1

THE QUESTION OF WEALTH IN THE APOCALYPSE

1.1 The problem

> For you say, 'I am rich (πλούσιός εἰμι) and have acquired great wealth (πεπλούτηκα), and need nothing,' yet you do not realize that you are the one who is miserable and pitiful and poor (πτωχὸς) and blind and naked. (Rev 3:17)

The text above illustrates the theological problem to be considered in relation to the Johannine Apocalypse. One might suppose that this passage reflects only a concern for certain attitudes towards wealth. Yet, in contrast to the circumstances portrayed in the missive to Smyrna, 'I know your tribulation and poverty, yet you are rich' (2:9), it seems as if the writer values their impoverished state over a lifestyle of wealth as depicted in Laodicea. A similar tone can be detected among the other churches as well. Philadelphia, for example, is said to have 'few resources' and shares with Smyrna the absence of any call for repentance.[1] In addition, the 'teaching of Balaam' (2:14), as some commentators suggest, includes what the author regarded as an excessive interest in wealth and could be a reference to greed as shown in later traditions.[2] John's primary opponent Jezebel is explicitly connected with the rich whore Babylon through the language of sexual immorality (πορνεύω) and deceit (πλανάω), which in chapters 17–18 is associated with economic activity (Rev 2:20–3; 17:2–6; 18:3–4, 23; cf. 13:14–17). The author's disdain for wealth among the churches is so great that he can unambiguously say that the poor are rich while those enjoying economic success are poor. Commentators have struggled to make sense of this juxtaposed

[1] The phrase μικρὰν ἔχεις δύναμιν in 3:8 can be taken as 'you have few resources'; *BDAG*, p. 263 (cf. Rev 18:3).

[2] 2 Pet 2:15; Jude 11; Philo, *Mos*. 1:294–9; Josephus, *Ant*. 4:126–30; *m.'Abot* 5:19–22; *Tg*. Num 24:14; *Midr. Rab*. Num 20:23. See Charles, *Revelation*, vol. I, p. 63; Harrington, *Revelation*, p. 61; Fiorenza, *Vision*, p. 56; see also Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, vol. II, pp. 764–5; Vermès, *Scripture and Tradition*, pp. 127–77.

language suggesting a spiritual interpretation, yet these studies offer little support for such conclusions and avoid the difficult issue; the lack of repentance for the poor and the sharp calumniation of the rich seems to indicate that John associates faithfulness with one's economic status.

The arrogant speech attributed to the rich in the passage cited above (3:17) functions further to denigrate the wealthy and draw associations with Babylon (18:7) in the only other place where this device occurs.[3] In the vilification of Babylon's wealth, which is developed most extensively in chapter 18, a prophetic word simultaneously exhorts and warns the faithful in relation to the Roman Empire: 'Come out of her, my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues' (18:4). Taken together with the harsh censure of wealth in the seven messages and the praise of poverty, this passage encourages us to consider whether the author is calling his audience to withdraw completely from the present economic system.[4]

The language of Revelation 18 has been examined in detail for its many allusions to the Hebrew Bible, in particular the oracles against the nations of Tyre and Babylon in the prophetic tradition (Isa 13, 23; Jer 50–1; Ezek 27). Yet a transformation of the language by the author is evident in his explicit denunciation of riches. Those who have dealt with this text in light of the biblical tradition have identified this transformation, though without an analysis or explanation that accounts for this shift. Commentators have sought to explain the radical reshaping of these OT texts as the author's interpretation of these traditions in light of his present socio-historical circumstances. Yet, these studies have produced a wide variety of speculation, none of which has dealt directly with the author's almost categorical rejection of wealth or explained his correlation between faithfulness and poverty. This leads to the question of the present study: To what degree can we say that John's portrayal of the faithful Christian community is informed by more recent Jewish interpretive traditions related to wealth in the Second Temple period? The harsh denigration of wealth and praise of poverty in the seven messages goes beyond any critique found in the Hebrew Bible. This encourages us to advance additional questions, which are subsidiary to the first. Is John's language of wealth conventional, and, if so, with what traditions is he in contact? Moreover, is the 'idea' contained in this language traditional? We ask this in an attempt to ascertain the extent to which we can understand John's perspective on wealth as a whole. We must also inquire as

