

## PERSECUTION IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION

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### ABSTRACT

In this article attention will be given to scholarly interpretations of persecution in Revelation with special attention to their theoretical, hermeneutical and theological implications. After an introductory discussion of the traditional interpretation of a “real” persecution in a Domitianic setting, attention will be given to the recent theory of “perceived” persecution and its theological implications. This is followed by critical remarks about some theoretical and hermeneutical issues. The article concludes with suggestions for an alternative approach to persecution in Revelation that is more in line with the literary nature of the book and with an accountable hermeneutics.

### 1. THE ISSUE

As a result of the almost exclusive focus on historical work in Biblical scholarship, the theoretical, hermeneutical and theological implications of historical views on the book of Revelation are not always spelled out.<sup>2</sup> This can be best illustrated in the light of two recent commentaries. One, written by Knight (1999) and published in the series *Readings: A New Biblical Commentary*,<sup>3</sup> draws attention because of discussion of its explicit theological inter-

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- 2 Bauckham (1993) represents one of the few attempts in the last decade to develop the theological interpretation of Revelation. The recent publication edited by Backhaus (2001) is even more notable, since it has a much more technical character than the work of Bauckham, written on a more accessible level. The contributions in Backhaus focus on specific themes and not on the theology of the book as a whole.
- 3 Considerable progress in scholarship on Revelation over the last decade motivated this publication. “The time has come for a reading of Revelation that takes these new developments into account” (1999:9). The theological implications of Revelation spelled out in this commentary, are not a side interest of the author. On the second page of the commentary Knight (1999:10) acknowledges that his own research interests have a bearing on his commentary, which he then describes as the history of early Christian doctrine.

est and contents.<sup>4</sup> When compared with the massive work by Aune (1997-1998) in the *Word Biblical Commentary* series, this commentary with its 183 pages seems minuscule. But in its theoretical and theological discussions it complements Aune's work, in which such reflections are indirect or lacking. Knight's remarks about the contemporary value of Revelation are especially interesting. They reveal the important place of theories and hermeneutics in determining the theological outcomes of interpretation.

In this article attention will be given to some theoretical, hermeneutical and theological facets of recent research on Revelation by discussing the motif of persecution in Revelation. This will include reflection on the newer crisis theory that Knight proposes as an alternative to the earlier established positions. It will be analysed and evaluated in the light of other, similar research on the issue and in terms of its theoretical, hermeneutical and theological impact. In a final part some critical remarks about aspects of these theories will be made and an alternative reading of persecution will be suggested.

## 2. THE TRADITIONAL PERSECUTION THEORY

The theory that the book of Revelation was intended to comfort its readers in their persecution by Romans in the time of emperor Domitian<sup>5</sup> and to motivate them to resist the absolutising tendencies of these Roman authorities was one of the most established research findings in New Testament studies, especially in commentaries that have been moulded in the tradition of the time historical approach.

The following excerpt from Van Hartingsveld (1985:1) will illustrate this.

The Revelation of John transfers us to the Roman empire under the rule of Emperor Domitian (A.D. 91-96). John exhorts Christians to remain faithful and comforts the church with the victory of God and the Lamb. Some believers have already been martyred, one of

4 He is the author of two publications on the *Ascension of Isaiah* (Knight 1995 & 1996).

5 Already suggested by Irenaeus in his *Adv. Haer.* 5.30.3. Even stronger are remarks by Sickenberger (1940:15) in his interesting commentary:

Nach dem Vorgange von Nero hat auch Kaiser Domitian, der sich *dominus et deus* nennen liess, gegen Ende seines Leben im Jahre 96 eine blutige Christenverfolgung angeordnet, von der wir allerdings nicht wissen, ob sie sich auch in Kleinasien ausgewirkt hat ... In dieser Zeit des Kämpfens, Leidens und Hoffens der Christenheit fällt die Abfassung der Apk.

whom Antipas, is mentioned by name (Rev. 2:13). John sees and hears the souls under the altar, who cry out for vengeance (6:9-10); he sees the souls of those who have been beheaded (20:4). The blood of saints and prophets has been shed (16:6). The woman sitting on the beast is drunk with the blood of the martyrs (17:6). The emperor had himself venerated as a god and anyone not co-operating had to fear the worst. But mighty Rome is sure to perish; God and his Anointed have the last word.<sup>6</sup>

Several historical events, people and institutions form the background for this view and promoted its widespread acceptance. There is, in the first place, a history of persecution by Roman emperors of which Christians were the direct victims or of which they were very aware. This included the well-known and bloody persecution of Christians in Rome already as early as the time of the emperor Nero<sup>7</sup> who blamed Christians for the fire in the city in 64 A.D.<sup>8</sup> This Neronian persecution framed historical interpretations of Roman Emperors and their rule in later times (e.g. of the rule of Domitian). This happened already in antiquity when Melito of Sardis singled out Nero and Domitian as two emperors who falsely accused Christians (cf. Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 4.26.9), whilst Eusebius describes Domitian as the successor of Nero because of his persecution of Christians (*Hist. Eccl.* 3:17). With Nero begins a *Wirkungsgeschichte* of persecution that is linked with Domitian, so that the references to persecution in Revelation are commonly linked with them and, consequently, with an official and widespread action of the Roman Empire against Christians.<sup>9</sup>

6 Mounce (1977:31-36) places Revelation in the time of Domitian, linking it to his persecution of Christians who failed to participate in the imperial cult. He quotes Kümmel's *Introduction* as authority who wrote that under Domitian "persecution of Christians by the state on religious grounds took place for the first time" (Mounce 1977:33). He is reserved, though, as is clear when he adds later on:

Although the evidence for widespread persecution under Domitian is not especially strong, there is no other period in the first century in which it would be more likely.

