

Idolatry and empire

J. Nelson Kraybill

On that morning a decade ago when twin towers fell and an empire shuddered, a dirge over the fall of Babylon in John's apocalypse pulsed on the pages of my Bible: "Alas, alas, the great city, where all who had ships at sea grew rich by her wealth! For in one hour she has been laid waste" (Rev. 18:19). Using "Babylon" as an epithet for first-century Rome, chapters 17 and 18 of Revelation expose the linkage of international trade, violence, and idolatrous allegiance in the first-century Roman Empire.

In the years since 2001, John's concern that Christians follow the Lamb and not take up arms has rung in my ears as a modern

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empire struck back with two wars of invasion: "If you kill with the sword, with the sword you must be killed. Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints" (Rev. 13:10).

John spoke to his day

There is no reason to think that John predicted the 2001 attacks or any other modern events. John and other ancient apocalyptic authors largely dealt with political and spiritual realities of their own day. But Revelation's exposé of idolatry and empire in the Roman world can open our eyes to imperial pretense in our era. Revelation calls

first-century readers—and today's believers—to give radical allegiance to Christ the Lamb.

Empires seduce and intimidate because they are beautiful and powerful. They also generate rituals, symbols, and icons that reinforce their aura of legitimacy. Rituals and symbols of empire, such as coins, flags, patriotic events, and national heroes, become so pervasive in the culture that they unconsciously shape our

attitudes and actions. Christian worship of God and the Lamb is essential to counter the spirit of violence, greed, and arrogance that undergirds empire. Worship reminds us that our allegiance is to the global reign of God, not primarily to nation, ethnic group, or class.

Seeing empire from a distance

It often is easier to identify idolatrous claims of empire from a distance than to see them in our immediate surroundings. The crass nature of eighteenth-century imperial ideology, for example, is evident to us in “Rule Britannia,” a song is still played today:

*When Britain first, at heaven’s command,
arose from out the azure main . . .
This was the charter, the charter of the land,
and guardian angels sang this strain:
Rule Britannia! Britannia rule the waves!
Britons never, never, never shall be slaves!*

Subsequent verses laud the freedom and majesty of Britain, and chortle over the “dread and envy” of other nations. These are classic imperial claims: divine mandate, glorious origins, and invincibility. John of Patmos saw the same qualities in Babylon/Rome, which “glorified herself and lived luxuriously.” Rome smugly said, “I rule as a queen; I am no widow, and I will never see grief” (Rev. 18:7).

Rome broadcast arrogance

Such arrogance went all the way back to Caesar Augustus, the first emperor to govern “all the [Roman] world” (Luke 2:1). By 31 BC, General Octavian—soon to be called Caesar Augustus—had defeated every opponent and established himself as undisputed ruler of the Mediterranean region. Though not named emperor until 27 BC, Octavian already had well-oiled propaganda mechanisms.

A denarius coin from 31 BC (see fig. 1) portrays Octavian (Caesar Augustus) as a handsome and resolute leader. The reverse depicts Victory, personified as a graceful female figure, striding across the globe. She bears two symbols of victory, a laurel wreath

and a palm frond. The inscription proclaims CAESAR DIVI F[ilius]—“Caesar, son of the deified one.” Octavian claimed the title of divinity because he was the adopted son of Julius Caesar. The Roman senate declared Julius Caesar divine after his assassination, allowing Octavian (Caesar Augustus) to claim the title “son of god.”



Fig. 1. Denarius coin depicting Octavian (Caesar Augustus). Image courtesy of Classical Numismatic Group, Inc.

Some subject people in the East, especially in the region where the seven churches of Revelation later emerged, *wanted* to worship Octavian (Caesar Augustus) as a god. After decades of wars and economic upheaval in the Mediterranean region, Octavian brought political stability and opportunity for business to flourish. Entrepreneurs and politicians requested permission from Octavian to set up altars and temples in his honor. Octavian and later emperors recognized the propaganda value of such extravagant expressions of allegiance. Pergamum—one of the seven cities of Revelation—was the first of many cities in the Roman world to erect a temple to worship the goddess Roma (personification of the Roman Empire) *and* Augustus (Octavian).

A *tetradrachm* coin (see fig. 2), minted in first-century Asia Minor, features Emperor Claudius (AD 41–54) on the front and a temple labeled ROM[a] ET AUG[ustus]—“Roma and Augustus”—on the reverse. The goddess Fortuna, holding a cornucopia representing abundance, places a crown on the head of Claudius. The emperor carries a scepter, symbol of power. The tableau

portrays emperor worship, which John of Patmos condemns in his vision as a vulgar parody of worship of the living God (Rev. 4:1–11).