[3] See discussion in section 6.1, below, pp. 55–6; 161–3.
[4] Yarbro Collins, 'Revelation 18', p. 202.

to John's strategy in relation to 'how' he uses this wealth language in an effort to move his recipients to a particular resolution of what it means to be faithful. To what extent is faithfulness in the Christian community, as portrayed by John, inconsistent with the accumulation of wealth? We will further ask to what degree we can say John's use of traditional perspectives in Scripture and developments of early Jewish literature legitimized or strengthened his attempt to impose his perspective on the communities he is addressing. The need for research that answers these questions in relation to the Book of Revelation becomes clearer when considered in view of the current state of scholarly research on the topic of wealth in the NT.

1.2 Scholarly approaches to wealth in the New Testament

There is no shortage of books that seek to provide a 'Christian' perspective of wealth, though these are frequently written on a popular level. Less abundant are those volumes that take a scholarly approach to the subject. These studies underscore the degree to which scholars have either (1) been reticent or unable to fit John's perspective on wealth into a systematic treatment of the subject or (2) have underestimated the value of its contribution to the discussion of wealth in the NT.

Hengel produced a helpful, yet brief, volume that traces the idea of possessions among the faithful community from the Hebrew Bible into the early church.[5] He correctly notes the presence of apocalyptic themes in John's critique of the wealth of Rome. However, this treatment of the subject does not have as its aim to produce a coherent view of John's perspective on wealth, nor does he endeavour to synthesize the material in order to find a unified point of view on wealth as a whole. In line with his aims, he does not provide any insight into what traditions in the Second Temple period might reflect the author's apocalyptic critique of wealth in Rev 18. Rather, he rightly concludes that a homogenous outlook on wealth in the early church cannot be deduced.[6]

Blomberg attempts to provide a 'biblical' theology of riches from a Christian perspective.[7] While this volume includes discussions of wealth in the Hebrew Bible and the Second Temple period, there is no engagement with how these traditions have shaped John's view of wealth. Rather, his emphasis is on the *Sitz im Leben* of the texts, in which reactions to historical events drive the interpretation. Consequently, the Apocalypse

[5] Hengel, *Property and Riches*. [6] *Ibid*., p. 84.
[7] In Blomberg, *Poverty nor Riches*. See also González, *Faith and Wealth*.

of John plays no role in this assessment or, for that larger role, does not factor into what one would consider in regard to the larger question of wealth and poverty and biblical theology. More importantly, the emphasis is on a systematic understanding of the teachings of Jesus and Paul, with the Apocalypse being relegated to a chapter entitled 'The Rest of the New Testament'.

Hoppe's 2004 volume on poverty in the Bible deals with the language of 'the poor' from a socio-historical perspective, yet lacks any discussion of the poverty of Smyrna (Rev 2:9), and provides only a cursory treatment of the metaphorical poverty attributed to the church at Laodicea.[8] In the chapter entitled 'New Testament', the writer divides the material into three categories: Gospels, Paul, and 'Other Books', providing only a brief discussion of John's Apocalypse. More recently, Berges and Hoppe have offered a discussion on the perspectives of wealth in the Old and New Testaments.[9] While noting especially distinctive features between the Old and New Testaments, there is no attempt to account for these differences by placing them in conversation with traditions from the Second Temple period or their possible impact on the NT writers.

More specialized studies on wealth and poverty in the NT are frequently focused on either Luke-Acts or the epistle of James,[10] while others seek to demonstrate a coherent view of the teachings of Jesus.[11] Thus the state of scholarship concerning John's view of wealth in the Apocalypse has been almost entirely neglected.[12] This is seen most recently in a contribution by Regev in which he compares the social approaches to wealth and sectarianism of Qumran with the early Christian communities. Given the apocalyptic nature of the documents related to the Qumran community and the sectarian nature of John's communication to the seven churches, it is surprising, since both demonstrate a decided

[8] Hoppe, *No Poor Among You*, pp. 163–5. [9] Berges and Hoppe, *Arm und Reich*.