This remark is an illustration how the reading of a text is directed by historical construction (instead, as is more meaningful, the other way round).

7 Cf. Suetonius *Nero* 16.2 and Tacitus' *Annals* 15.38, 44.

8 Aune (1997:lxvi).

9 Collins (1984:100-101) wrote succinctly about the trauma that Nero's action against Christians created decades after the actual event. Her perspective is confirmed by the way in which the *Nero redivivus* tradition emerged and by the fact that this tradition was taken up so clearly in Revelation in Rev. 13 and 17.

So prominent is Nero in sources from this period and in the mind of commentators who have to interpret the information on persecution in Revelation, that some of them prefer to date it in his time.<sup>10</sup> Robinson (1976: 221-253) argued this position, claiming that the persecution in Revelation can only be understood in a Neronic context. A Neronic dating of the book obviously implies a re-evaluation of the Domitian position. Quite telling, for example, is Robinson's observation that nothing that Domitian did equalled the actions of Nero, so that Revelation with its strong sense of persecution would fit better in a Neronic context.<sup>11</sup> This example serves to illustrate the major impact of the events under Nero on later generations and on modern interpreters of that time and the book of Revelation. After Nero not much is needed to portray Domitian as an emperor who is the most probable candidate as persecutor of Christians. Historical information about his reign together with what is known about his violent and abusive personality were taken as sufficient indication that persecution took place under his rule (Aune 1997:lxvii). The extreme language of Revelation on persecution fits well in such a Domitianic context.

The emperor cult,<sup>12</sup> secondly, also intensified the perceptions about Domitian persecution. The historical reconstruction of the emperor cult normally implies that it is deeply threatening, leading to the persecution and death of Christians. The emperor cult is then, in turn, linked to the figure of Domitian. Metzger (1993:15-16), for example, writes that he is the first ruler to have forced Christians to worship the emperor.

Finally, specific historical sources and witnesses were quoted to prove that Revelation was written in the time of the Emperor Domitian.<sup>13</sup> Irenaeus dated it in that time (*Adv. Haer.* 5.30.3), but another source, Eusebius,

Note also similar observations by Kiddle (1946:xxxviii-xl). He traces the earlier warning of latent persecution to Jewish Christians, to the figure of Antiochus Epiphanes and to Caligula's actions in the temple in Jerusalem.

10 The Neronic date was especially popular in the earlier phases of New Testament scholarship. It is only from the twentieth century that a Domitianic date became more popular. Note, for example, the position of the well-known "Cambridge trio" (Westcott, Lightfoot & Hort) as discussed by Mounce (1977:36).

11 Robinson uses other arguments for his early dating of the book. One of them is that the number for the beast (666) fits Nero best. Cf. also Bell (1978).

12 Cf. Swete (1909:civ-cv); Collins (1984:101).

13 Aune (1997:lxvi) describes the way in which the evidence, listed for the first time in Lightfoot's *Apostolic Fathers*, was taken over by many later commentators without critical reflection.

describing the persecution under the emperor (in his *Hist. Eccl.* 3:17-20), also gave further cause to link Revelation to Domitian.

In all these attempts, the history and sources that portrayed a situation of persecution and that named Domitian as a major persecutor of Christians, together with the information in Revelation on the topic brought about a theory that established itself as almost unassailable. Revelation thus was seen as reflecting a situation in which the Roman Emperor Domitian violently persecuted Christians because of their faith.

### 3. DOMITIAN PERSECUTION REVISITED

In recent research on Revelation a major revision of the persecution theory has taken place. The revision related to the way in which Domitian has been portrayed as a persecutor of Christians and does not necessarily question the motif of and references to persecution in Revelation. It revised the link of this motif with Domitian, particularly because of the lack of evidence of an *official and active* policy of persecution in his time and on his authority.<sup>14</sup>

The arguments are based on a re-evaluation of the sources. Firstly, the prejudices at work in historical reports about Domitian are pointed out. The distorted picture of Domitian in some historical reports was the result of the desire of his opponents to score political points against him. Three leading authors (Tacitus, Suetonius and Pliny the Younger) emphasise his cruelty and autocratic behaviour in their writings in order to advance the cause of the senators with whom they had extensive political links and with whose cause they sympathised (Aune 1997:lxvii-lxviii).

It is noted, secondly, how other sources portray Domitian as a careful, moderate and incorrupt ruler. The situation before his reign is often contrasted with the improvements that he brought about and that characterised the times after him (Aune 1997:lxix).

14 An example of a popular commentary in which this new position is reflected, is Wall (1991:10) who writes:

Recent research, however, suggests that Rome did not single out Christianity for persecution; neither is there much evidence to confirm an empirewide effort to repress Christian worship.

Wall refers to Boring's 1989 commentary on Revelation. Piquant is the footnote in which he quotes Moffat on the insufficient evidence for a general Asiatic persecution, adding "a few drops of rain warn of an approaching storm" (1977:33; cf. also Kiddle 1947:xxxvii).