Fig. 2. Tetradrachm coin depicting Emperor Claudius. Image courtesy of Classical Numismatic Group, Inc.

Imperial idolatry in a modern capital

Outright ruler worship seems foreign to us, but something reminiscent surfaced when the United States was an expanding global power in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A larger-than-life marble statue of George Washington, commissioned by the United States Congress in 1832, featured the first president posed like Zeus—naked above the waist, with right arm raised.¹

A massive 1865 fresco on the ceiling of the United States Capitol rotunda, still there today, shows Washington seated gloriously in the clouds of heaven, a rainbow at his feet. Flanking the first president are female personifications of Liberty and Victory, and thirteen maidens representing the thirteen first states. It is called “The Apotheosis [elevation to divinity] of Washington.” The title includes the very Greek word that ancient Romans used to describe the divinization of their emperors!

Female personification of empire

It is perverse that empires, generally patriarchal in character, often use images of women to personify themselves. The Romans called her *Roma*, the British called her *Britannia*, and the United States calls her *Liberty*, *Progress*, or *Columbia*. These images appear millions of times on coins, stamps, statuary, and official documents.

One of the most widely distributed artistic images of nineteenth-century America was the 1872 painting *American Progress*, by New York artist John Gast. The original is small (13 x 17 inches), but its symbolism made a huge impact on the American psyche. Lithographer George Crofutt added explanatory notes to his countless reproductions of the painting (see fig. 3). He said the “beautiful and charming Female” on the print “is floating westward through the air bearing on her forehead the ‘Star of Empire.’” On the right of the picture is a city, steamships, manufactories, schools and churches over which beams of light are streaming and filling the air—indicative of civilization.”



Fig. 3. A lithograph by George Crofutt, based on the painting *American Progress*, by John Gast (1872). This image is in the public domain.

To the west, Crofutt added, all is “darkness, waste and confusion.” From the east come railroads, wagons, hunters, gold seekers, pony express, and immigrants. Fleeing from Progress are “Indians, buffaloes, wild horses, bears, and other game, moving Westward, ever Westward, the Indians with their squaws . . . [who] turn their despairing faces” as they “flee the wondrous vision. The ‘Star’ is too much for them.”²

It is unlikely that John Gast ever saw the coin of Octavian (fig. 1), but the similarity between the Roman image of Victory and the American image of Progress is striking. Imperial power is a triumphant female striding across the globe, head high, skirt blowing in the breeze. She carries a schoolbook and represents enlightenment. She symbolizes Manifest Destiny, the political doctrine that God ordained (European) American colonists to conquer and exploit the continent from sea to sea.³

Babylon as epithet of loathing

The name *Babylon*—once denoting a city at the heart of the vast empire that ravaged Jerusalem in Jeremiah’s day—became an epithet of loathing that John and other Jewish or Christian radicals hurled against ancient Rome.⁴ In John’s appropriation of the label, Rome became a “great whore” with whom “the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and with the wine of whose fornication the inhabitants of the earth have become drunk” (Rev. 17:1–2).

A kind of globalization and business boom occurred in the ancient world as Rome imposed a unified monetary system on a vast region, suppressed piracy, and built roads. Elites in many subject nations acquired wealth and status by aligning themselves with Roma (Rome) and her “divine” emperors, a network of allegiance that John calls “fornication.”

Economic agenda of empires

Empires always have vested economic interests, and Revelation links those closely to idolatry. Given the fact that emperor worship pervaded trade guilds and merchant associations throughout the Roman world, this is not surprising. Merchants and entrepreneurs had to wear the “mark of the beast” (participate in emperor worship) in order to be able to “buy or sell” (Rev. 13:17). A modern equivalent might be tacit approval of the “war on terrorism” by corporations that massively participate in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. Countless Canadians and Americans are part of this endeavor through mutual funds invested in such companies.

When Americans invaded Iraq in 2003, they literally built a military base on top of archeological ruins of Nebuchadnezzar’s old imperial capital.⁵ Did the soldiers digging trenches through

those archeological ruins consider how the location of their military base represented modern empire aligning with the idolatry and hubris of ancient Babylon (Ps. 137) and Rome (Rev. 18)? If John of Patmos were listing the booty of empire today (see 18:11–13), he certainly would include petroleum!