[10] Metzger, *Consumption and Wealth*; Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor*; Gillman, *Possessions and the Life of Faith*; Phillips, *Reading Issues of Wealth*; Gradl, *Zwischen Arm und Reich*; Takatemjen, *The Banquet is Ready*; Bosch, *Good News for the Poor*; Stanford, 'Their Eyes They Have Closed?'; Krüger, *Jakobusbrief als prophetische Kritik der Reichen*; Maynard-Reid, *Poverty and Wealth in James*; Maier, *Reich und Arm*; Kelly, 'Poor and Rich in the Epistle of James'.

[11] Schmidt, *Hostility to Wealth*; Poulain, *Jésus et la richesse d'après Saint-Luc*; Mealand, *Poverty and Expectation*; Heuver, *Teachings of Jesus Concerning Wealth*.

[12] Two volumes make no mention of the Book of Revelation in their treatment of the theme of wealth: Countryman, *The Rich Christian in the Church* and Wheeler, *Wealth as Peril and Obligation*.

concern over wealth, that the author does not include in his comparison the Johannine Apocalypse.[13]

One recent volume, however, has been devoted to the topic, having as its focus 'heavenly wealth'.[14] Royalty's point of departure is the internal struggle between John and the rival prophetess Jezebel, who promotes a decadent lifestyle that includes assimilation into the dominant culture and eating meat sacrificed to Roman idols.[15] In order to establish his prophetic authority, John presents Jesus in terms of wealth since this was the 'preeminent symbol of power in antiquity'.[16] In doing so, he underscores the significance of the 'high status' wealth of heaven in contrast to the 'low status' commercial wealth of Jezebel and Babylon/Rome. Royalty argues that John portrays Christ as a moral philosopher and maintains that wealth imagery in the Apocalypse is best located within Greco-Roman literature and culture. This study, although groundbreaking, raises a number of finer points, which will merit attention throughout the present work. For now, however, it is appropriate to discuss larger questions that emerge from Royalty's study.

First, Royalty may be too quick to dismiss the importance of traditional Jewish sources. While he identifies John's 'excessive' use of language from the Hebrew Bible, he contends that his recipients would have been unfamiliar with these traditions and would have failed to recognize the multilayered intertextuality. He states, 'it is unlikely that his urban Greek audience had the scriptural knowledge to hear the allusions . . . The audience would have been more knowledgeable about Greco-Roman culture, in which they lived, than the Hebrew prophets, whom they may have never read.'[17] Moreover, he asserts that John 'deconstructs' the authority of his prophetic sources through a series of 'strong misreadings'.[18] Although he recognizes how much John reconfigures any Jewish traditions he may have received, including the Hebrew Bible, his thesis is overstated. Undoubtedly, Greco-Roman culture is in the air, but this emphasis is one-sided. On the contrary, the earliest church viewed itself as Jewish and its attachment to ancient Jewish traditions vis-à-vis

[13] Regev, 'Wealth and Sectarianism', pp. 211–29.

[14] Royalty, *Streets of Heaven*. Adela Yarbro Collins and Richard Bauckham have both contributed helpful articles pertaining to John's language of wealth (see section 1.3). Here I draw attention to the fact that only one volume has been dedicated solely to the study of wealth in John's Apocalypse.

[15] See also Duff, *Who Rides the Beast?* He also argues that John's primary concern is the internal struggle within the churches and deals with wealth as a subsidiary issue.

[16] *Ibid*., p. 38. [17] Royalty, *Streets of Heaven*, pp. 18–19. [18] *Ibid*., p. 243.

Christian apocalypses and testaments argues against this notion.[19] Moreover, the writer's use of prophetic speech forms, names of biblical characters to denigrate opponents, and the apocalyptic idiom argue strongly against the idea that John would not expect his readers to understand this language. It seems idiosyncratic for an author to communicate to an audience through a medium of expression that he or she knows they will not recognize.[20] Royalty rightly notes the writer's development and reshaping of biblical traditions in formulating his own message. However, his contention that this in some way undermines the authority of the Hebrew Bible and is the basis for looking to Greco-Roman sources for our understanding of the Apocalypse does not compel.