It is also noted, thirdly, that there is no proof of any *official* persecution of Christians under Domitian, even if he did act extremely autocratically, repressing Roman senators and persecuting both Jews and Christians.<sup>15</sup>

A short digression about some of the roots of this revision is needed here. The argument about Domitian and an official policy of persecution should be seen in the context of a debate in the sixties of the previous century, when Croix, in a wider, historical context, investigated the persecution of the Christians in an essay that drew much attention, particularly in research on Revelation. He questioned existing theories on persecution, especially as an official action by the state, arguing that public opinion forced some sporadic actions of Roman authorities against Christians, mainly because they were perceived to be disrespectful to established religion in their refusal to participate in the cults. Their claims to exclusiveness created the tension that led their contemporaries to call for their punishment.<sup>16</sup>

Once these basic observations were being made, other historical studies followed that solidified the position that no official persecution of Christians under Domitian can be proven. This needs further explanation. Before this is done below, it is noteworthy that this revision of the Domitianic persecution which is essentially a historical enterprise, repeats the hermeneutical approach of the readings that preceded it: a historical reconstruction of Domitianic times is done and then studied in terms of its impact on the text of Revelation. The argument is circular: it is assumed that Revelation refers to a Domitianic situation, this situation is reconstructed historically (to reflect no official persecution) and Revelation is then read against the backdrop of this reconstructed history. The text remains a captive of historical reconstruction, as will become clear when one studies the way in which Revelation is reread in terms of its portrayal of the persecution of the faithful.

#### 4. TEXTUAL REFERENCES TO PERSECUTION REVISITED

Once the Domitian link has been weakened and the conviction established that he was not guilty of any official persecution of Christians, the reading of the persecution passages in Revelation seems to be affected rather incisively. This happens in different ways.

15 Cf. esp. Collins (1984:69-70), who concludes, "There seems, therefore, to be no reliable evidence supporting the theory that Domitian persecuted Christians as Christians", and also Schüssler-Fiorenza (1989:415).

16 Cf. the discussion and references in Collins (1984:70-72). Aune (1997:lxvii) also refers to and quotes from Croix in his insightful comments.

In one of the more extensive discussions of persecution in Revelation, Collins (1984:70) argues that it provides “nothing more than an example of the usual sporadic repression suffered by the Christians in the first two centuries”<sup>17</sup> and supports this statement by allowing only for a few passages in it to “look back on persecution in the past.” They are Revelation 1:9 where John is said to have been banished because of his activities as a prophet and 2:13 where the death of Antipas is mentioned. It is doubtful whether the reference to Christians under the altar in 6:9-11 is referring to the past. All other instances refer to persecutions expected in the future. The two certain passages cannot be linked to official persecution and could have taken place “at almost any time in the first two centuries after the death of Jesus” (Collins 1984:71). Of other references to persecution in the book, it “seems safest to conclude that most ... expresses the author’s expectation of persecution.”<sup>18</sup>

This rereading of the persecution motif in Revelation is intensified in Knight’s interpretation of several seminal passages in Revelation:

(T)he internal evidence of Revelation hardly supports the view that the Apocalypse was addressed to a situation dominated by martyrdom. The only martyr mentioned by name is the Antipas of Rev. 2:13, and it is far from certain how this person died. The other references to martyrdom in Revelation are essentially symbolic and they must be judged in the wider context of the imagery that the Apocalypse constructs. The threat of widespread martyrdom is significantly unconfirmed by the letters to the seven churches which, if anything, indicated that the Apocalypse was addressed to a situation dominated by complacency and not by guilt (Knight 1999:22).

According to him, John’s banishment to Patmos (Rev.1:9) does not reflect persecution. He went there on a (form of) retreat, that is, to receive a prophetic revelation (Knight 1999:21, 38).<sup>19</sup> The reference to Antipas in Revelation

17 She adds:

It is doubtful that the emperor cult was forced upon Christians at any time during the first and early second centuries, including the reigns of Domitian and Trajan. The book of Revelation cannot be understood as a response to a new initiative against the Christians taken by Roman authorities (1984:71).

18 Kiddle (1946:xxxvii) is one of many others who recognised this important fact without toning down the importance of persecution in the book.

19 How radical this interesting observation is, becomes clear when one considers the many theories that kept researchers busy about the nature of the assumed banishment of John. For an example, cf. Collins (1984:102-103). All these dis-

2:13 “contains the only named and documented instance of martyrdom in the Apocalypse”, but it is significant that in Pergamum, the “absolute blackspot in the churches addressed” only one martyr is mentioned (Knight 1999:46). The imprisonment of some Smyranean believers alludes to impending suffering. Suffering as a familiar feature in eschatological tradition is mentioned because in John’s view the believers “are not suffering enough. A church that is doing well must be warned not to slip” (Knight 1999:45). References to Jewish opponents that imply harsh action of exclusion against Christians are read symbolically: “synagogue of Satan” and false Jews (Rev. 3:9) denote

a pattern of behaviour and not primarily an ethnic and religious identity.... John here casts the faithful Christian in the role of the ‘true Jew’ and presents Christians opposed to his position as ‘the synagogue of Satan’ and ‘false Jew’ (Knight 1999:53; cf. further below).

