

The Setting of the Book of Revelation – Historical Context

The book of Revelation HAD a specific historical context – John refers to historical figures, institutions, activities, and systems throughout Revelation that suggest that these were the objective realities of the landscape as well as people’s lives he addresses. John wants his readers to see these realities through a specific strategic LENS but he is also acknowledging that these realities exist and need to be interpreted.

John’s audience faced an environment that is dominated by:

- Idolatrous religion (9:20-21)
- Emperor worship (13:4, 11-18)
- Economic practices that were formed around the needs of imperial Rome (“the great city set upon seven hills” that “has authority over the kings of the earth” – 17:9, 18)
- Pax Romana

1. Idolatrous religion – referenced in Revelation

- a) There is reference to the worship of demons (Rev. 9:20).
- b) There is reference to the worship of idols of gold (Rev. 9:20).
- c) People were eating food that had been sacrificed to idols (something forbidden in the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15)
- d) There is reference to the worship of the “dragon” and the “beast” – that worship becomes a decisive factor in one’s temporal fate and eternal destiny.
- e) Religious activity in the Roman empire – public spaces (especially in cities addressed in chapters 2 and 3) were dominated by buildings and activities that were religious in nature and always directed towards a god other than Jesus Christ. The fact remains that early followers of Jesus knew of no separation between the spheres of social activity/engagement and religious activity. There were pervasive religious activities throughout every major city in the empire – from processions, sacrifices, state-sponsored meals, private dinner parties, etc.
- f) For example – in Ephesus was a massive temple to the goddess Artemis (Diana) – which was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world and had a footprint 4 times greater than Athens’ Parthenon. Pergamum’s acropolis had a massive altar dedicated to Zeus and temples erected to Athena, Demeter, Dionysus, among others. There was actually a massive “health spa” in Pergamum that was dedicated to the god Asclepius, the god of healing. In Smyrna there are literary references to temples dedicated to Zeus and Cybele (no time to get into this – but do your own research on Greek and Roman deities – internet full of charts). Piety toward the gods demonstrated solidarity with one’s fellow citizens.

2. Emperor Worship

- a) This is the cult of emperors as well as the goddess Roma. It was unabashedly a promotional tool for the empire and Roman ideology throughout the world.
- b) It would NOT be too much to call this ideology a “gospel.” At the birth of Augustus (emperor from 31 BC to 14 AD) it was hailed as, “the good news” (Greek “euangelion” translated “Gospel” or “good news” in the New Testament) for the world about one who was the “savior of the world” and who would usher in a “golden age” as the new lord of lords and prince of peace (that is simply of a sampling of the declarations).
- c) THAT IS WHY THE BOOK OF REVELATION, WHAT WOULD EVENTUALLY BECOME THE NEW TESTAMENT AS WELL AS THE ENTIRE JESUS FOLLOWING MOVEMENT, WAS SUBVERSIVE! Either Jesus is Lord or Caesar is! To proclaim Jesus as Lord in midst of empire was revolutionary (and Rome didn’t look kindly on revolutions).
- d) More than that, many ancient cities sponsored temples dedicated to emperor worship. For instance, Ephesus became one of the cities to sponsor a temple which brought significant honor to the city

(to be a “temple keeper” – cultic site/headquarters). In the Ephesian cultic temple was a 24-foot-tall image of Domitian. In these temples, Imperial cultic rites were celebrated by professional choirs singing hymns written to praise the emperor, processions honoring the emperor as well as athletic games and massive meals.

3. Economic practices that were formed around the needs of imperial Rome.

- a) The appetite of the city of Rome (center of the Empire) was staggering. Rome’s population is estimated to be at over a million inhabitants by the end of the first century AD. Dense major city – 302 people per acre some estimate (compare to 122 in modern Calcutta and 100 in Manhattan). Narrow streets – by Roman law had to be 9 ft. wide – but in reality, probably narrower. Stories where people could lean out of window and talk to somebody. All buildings three stories max – all wood – no indoor stoves just braziers
- b) Heads of families had access to free grain (though a fixed amount most likely based on the size of one’s family).
- c) The provinces had to ensure a steady supply of goods were flowing into the imperial city. At time of shortfall, the province and NOT the city of Rome had to cope. There is currently a mound on the south side of Rome that is a monument to ancient Rome’s appetite for olive oil. It is presumed that on that artificial mound an estimated 50 million broken bottles/flasks (amphorae) were once used to satisfy the needs of Rome.
- d) Rome demanded every luxury “power” could provide to its upper and ruling classes.
- e) Five of the seven cities referred to in Revelation were major seaports importing goods that flowed to the center of the empire. See Revelation 18:12-13.
- f) Roman provinces were divided up into two classes – imperial and senatorial. The provinces that were deemed problematic were administered directly by the emperor through his agents and by means of an imperial legion being quartered there. Secure provinces were entrusted to senators of Rome to govern.

4. Pax Romana - (Latin: “Roman Peace”)

- a) Denotes a state of comparative tranquility throughout the Mediterranean world from the reign of Augustus (27 BC–14 AD) to the reign of Marcus Aurelius (161 –180 AD).
- b) Augustus laid the foundation for this period of concord, which also extended to North Africa and Persia. The empire protected and governed individual provinces, permitting each to make and administer its own laws while accepting Roman taxation and military control.
- c) But make no mistake about it, Pax Romana was in many respects a label without any real meaning – the empire was violent and ruled by violence. Tacitus once wrote, “to violence, rape and plunder they give the name ‘government,’ they make a wasteland and call it ‘peace.’” New Testament professor Harry Maier wrote, “for audiences convinced of the reasonableness of a Roman military order whose economic prosperity was bought at the price of incalculable human suffering, John the troublemaker from Patmos unsettles reason and asks his audience to reconsider what counts for sanity.”