Second, Royalty's arrangement of his texts for analysis is overly schematic. He compares only four of his five primary texts for examination in John's Apocalypse (1:12–16; 4:2–11; 17–18; 21–2) with ancient Jewish literature and concludes that John's strategy lies in Greco-Roman sources. This is further illustrated by the way he then focuses only on Greco-Roman sources when discussing Rev 2:9 and 3:17. The Greco-Roman context, which has purportedly shaped John's language of wealth, is then located in Stoic ideas, though Royalty recognizes that the language of the text itself agrees with Cynic philosophy.[21] According to Royalty, the imagery of Christ clothed in a long robe and golden sash (1:13) 'would evoke Stoic attitudes towards wealth' as *adiaphora*.[22] More generally, in his analysis of wealth texts from Revelation in comparison to Jewish literature, he focuses only on wealth imagery, i.e. golden crowns and jewels, and not on John's language of riches (πλοῦτος) or the accumulation of wealth (πλουτέω).

[19] John's concern over 'those who say they are Jews but are not' suggests some degree of self-identity as the true Jews (Rev 2:9; 3:9). For a discussion concerning the definitive split between Christianity and Judaism, see Dunn, *Parting of the Ways*, pp. 301–29; Alon, *Jews in their Land*, pp. 288–307. For a discussion about the possible Christian provenance of pseudepigraphal literature, see Davila, *Provenance of the Pseudepigrapha*; de Jonge, *Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*; Elgvin, 'Jewish Christian Editing', 278–304.

[20] e.g. manna, Jezebel, Balaam, twelve tribes of Israel, new Jerusalem, priestly descriptions of Jesus, reference to Jesus as the lamb slain (Passover), Temple, priests. The antagonism between the Synagogue of Satan and the churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia and those who call themselves Jews but are not underscores the author's expectation that his audience was not only familiar with Old Testament traditions but considered themselves to be the true Jews. It is beyond the scope of this book to argue for either the Christian or Jewish nature of the Apocalypse. However, for a discussion of the apocalyptic aspects of the Book of Revelation, see Aune, *Apocalypticism*, pp. 150–74. See also n. 93, below.

[21] Royalty, *Streets of Heaven*, pp. 162–3. [22] *Ibid*., p. 123.

Finally, and more importantly, Royalty's focus on the non-Jewish, Greco-Roman world could not produce a sustained engagement with the literature of the Hebrew Bible or other ancient Jewish literature. While he does offer a limited discussion of *1 Enoch* and the *Sibylline Oracles*, other literature, such as documents from the Dead Sea Scrolls and related texts, is not explored. An example of his limited involvement in these texts is evidenced by the absence of any protracted discussion of the negative language of wealth in the *Epistle of Enoch* and its similarity to the Apocalypse, although he recognizes its presence and cites a very significant text (*1 Enoch* 97:8–10).[23] Rather, he maintains that the pejorative tone against the rich in the *Epistle of Enoch* has no connection with the Apocalypse because 'there is no such universal condemnation of wealth in Revelation'.[24]

Royalty's conclusions contrast prima facie with what the text of Revelation portrays as an almost categorical rejection of wealth. Apart from the Lamb's worthiness to receive riches and the gold and jewel-laden new Jerusalem, nothing positive can be said about John's portrayal of wealth on earth in the present age. In addition, a discussion of the call for the faithful to 'Come out' in the critique of the wealth of Rome (18:4) is entirely absent. Rather, he concludes that wealth imagery functions to maintain and increase status in the same way that it functions in the aristocratic Greco-Roman culture.[25] The author's contrasting perspectives on wealth function to establish his prophetic authority over Jezebel and other rivals, which, according to Royalty, is the primary aim of the author. This emphasis, correct as it is, nonetheless leads to a conclusion that John's calls for action in the Apocalypse are 'few' and 'vague'.[26] The result of his analysis does not do justice to the numerous imperatives that are directed to the Christian community throughout the Apocalypse.[27]

In relation to the present study, the most important of these imperatives are John's admonitions to repent (2:5, 16, 21–2; 3:3, 19) and to 'Come out' (18:4). Thus, Royalty's study does not provide an answer for how John expects the faithful to respond to his message or what form their repentance is to take. The textual evidence that ties the seven messages with the critique of Babylon in chapter 18 and the subsequent call to

[23] Charles identified this passage as a parallel to Rev 3:17. Charles, *Book of Enoch*, p. xcvii.
[24] Royalty, *Streets of Heaven*, p. 57. [25] *Ibid*., p. 245. [26] *Ibid*., p. 128.
[27] The seven messages contain twenty such imperatives: 2:5, 7, 10–11, 16–17, 25, 29; 3:2–3, 6, 11, 13, 19, 22. See also 13:9, 18; 14:7; 18:4; 22:17.