This revision of the persecution motif reflects an interesting hermeneutical shift. Knight, leaning heavily on his understanding of the allusive and ambiguous symbolism of Revelation, stresses repeatedly that there is not a simple line from the symbols in the text to a historical situation. Whilst others would see the nightmarish Imperial Cult as a main threat behind many utterances, and, especially behind the second beast, he finds no textual evidence of compulsory sacrifices to the emperor that may have caused persecution. Revelation 13:14 (Knight 1999:99) is one of the few, if not the only, reference to the imperial cult in this book, he observes.<sup>20</sup> Miracles by the second beast criticise the divinisation of emperors, “but we should beware of confusing John’s rhetoric with the actual situation addressed” (Knight 1999:99). The same caution is evident when he discusses the notoriously difficult Revelation 17:10-11 with the reference to seven kings. He finds it impossible to identify the kings. “The language is primarily symbolic and mythological and it does not necessarily offer a full historical precision” (Knight 1999:118).

cussions are suspended by a simple alternative and seemingly legitimate reading of Revelation 1:9.

(The tradition that John had been banished to Patmos must itself be banished from the exegesis of the Apocalypse as unsupported by external and internal evidence. [Knight 1999:38]).

But cf. further below. Knight’s reading is not a new insight, though, since Safrey (1975), amongst others, also questioned the view that John was banished to Patmos, stating that he withdrew for a prophetic experience. Cf. also Bauckham (1993:4).

<sup>20</sup> Aune (1997:lxiv) points out how the significance of the emperor cult generally has been overemphasised.



Knight's commentary reflects sensitivity for literary matters, as is clear from this understanding of its symbolism and as is also evident from the way in which he analyses the book. This does not mean that he neglects the historical context of the book.<sup>21</sup> He has, on the contrary, fixed views on the history of Revelation, as will be clear from the discussion below. He does, however, create a greater gap between the text and its historical context than is usually the case, at the same time limiting the historical reconstruction that is undertaken by scholars in terms of the text. The text plays a more prominent and directive part in his own work, not only on an intuitive level by limiting the reconstructive work, but also in the theoretical reflections on the symbolic nature of the text as literary work. This shift is an important step forward in the ongoing interpretation of Revelation.

Whilst Knight's hermeneutical observations are positive, questions about the way in which he comes to certain conclusions about persecution in the text, need to be answered. But before this is done, some remarks must be made about a new theory that is developed in terms of the revised readings of the persecution motif in Revelation.

## 5. THEORIES OF PERCEIVED PERSECUTION

As a result of the revision of persecution passages in the book, a new theory about the origins of the book developed. Collins (1984:166) argued that Revelation should not be understood as a response to "an external crisis due to some recent historical or social change." The book is deeply embedded in the world in which Christians found themselves. The presence of foreign, Roman rulers, tension with Jewish groups, the religious, social, economic and political situation of western Asia Minor, as well as the world-view of the author and addressees produced a crisis. Christians began to differ about their response to their social world.

In other words, external and internal factors contributed to the origins of Revelation. On the one hand there is upheaval and pressures within the social world of the author that created some form of deprivation, whilst, on the other hand, there was a particular religious perspective that steers the experience of deprivation.

A new set of expectations had arisen as a result of faith in Jesus as the Messiah and of belief that the kingdom of God and Christ had been established. It was the tension between John's vision of the

21 For example: although the Roman Empire is involved in some way in Revelation 17, John's vision is not set "against Rome' world domination in any limited sense," but condemns the whole social order of his time (Knight 1999:118).

kingdom of God and his environment that moved him to write his Apocalypse (Collins 1984:106).

Although diverse aspects of an external situation converged to put extensive pressure on some Christians, Revelation was essentially the result of psychological stress within a small group. Collins (1984:73) remarks briefly during her discussion of the nature of the persecution, that

(T)he book of Revelation cannot be understood as a response to a new initiative against the Christians taken by Roman authorities. *A more plausible view of its function is that it was written to awaken and intensify Christian exclusiveness, particularly vis-à-vis the imperial cult* (my emphasis).

Thus, the book does not reflect a real persecution as was thought previously by New Testament scholars. It tells of the inner feelings of a community that their situation has taken on crisis dimensions that require a radical response from the faithful and require withdrawal from it. Others had to be brought on board of this exclusive group that drew clear social boundaries between them and the others. This was done by accentuation and developing the feelings of crisis. Though the crisis roots somewhere in external factors also, it is ultimately of the making of specific individuals.

This theory is developed further and sometimes rather idiosyncratically by Knight (1999:28). He argues that Revelation reflects internal struggles in Asian congregations on the issue of social integration with their pagan context. He thus develops a well-known theory of L. L. Thompson<sup>22</sup> that the author of Revelation *created* a crisis consciousness to demarcate social boundaries between his readers and their pagan neighbours, practically requiring them “to be a sectarian countercommunity in the midst of an unbelieving world” (Knight 1999:29, 154). In the process of doing so, Knight argues, the author makes those who do not support him and his followers into enemies.

With these remarks the previously established position in New Testament scholarship that reconstructed a “real” world behind the text in which the Roman emperor Domitian persecuted Christians, is replaced by a reconstruction of what the author of Revelation experienced as his world. What happens in the text and in the mind of the author does not necessarily overlap with the “real” world. Perceptions and experiences of the world are given explanatory power.

22 Cf. his *The Book of Revelation: apocalypse and empire*. Collins also refers to Thompson's work, but in a first article that is a precursor to the later more extensive publication (1984:82).

## 6. THE THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE PERCEIVED PERSECUTION THEORY

Of special significance are the theological consequences of this theory of perceived persecution. Collins, for example, spells out these implications of her theory in the conclusion of her book when, discussing the perceived crisis in which the expectations of John and his followers stand in conflict with their social reality, she draws attention to the aggressive and violent way in which this is done.

