the NRSV.

<sup>126</sup>"This is why the saints must have perseverance and faith" (13:10, NJB).



Should the situation envisioned by the myth materialize whether or not the myth is reflected in Revelation, it, too, would call for perseverance and faith.

The conditions envisioned in Revelation, however, extend the reality of the cosmic conflict to its logical and inevitable conclusion by representations and realities that require something more than the myth of Nero's return and the colluding interest of the imperial cult. God, who was misrepresented by "the ancient serpent" (Gen 3:1) is, in the perspective of Revelation, the object of renewed and intensified misrepresentation in the eschatological drama (13:5-6). The character of the divine government has been revealed through the slaughtered Lamb (5:6), but the message is threatened by forces aspiring to usurp it (13:3, 11), not only by a historical parody contemporary to John. The slaughtered Lamb has disclosed the means by which the truth is to triumph (13:10), mapping a route for the believer that is identical to the one he walked (14:4). In Revelation's larger narrative, the juxtaposition of satanic misrepresentation and Christological vindication are inseparable, constituting the implicit premise for the unfolding historical spectacle.<sup>127</sup> For this reason, the believers must not only keep faith in the face of persecution; they must not let go of the means by which God has identified and defined himself in the cosmic conflict. The faith of the believer must be informed and fortified by the means by which God has revealed God's faithfulness, and the one who is to "follow the Lamb wherever he goes" must know where the Lamb goes in order to follow (14:4).

#### *Conclusion*

The foregoing points have critiqued the role of the myth of Nero's return and its alleged role in Revelation. According to the present interpretation, the myth mirrors issues that, broadly speaking, reflect "the claims of patriotism and religion,"<sup>128</sup> but the imperial threat is neither fully paradigmatic nor climactic in the sense suggested by the metaphors of Revelation. Reiterating the conviction that Revelation's perspective originates in the theme of cosmic conflict, the momentum of this theme remains undiminished and is, in fact, further enhanced by the depiction in Rev 13. As the eschatological phase of the cosmic conflict concerns "the testimony of Jesus" (12:17), the conflict described in Rev 13 shows that "the perseverance and the faithfulness of the saints" (13:10) are patterned on the enduring legacy of "the faithfulness of Jesus" (14:12).<sup>129</sup> Discerning the nature of Jesus' faithful witness is decisive because the end-time subversion envisioned in Revelation builds credibility for itself by a persuasive imitation and not only by a parody on the order of the myth of Nero's return.

<sup>127</sup>Tonstad, *Saving God's Reputation*, 124-143.

<sup>128</sup>Charles, 1:333.

<sup>129</sup>Tonstad, *Saving God's Reputation*, 165-194.