'Come out' suggests John's perspective on wealth for the faithful community cannot be understood without making this connection. Royalty's focus on wealth imagery to formulate an argument based on status honour in the Greco-Roman world leaves aside the problem John seems to be concerned with more directly; how is wealth to be negotiated in relation to the faithful community? This emphasis, in conjunction with his limited engagement with Jewish apocalyptic literature outside the canon of the Hebrew Bible, elicits the need in NT scholarship for a reading of John's language of wealth in the Apocalypse that takes these issues into account. The scope, limitations, and the approach adopted by such a study might be best formulated in light of previous approaches to the Book of Revelation. Since the communities John addresses lived in the Greco-Roman world of Asia Minor a discussion of those scholars who have focused on the social world of the Roman Empire is warranted.

1.3 Scholarly approaches to the Apocalypse

From the perspective of the social world

The following overview shall consider recent studies that attempt to locate John's language and imagery within the historical setting of Roman Asia Minor. While the topic of wealth is implicit in most of the secondary literature, those who focus on it explicitly are rare. One such investigation engages the issue indirectly by focusing on the economic environment of Asia Minor, particularly with the intersection between the economy and the Roman imperial cults.[28]

Kraybill takes as his point of departure the seer's critique of merchant shippers in Rev 18:1–19, which provides the basis for a historical reconstruction of political oppression and an increasingly stronger presence of the imperial cults among trade guilds. From here, he retrogresses back onto the vision of the beasts in Rev 13 the writer's focus on Christian involvement in trade and trade networks in first-century Asia Minor.[29]

[28] Kraybill, *Imperial Cult and Commerce*.

[29] More recent scholarship has shown that trade guilds or *collegia* were not the equivalent of medieval trade guilds, nor did they perform 'regulatory or protective functions', but were more interested in the social lives of its members (Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, p. 186; vol. II, p. 768; see also Malherbe, *Social Aspects*, p. 88). These social groups were unique organizations characterized by a fraternal or familial construct, administratively functioning as a 'mini-society' or 'small city' (Perry, *The Roman Collegia*, p. 78). This fraternal aspect also involved religious ceremonies. The majority of evidence available for the maritime guilds comes from Peutoli and Ostia, both of which were port cities on the western coast of Italy. Epigraphic evidence suggests that trade guilds began to flourish in the Empire

The study assumes the literal language of wealth in 3:17 and properly connects it with the censure of wealth in chapter 18. Moreover, it recognizes the call to "Come out" in 18:4, and correctly identifies this as a demand to cut all commercial and economic ties with Rome.[30]

According to Kraybill, the 'intersection of cult and commerce' creates active participation in idolatry, which is the basis of John's concern. Thus, he calls Christians 'to sever or avoid *economic and political ties* with Rome' because of the 'unholy allegiance to an emperor who claimed to be divine'.[31] In turn, this withdrawal creates a situation of persecution and economic difficulty. Since only some had already withdrawn from participation, John's response is directed both to the social injustices being experienced by the faithful and the idolatry of those who continue.

To the extent that Christians had 'ready access to ships, docks, and guild halls that serviced Rome's enormous appetite', Kraybill argues that they *could have* been involved in the maritime trade.[32] While he admits there is scant evidence to support this idea, his approach necessitates the reconstruction of a historical setting that accounts for it.[33] Intrinsically, then, John's concern is not with wealth *per se* but with the much broader issue of idolatry.[34]

during the second and third centuries CE. It is not until the late third and into the fourth and fifth centuries CE that the state became involved in the operations of these guilds, which ultimately led to their downfall. Thus, it is anachronistic to speak of trade guilds acting as trade unions, as such, or having been well developed and thoroughly permeated by the imperial cults as early as the first century CE. One can assume, however, that such associations did exist in first century Asia Minor. An Egyptian papyrus attests an association of salt traders in 47 CE, of which one can see the blending of economic and religious spheres in the life of the group. This helps to establish the likelihood of *collegia* existing on a broader scale in the first century. However, it provides no evidence of participation under duress but merely reflects an agreement made between its members (Meijer and van Nijf, *Trade, Transport and Society*, p. 75; see also Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations*, pp. 161–73). The extent to which Kraybill proposes these associations were well established is unconvincing. More importantly, the interrelation of the imperial cult and the guilds is suspect.