This aggression has two sides. On the one hand it is constructive in so far as Revelation succeeds in resolving tensions in a way reminiscent of Aristotle's theory on catharsis.<sup>23</sup> The harsh and violent passages in the book have a psychological function of releasing the feelings of tension. His resolution of tension is, however, also destructive. John dehumanises people by dividing them in two opposing camps and denigrating those not on his side.

Collins describes several attempts in the history of research to come to terms with the violent nature of the book. These attempts seek justification of the dehumanising language of Revelation in its oppressive and exploitative world. Of significance here is her response to Barclay.<sup>24</sup> Barclay mentions the extreme and exploitative lifestyle of the city as one of the reasons why it is justly made an object of vengeance in the book. In similar vein, Schüssler-Fiorenza is quoted when she refers to the outcry of the saints in Revelation 6:9-11 by saying,

many exegetes label this outcry as un-Christian and contrary to the preaching of the gospel only because they themselves 'do not suffer unbearable oppression and are not driven by the question for justice' (Collins 1984:170).

Collins's criticism of these attempted explanations illustrates the force and implications of her crisis-theory:

As we saw in Chapter 3 (about the perceived crisis), there is little justification for Barclay's excuse of 'terrible suffering'. Likewise, it is doubtful that Schüssler-Fiorenza can base her defense, as she attempts to do, on the assumption that John and his hearers were suffering 'unbearable justice and oppression' (Collins 1984:170).<sup>25</sup>

23 Gager (1975) is known as the scholar who developed this perspective in terms of Levi-Strauss's work on myth.

24 He "has struggled most deeply with the harsh language" (Collins 1984:168).

25 Collins (1984:170) continues to discuss the subordination of love to justice in the text, as she formulates it, adding that "(T)he question is whether the circumstances at the time of writing justified" this.

In her own historical portrayal, the conviction that John's writing does not overlap with "external" reality" has far-reaching effects for Collins' view of its theology. Her historical portrayal of a situation in which Domitian did not officially persecute Christians determines the theoretical and theological outcome incisively. That Revelation is about perceptions makes the aggression and violence in the text so much more unacceptable and problematic. Because the crisis was shifted to the level of perceptions in the historical analysis, the language of the book is offensive and theologically questionable.

According to Collins, then, the resolution of this conflict cannot provide a model for similar actions in the present. To discern the role of Revelation today one needs to read the book critically in terms of the values of humanisation, justice and love (Collins 1984:165-167) that imply, among others, that one should not dehumanise opponents. The theology of the book thus has limited value, mainly because of the extreme way in which the author perceived his situation and expressed it in his text.

Equally reserved is Knight when he works out the theological implications of his own reading of Revelation (1999:29). He finds the sectarian mindset and the confusing outlook of the author main stumbling blocks. John found social integration of Christians with the pagan world in the Pauline sense out of the question. He was strictly against adopting pagan practices. His instruction to his followers to isolate them from their social world was tantamount to a call to become a sectarian countercommunity. He guided his flock, already in the minority, deeper into the wilderness of seclusion. In this he was close to the absolute sectarianism of the Qumran community that represents the logical conclusion of John's own position.

In evaluating the *Wirkungsgeschichte* and theological significance of Revelation, Knight states that it is an open question whether Revelation contributed to the survival of Christianity in the seven cities. Revelation as a sectarian book

requires careful handling in any discussion of the place of the church in the world that might be undertaken today (Knight 1999:29).

He therefore thinks further reflection is needed on a "provocative" comment of Bauer about the extremely confused religious outlook of the apocalypticist.

There is also room for doubt as to whether the apocalypticist, with his extremely confused religious outlook that peculiarly mixes Jewish, Christian and mythological elements and ends in chiliasm, can be regarded in any sense as an intellectual and spiritual leader of an important band of Christians in western Asia Minor (Knight 1999:29).

With this observation, the full circle has been drawn from a reconstruction of a historical situation that lacks the “real” persecution that was traditionally suggested in scholarship, to the text of Revelation that lacks the prominent motif of persecution that was delineated in revisionist research on the book, to an evaluation of a confused author as belonging to a sectarian minority that set itself on a path of irrevocable withdrawal and isolation from other Christians. These remarks illustrate how powerful historical reconstructions can influence theological observations. How legitimate these observations and their underlying theories are now need further scrutiny.

## 7. CRITICAL OBSERVATIONS

The crisis theory will make sense to readers who feel that a crude persecution theory is often imposed on the text and who recognise the problem of the lack of evidence for official persecution in Domitianic times. Whether this explains the nature of the text and its context adequately, now needs further reflection.

### 7.1 Persecution as a leading motif in the text

A first question is whether the motif of persecution that appears throughout the book can be toned down, spiritualised as fictive language or moved so radically to the level of the experience of a particular author as is being done in the crisis theory.

There can be little doubt that the motif of persecution is a leading motif in the book. This is clear right from the outset. The self-description of John at the beginning of the book (Rev. 1:9) introduces the motif of persecution in several ways. John characterizes himself as their brother “who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance” (συγκοινωνὸς ἐν τῇ θλίψει καὶ βασιλείᾳ καὶ ὑπομονῇ ἐν Ἰησοῦ). The triad, qualifying the noun (co-sufferer) and joined together by the preposition ἐν, frames the middle word (“kingdom”) with the two other descriptions of persecution and perseverance — both important motifs in the rest of the book. Both words in the frame, persecution and perseverance, refer to a situation of oppression. Both are repeated later on in the book. With this triad at the beginning of the book, the tone is set for the rest of Revelation.