Powerful rituals in worship today

Christian worship needs to include powerful rituals of allegiance to God and the Lamb to counter the constant lure and booty of empire. Most residents of the United States and Canada benefit from economic imbalances that tilt the scales of international commerce in favor of wealthy nations. European nations and the United States once colonized other parts of the world by direct rule. Now they often find it preferable simply to siphon off natural resources of weaker nations through diplomatic pressure or economic incentives to local elites.

The resulting injustices include poverty-level wages for millions of workers in the two-thirds world, trade agreements that favor North American exports of agricultural products, and “foreign aid” that is largely military in nature. The American empire conducts business with a veiled fist, putting faith in a defense budget that is 46.5 percent of *global* arms spending.⁶ Canadians cannot wash their hands of this idolatry by claiming to be a demographically small nation with a modest military budget. Canadian prosperity and national security are inextricably linked to the imperial neighbor to the south.

Use and misuse of Revelation imagery

Revelation calls the Roman empire a beast, and exposes the hubris and violence of the “great city that rules over the kings of the earth” (17:18). John’s vision offers a counternarrative of salvation that culminates in a just society where God and the Lamb reign. The new Jerusalem (Rev. 21, 22) is not a pie-in-the-sky ideal of where we go when we die. It is a tangible matrix of relationships and allegiances, a new community of justice and *shalom* that God is bringing into being today. Christians already have citizenship in this city, living by the example and teaching of the Lamb who someday will complete the restoration of our world.

Iconography and liturgy from Revelation appropriately have influenced Western Christian worship, as in Edward Perronet's hymn: "All hail the power of Jesus' name! Let angels prostrate fall . . . Bring forth the royal diadem, and crown him . . . Lord of all."

Christians need to celebrate Jesus the Lamb as Lord of all, not as a patron deity of our national or class interests. Allegiance to the God made known in Christ must supersede and sometimes oppose political currents in surrounding culture.

But sometimes imagery or texts from Revelation get co-opted by empire, incorporated into militaristic songs, patriotic jingo, or partisan politics.⁷ The *Left Behind* books and movies warped the message of Revelation into Christian triumphalism, with believers carrying automatic weapons and the Antichrist masquerading as a pacifist.

Christians need to counter such misuse of scripture by celebrating Jesus the Lamb as Lord of all, not as a patron deity of our national or class interests. Allegiance to the God made known in Christ must supersede and sometimes oppose political currents in surrounding culture. The governing motif for allegiance in Revelation is a Lamb who has won victory through suffering, death, and resurrection.

Salvation belongs to God

Revelation assumes that Christians may suffer, even endure martyrdom. But "salvation belongs to God . . ., and to the Lamb" (Rev. 7:10), not to human political machinations or ideology. Mennonites are not immune to a kind of idolatry that puts pacifism or activism at the center of our lives rather than God and the Lamb. Whenever we are tempted to give our highest allegiance to anything less than God, we need to hear the rebuke John himself received twice: "You must not do that! . . . Worship God!" (Rev. 19:10; 22:9).

A faithful response to the ideology of empire is not another ideology but *relationship* with the Lamb who has triumphed over sin, death, and empire. That relationship unfolds in worship, active discipleship, and faithful witness. Radical allegiance to Christ that transforms our economic, political, and social priorities should be celebrated at baptism. Eucharist is an opportunity for God's strategy of suffering love in Christ to turn us away from

the coercive ideology of empire. At communal or individual prayer we can hear Jesus say, “I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me” (Rev. 3:20). When we know the Lamb, we can follow him and claim our citizenship in the reign of God that will endure when every empire falls and death is no more.

Notes

¹ Sculpted by Horatio Greenough, the statue was so heavy it damaged the floor of the Capitol rotunda and had to be moved outdoors. Today it is in the National Museum of American History in Washington DC.

² Merritt Roe Smith and Leo Marx, *Does Technology Drive History? The Dilemma of Technological Determinism* (Boston: MIT, 1994), 9.

³ A current corollary to this doctrine is the notion of American *exceptionalism*: generally it is wrong for nations to invade each other, use torture, or support repressive regimes. But if these are done for the cause of democracy, exception can be made.

⁴ See, for example, 1 Pet. 5:13 and *Sibylline Oracles* 5.159.

⁵ See Steven Lee Myers, “A Triage to Save the Ruins of Babylon,” *New York Times*, January 2, 2011.

⁶ Stockholm International Peace Research Yearbook 2010. See <http://www.globalissues.org/article/75/world-military-spending#WorldMilitarySpending>.

⁷ For recent analyses of liturgy and worship in Revelation, see David A. deSilva, *Seeing Things John’s Way: The Rhetoric of the Book of Revelation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009); and Michael J. Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011). The latter works well as an adult education resource for congregations.

About the author

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