[30] See also Yarbro Collins, 'Revelation 18', p. 202; contra Beale, *Revelation*, p. 898, who states it would 'contradict the essence of Christian calling to witness to the world'. Yet, 'witness' in the Apocalypse seems to have an entirely different meaning, not least a different outcome than Beale seems to be suggesting (cf. Rev 6:9; 11:3, 7; 12:11; 14:3; 17:6; 20:4).

[31] Kraybill, *Imperial Cult and Commerce*, p. 17 (emphasis mine). [32] *Ibid*., p. 16.

[33] If the Apocalypse can be given a Neronian date, it is unlikely that such an infiltration would have occurred at that time. See Wilson, 'Domitianic Date', pp. 587–95.

[34] This same approach is taken by David deSilva who argues that John's concern over wealth and economic participation among the Christian community was fostered by the close relationship of idolatry and commerce in the Roman economic system. He critiques Royalty's thesis that the primary source of conflict in the churches is a power struggle with the prophetess Jezebel. In doing so, he rightly points out John's concern with the church's

Kraybill sets up his study by taking what he calls 'the majority opinion of modern scholarship' that John's primary concern is with socio-religious pressure being applied to Christians by the imperial cult.[35] Coupled with the growing pressure on Christians to become more involved in cult worship, this created a situation of religious tension in which Christians had to negotiate their involvement in the economic activity of trade guilds against an attempt to remain faithful. He states, 'The cult so threatened Christians that John thought some would soon die for refusing to participate.'[36] He tempers this statement by suggesting that other Christians felt an internal desire to participate and consequently reaped the economic benefits of doing so.[37]

While Kraybill provides a way into the study of wealth in the Apocalypse, there are limitations to his argument that should be delineated. First, how descriptive can we say the language of merchants and sailors is in chapter 18? Does this imagery demonstrate a real concern over merchant shippers or has the language simply been brought forward from the prophetic text from which the author has borrowed? The lack of any mention of merchants and shippers elsewhere in the Apocalypse points to the latter.[38] Second, and most obvious, the assumption that imperial cults are at the forefront of the author's concerns creates an interpretive scheme whereby the texts are held hostage to this reconstruction of history. One cannot completely discard the importance of the social setting to the text, yet Kraybill's emphasis on the larger social world overlooks the explicit internal conflict between rival teachers that is clearly reflected

assimilation into the culture and the need to formulate an identity associated with loyalty to the Lamb and not based on economic prosperity. While both are correct to some degree, the latter seems to reflect John's more immediate concern. deSilva, *Seeing Things John's Way*, pp. 58–63, 69–72.

[35] Kraybill's view is largely based on the vision of the two beasts in Rev 13 and manifests itself in a variety of interpretations. See below, pp. 192–6 for a review of the history of interpretations of this passage.

[36] Kraybill, *Imperial Cult and Commerce*, pp. 26–7.

[37] These somewhat opposing ideas concerning the imperial cults reflect the general indecision about the degree to which they were in any way involved in the function of trade guilds or forced Christian participation in worship in the first century CE. As will be discussed below, there is little agreement that the situation of Roman Asia Minor reflected any widespread persecution toward Christians or that the imperial cults forced worship in and through trade guilds or associations. For arguments that dismiss a Domitianic persecution, see Thompson, *Apocalypse and Empire*, pp. 95–115; Wilson, 'Domitianic Date', pp. 587–95. See also Ulrich, 'Euseb, *HistEccl* III', pp. 269–89; Harland, *Associations, Synagogues and Congregations*, pp. 239–64; Kloppenberg and Wilson (eds.), *Voluntary Associations*, pp. 1–15; Price, *Rituals and Power*, pp. 123–6, 220–22.

[38] For a detailed discussion of this possibility see the Excursus in section 8.6, below: 'The use of merchant and sailor imagery in Jewish traditions'.