The prominence of the motif is further confirmed by the difficult and harsh situation that the seven churches are said to face in Revelation 2-3. The worst forms of persecution are mentioned explicitly in the letter to Smyrna where their affliction, poverty, imprisonment and the possible death of some (Rev. 2:9-10) are mooted, followed in the letter to Pergamum

by the reference to the killing of Antipas (Rev. 2:13). Jews and other Christians are explicitly listed as opponents.<sup>26</sup> The letters also stress how important perseverance is in such a setting and speak positively about the future of those who overcome.

In the rest of the book persecution is mentioned at crucial points. At a crucial point, the witnesses in Revelation 6:9-11 ask for vengeance because they had been slaughtered for the word of God and the testimony they had given. Their cry is answered amongst others in Revelation 11, where the two witnesses are killed by the beast (Rev.11:7), but are resurrected (Rev. 11:11) and in several other chapters and incidents in the book. The story of the witnesses is at the same time an example of the opposition and consequences of those who face and challenge evil with their testimony. After the eviction of the dragon from heaven, a loud voice in heaven (Rev.12:11) announces the coming of salvation because he has been conquered by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of the testimony of “our comrades” (Rev. 12:10). In Revelation 16:6 a further answer is given in that the judgement of God is brought about because of the shedding of the blood of the saints and the prophets (cf. 17:6). In a climactic phrase in Revelation 18:24 the city is said to be judged, amongst others, because it contains the blood of the saints and the prophets, but also of all who have been slaughtered on earth.

This analysis confirms that persecution cannot be regarded as a minor issue in the book, whilst it is hard to conceive of such an overriding theme being merely a matter of the perception of an individual, as is suggested in the crisis theory. That is why, in a recent publication on Revelation, Backhaus (2001:18-25) speaks of a “tiefgreifende Krise” in which Christianity found itself at the time of the writing of this book. He associates the book with an external and internal crisis. The external crisis is typical of a minority in so far as it reflects cultural pressures, social limitation, sporadic attacks, legal actions (e.g. exile), imprisonment and even capital punishment. Internally the church faced divisions regarding life in a pagan context. Rejecting the notion of a perceived crisis theory, Backhaus (2001:20) correct-

26 Knight, strangely explaining references to “synagogue of Satan” and to false Jews (Rev. 3:9) as denoting “a pattern of behaviour and not primarily an ethnic and religious identity” (Knight 1999:53), does acknowledge elsewhere, however, that the Jewish opponents could relate to Jewish opposition to Christians commonly found throughout the empire (Knight 1999:44). If this is so, how does one convincingly prove that the “false Jews” of Revelation 2:9 refer to “Christians who refuse to do what Johns says” rather than to such groups?

ly draws the attention to the closing, that is “the one who conquers”-formula at the end of each of the seven letters that reflects a context in which Christians faced real threats from their opponents. The realities of the emperor cult and the action of Jewish groups in the Roman Empire certainly also contributed to this serious situation. In such a situation the church is under deadly attack (Rev. 6:1-8; 12; 13; 17), involved in a struggle for life and death, called to follow the Lamb wherever He goes (Rev. 14:4) and to be with Him (Rev. 17:14).

### 7.2 A multifaceted portrayal of persecution

The second problem about the crisis theory is that it is reductionist in nature, leading to the “relatively simple” message of Revelation being seen as a call to readers of the book to “stand their distance” from the pagan world (Knight 1999:55-56). Such a message seems not less reductionist than the readings that interpret the book as a prophecy against Roman opponents who persecute the church.

The notion of persecution is more complex than is suggested by such remarks. This is clear from the several parties that oppose the church and that contribute to the persecution of the faithful. The book is also about more than the mere physical aspects of persecution. It interprets the forces behind the persecution, discusses the different forms that persecution takes throughout history, spells out its comprehensive consequences and investigates ways in which to respond to the persecution. The complexities of the letters and of the book in general, with its positive and negative symbols and their many possible references seem to require a more comprehensive explanation than is given by the crisis theory.<sup>27</sup>

Knight, in discussing the meaning of the two witnesses, notes that John does not name them “perhaps to tease his readers into thought.” He adds quite perceptively that

his silence means we cannot be sure that the witnesses’ identity is precisely restricted to the two figures mentioned (i.e. Moses and Elijah). Symbolism comes first in the Apocalypse; identification follows behind (Knight 1999:86).

Sentences further, he adds that these symbols “make a point on one level which can (and does) have meaning on a range of other levels.” Teasing the reader to think and having many meanings, are tantalising suggestions about

<sup>27</sup> Cf. e.g. also the important remarks by Bauckham (1993:15). Collins (1984) does more justice to the complexities of persecution.

the “fertile” mind and text of John, supporting and developing a growing belief that John’s symbolism is much more complicated than simply (and allegorically) referring to obvious Roman matters, issues and institutions, as has often been suggested in scholarly research. Since the motif of persecution is developed by so many symbols, it follows that John wanted his readers to engage constructively and imaginatively with it on many levels. It is unconvincing to reduce this engagement to attempts to social withdrawal.

Kowalski (2001:76), in her description of the situation of the seven churches, also drew attention to the special nature of the language used by the author. Though one can draw a concrete profile of the churches, they are

durch die Verwendung metaphorischer Sprache von einer grossen Offenheit geprägt, die Aktualisierung ermöglicht. Die Bilder wollen bei den Leser/-innen aller Zeiten eine produktive Kreativität freisetzen, die zur persönliche Auseinandersetzung mit der prophetischen Kritik des Johannes und schliesslich zu einer entscheidenden Bindung an Christus und einer an ihm orientierten Lebenspraxis führen soll.

These remarks should not be read as if John wanted to write a text in which he spoke about a particular situation from which certain principles or insights could be extracted for application by his readers in their own situation. John himself is working creatively with his own situation, producing several layers of meaning. His text cannot be reduced to a “simple message” about social withdrawal.

### 7.3 The directive role of the text in interpretation

These observations about the prominence of the persecution motif in Revelation need not imply a return to the older theory about a “real” persecution. That theory is problematic since it reduces the text effectively to reflect a “real” situation obfuscating the directive role it fulfils in interpretation.

To investigate persecution in Revelation in terms of “real” persecution during the reign of Domitian (like in the traditional approach) is a logical outcome of a historical critical way of reading a text and particularly of the tradition in New Testament Studies to regard a book as communicating a message about a specific situation to readers in order to influence their behaviour. The crisis theory that questions the reality of the persecution also depends on such an approach. Both these theories move from a reconstructed historical context to the text itself.

This is in itself not a problem. The use of historical work is necessary in order to promote responsible readings and avoid irresponsible interpreta-



tions of texts. It only becomes problematic where the directive role of the text in the process of interpretation is neglected.

The problem goes deeper, though. Historical work on Revelation has been deeply influenced by the ongoing attempts to place the book in the context of the Roman Empire and its opposition to the Christians. There can be little doubt that Revelation is firmly embedded in this world and that the author assembles the building blocks of this text from this particular historical and social context. But is it legitimate to restrict the author and the church of the first century to this history and to reduce his text to become a window on this world? Respect for the literary character and integrity of the text may lead as in another, less allegorical manner,<sup>28</sup> away from simple equations between a text and a presumed historical context.

This alternative approach can be explained in terms of the way in which historical scholarship reduced Revelation to a prediction of events that will unfold as the persecution of Domitian continues and that will end with the destruction of the Roman Empire. Sickenberger (1940:25) observed that the attempts to link the seven mountains and kings in Revelation 17:9-10 to Rome and its emperors rest on the assumption that the book is a warning against the emperor cult.<sup>29</sup> These chapters should then also be taken seriously when they predict the downfall of Rome. But we know from history that "Rome" was not destroyed as predicted in the book, which implies that John's prophecy was false.<sup>30</sup> In this instance the historical approach fails to do justice to the understanding of the text.

The literary character of the book also pleads against a facile interpretation of the book in terms of a reconstructed history.<sup>31</sup> The nature of the book suggests that the author wanted to keep his distance from a particular historical situation. Whilst the situation under Domitian may have pro-

28 "Allegorical" is used in the sense of having one historical referent, after which the meaning is exhausted.

29 The same assumption is also at work in the crisis theory that interprets the book as a warning against social integration and compromise.

30 This would question its inclusion in the canon, since the early church was aware of how unacceptable false prophets were.

31 There is a strong need for a proper appreciation of the literary character of Revelation. Note, for example, how Stuckenbruck (1995:270-271) tones down the interpretation of the refusal traditions in which angel veneration is rejected as a specific invective against outsiders because these traditions are at home in a literary context. Note especially his discussion about the socio-historical situation and symbolic world (1995:31-41).

vided the final impulse towards the writing of the book, the language and symbols refer to more than this situation only. The author was aware of a long history of rejection of God's message by peoples of the world and the Jewish groups. Nero made a impression on him, leading to the incorporating of the *Nero redivivus* tradition in Revelation 13 and 18.<sup>32</sup> But his history does not refer to one or two major figures like Nero or Domitian. These two figures are part of a wider social context that believers experienced as deeply threatening, especially, as Croix has pointed out, because of the way in which pagan society expected the same religious positioning from Christians that they themselves had.<sup>33</sup> And it has often been remarked what intense pressures had been put on those who forsook their previous allegiances. In the cities of the Roman Empire such switches were often quickly observed and deeply censured. In this regard it is noteworthy what Giblin (1991:10) writes,

(W)orldwide Roman imperial policy, with its deification of the Emperor, provided a *ready example* of colossal opposition to God. The world-reign of God, which was the quintessence of apocalyptic concern, could in John's day find no better counter-image than caricature of Rome. Lastly, no doubt in his own experience as in that of fellow believers who shared John's urban environment, social discrimination and occasional violence (like the murder of Antipas, 2:13) easily gave rise to a perception of *ongoing* oppression (my emphases).

"Ongoing" must be understood in terms of a long history. Persecution in Revelation is closely linked with the Christ events and with Hebrew Scriptures. The crucifixion of Christ, model of the persecution of the faithful, is mentioned in Revelation 11:8 in an interesting manner: the city where He was crucified is also the place where the two witnesses were killed. At the same time, the place is described as Sodom and Egypt, the classic names for those with a godless lifestyle and who persecuted the people of God. By many references to and dependence on Daniel (with its history of Antiochus Epiphanes) and references to the persecution of other prophets, the text displays sensitivity for the many ways in which evil persecuted those who proclaim God's will. John reads the history of the faithful as a history of persecution. His text takes his readers on the sorrowful jour-

32 Cf. the above quoted observations. Cf. also Giblin (1991:10)

... like that of Nero (A.D. 67) before it, Domitian's hostility vividly raised the prospect of what Christians could expect from Rome.

33 It is often said that Paul's position is more open and tolerant. This may be the case in the Corinthian correspondence, but in 1 Thessalonians he is not as compromising (e.g. 1 Thess. 1:3, 6, 9; 3:3, etc.).

ney of the faithful through the ages. In depicting this journey, John transcends his own time and his own historical situation.<sup>34</sup>

To link persecution in Revelation to one particular instance in history, is to overlook these complexities of the text and the history in which the text wanted to situate itself. The author of the book was aware of a long and complex history of persecution of the faithful. His book is not about a single incident of extreme proportions. If the faithful experienced persecution in the time of the prophets, including Daniel with his desolation of the abomination, in the time of Jesus, in the time of Nero and Domitian, the church as the two witnesses cannot expect something else for themselves.<sup>35</sup> This is what "all the churches," of which the seven Asia Minor churches are representatives and who need to go out as witnesses, should realise (e.g. Rev. 2:23). In this sense his message transcends the boundaries of one situation. It has a paradigmatic character. The text itself directs the reader beyond one particular situation.

Sickenberger (1940:25) drew attention to the way in which John purposefully wrote in a general manner:

Man übersah bei all diesen Anwendungen auf konkrete Einzelergebnisse... dass die Schilderungen der Apk mit Absicht sehr allgemein gehalten sind und deshalb auf verschiedenen Zeiten und Vorgänge passen. Darum hat mit dem Fortschreiten der Kirchengeschichte immer eine Einzeldeutung die andere abgelöst. Man hätte aber daraus lernen können, dass die Apk die Zukunft nur in Zusammenhang ähnlicher und sich wiederholender Ereignisse schildert. Die meisten Berichte sind generisch und typisch aufzufassen und wollen zeigen, welche Art von Schicksalen die Christen während ihres Lebens noch treffen wird.

The lack of specificity, so obvious because of the many opposing interpretations of the book, is not a matter of confusion in the material, but it is done on purpose in the light of the author's intention to write paradigmatically about the fate of Christianity in this dispensation. Though he

34 Giblyn (1991:10) wrote that the opposition to Christians "fostered the prophetic-apocalyptic desire for a definitive manifestation of God's justice on the 'sinful structure' of pagan society." More than this, the opposition recalled the suffering and persecution of the prophets and the faithful in the history of Israel. This is expressed in the universal character of the final reference to the persecution of the saints and the prophets: "And in you was found the blood of prophets and saints, and of all who have been slaughtered on earth" (Rev. 18:24).

35 Cf. the fuller discussion below.

takes his building blocks from the situation in which he wrote, he does not write merely and only about the situation in which he wrote:

Der Apk. ist also keine Darstellung der damaligen Zeit, durch die man wie ein Transparent die Zukunft erkennen kann, sondern eine Zukunftsgemälde, das auch mit einzelnen Farben der Gegenwart gemalt worden ist (Sickenberger 1940:26).

The portrayal in Revelation of evil in the future that will surpass the evil of his time and situation repeats what early Christian tradition presented in similar vein in prophetic passages in the Synoptic Gospels (e.g. Mt. 23). Both these instances contain literary reflections on the future fate of the church.

With these remarks the importance of the persecution motif in the text is acknowledged, but the text is not explained exclusively in terms of the historical situation or perceptions of the author about his own time. The text reveals that the author purposefully spoke generally about the future of the church, but then in terms of the present and the past.<sup>36</sup> Whilst there is evil, the church must be aware of what the future holds and how to prepare for it.<sup>37</sup>

The *Wirkungsgeschichte* of Revelation shows that later generations recognised it as a multivalent and rich text, relevant for much more than its own situation. The learned character of the book reflects the activity of an author that wanted to speak about the inexpressible, the intangible and transcendent matters that unfolded over centuries and affected many generations of faithful. In wanting to do this, he incorporated traditions that made his book into much more than only an attempt to console a few dislocated and

36 In the introduction to his commentary Giblin (1991:10) wrote, "... like that of Nero (A.D.67) before it, Domitian's hostility vividly raised the prospect of what Christians could expect from Rome." In terms of the criticism expressed in this section, one could amend this to remark that like the actions of Nero, Domitian's hostility vividly raised the prospect of what Christians could expect from evil.

37 John wrote his text in a time that the *Naberwartung* has generally subsided. Though his book contains some passages in which a near expectation is mooted, the seminal passage in which the saints are told to be patient (Rev. 6:9ff.) suggests that the book should not be read simplistically as expecting the end in the immediate future. The literary nature of the book, suggesting that it was designed and written over a long period of time and aspects of its contexts, confirms this (cf. e.g. Sickenberger 1940:25-26). This contributes towards understanding the future references to persecution as typical and paradigmatic.

nervous believers. To reduce the book to a historical moment in a closed communication process is to ignore the directions of the text.

Seen in this way, persecution in Revelation is not simply about Domitian hatred of Christians nor about perceptions of a confused apocalypticist, but is developed as a central theme in a literary manner as a response to events in the time of the author in the light of the ongoing history of believers who chose to remain faithful to God whatever the consequences.

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