

THE THEME OF TRIBULATION AS A LITERARY STRATEGY
OF AN ALTERNATIVE SELF-DEFINITION IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION:
A SOCIOLINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

BY

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts, to the Department
of Religious Studies at the University of Cape Town
under the supervision of Prof. Charles A. Wanamaker

CAPE TOWN

1993

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the significance of the theme of tribulation as developed by the author of the Book of Revelation. Its main concern is to examine what the author wants to achieve by depicting the tribulation of his audience. As such, the emphasis is on the social function of the notion of tribulation within the context of the social environment shared by the author and his audience. The methodology adopted here is that of a sociolinguistic perspective. This approach is based on the premise that language both provides information about the social context in which it is used and serves certain functions in the process of social interaction within that context.

Within the wider perspective of sociolinguistics, the model that is used here is that of Antilanguage. An antilanguage is a language that is generated by an antisociety, that is, a social collectivity which is embedded in another society but feels threatened or alienated by the dominant conventional norms of the wider society, and therefore sees itself as a conscious alternative to it. The language generated by such a social collectivity serves to express its alternative view of social reality and becomes a mode of resistance to the prevailing social order. This study proposes that the author of Revelation assumes that his audience constitutes an antisociety. Therefore, through the language that he uses to depict what he considers to be a state of tribulation for his audience, the author is engaged in the discourse of antilanguage. This

provides the author with both a mode of resistance to the dominant social system and an alternative framework in terms of which his audience can understand and define themselves, relative to the wider society.

To arrive at the above conclusion, however, it has become essential to delineate the scenarios proper to the social environment shared by the author and his audience. It has been noted that the tribulation addressed by the author of Revelation is a complex phenomenon in which various elements and forms of social conflicts coalesce. Such conflicts emanate from everyday interaction with other social groups such as the Roman authorities, Jews, Gentile neighbours and Christian rivals. From the perspective of the author of Revelation, however, the ultimate source of the alienation of his audience is the social system promoted and dominated by imperial Rome, particularly as it manifests itself through the imperial cult. Therefore, the actual target of the author's antilanguage is the imperial world view expressed through the practices associated with the imperial cult.

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PREFACE

This work could not have been a success had it not been for a great deal of advice, support and assistance from several people. It is with a realization of this fact that I express my gratitude to the following people.

Firstly, a special word of gratitude needs to go to my supervisor, Prof. Charles Wanamaker of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Cape Town. It was through the informative seminars that he offered on the Book of Revelation in 1991 when I was on study leave and registered at the University of Cape Town, that an interest which resulted in the choice of the topic for this work was aroused. Moreover, without his constructive comments and preparedness to avail himself whenever I needed his assistance, the systematic presentation of these ideas could not have been successful.

Secondly, this project is the culmination of a programme of study undertaken at the University of Cape Town over a period of approximately two and half years. I express my gratitude to those institutions which provided me with financial assistance throughout this programme. The scholarship awarded to me by the Human Sciences Research Council, and the bursary I obtained from the University of Cape Town Black Scholarship Fund sustained me throughout 1991 when I was enrolled as student on a full-time basis. I would also like

to thank the University of Transkei for first offering me a full year's study leave covered under the Staff Development Programme in 1991, and subsequently subsidizing my tuition fees in 1992 and 1993. Needless to say, the views expressed throughout this study are not those of the above-mentioned institutions, but rather emanated from my own independent research.

Thirdly, my thanks are due to my colleagues in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Transkei. I acknowledge the significant contributions made by Prof. Ephraim Mosothoane, Canon Livingstone Ngewu and Rev. Matome Rathete towards the overall success of this work. Not only have they been sources of encouragement, but they have also made this work to be a success by lending me books while I was doing my research. The contributions of Mesdames Welekazi Sokutu, Yoliswa Mxakaza, and Mr Osei Mensah-Aboramrah, who were tutors in the Department, cannot be underestimated. Their comments and questions during periodical presentations of certain parts of this work in postgraduate seminars prompted a major rethinking which influenced the final outcome of this project a great deal.

Within the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Transkei, I would like to single out a colleague and friend, Lehlohonolo Bookholane, for a special word of thanks. It is with great appreciation that I acknowledge his willingness to type and prepare this work for printing, in spite of his already loaded and

busy schedule. I also found the comments and suggestions he made while typing this work quite useful. Indeed, had it not been for his patience, this work might not have reached this stage.

Finally, I express a word of gratitude to my family for their moral support and their acceptance of the fact that they often had to adjust themselves to my absence from home while I was engaged with this project.

INTRODUCTION

The Book of Revelation belongs to a type of "revelatory" literature known as the apocalyptic genre. Scores of Jewish, Christian, Gnostic, Graeco-Roman and Persian examples exist from the third century B.C.E. to the second century C.E. This type of literature is related to two other main aspects of the apocalyptic tradition, namely, apocalypticism and apocalyptic eschatology. Apocalypticism is a socio-religious movement or ideology which sees the world as alienated from God and fervently expects divine intervention to bring about the desired world transformation. Apocalyptic eschatology is a product of apocalypticism and it entails a belief in the end or final transformation of the world. While these aspects of the apocalyptic tradition can be seen as distinct from each other, they are interrelated. The apocalyptic genre gives expression to the perspective of apocalyptic eschatology and thus serves as a medium for expressing the ideology of an apocalyptic movement [Hanson 1976:29-31].

The Book of Revelation, which is the subject of this study, is a product of the apocalyptic tradition, and it is the only piece of Christian apocalyptic literature that we have recorded in the New Testament apart from the apocalyptic eschatological perspective reflected in Mark 13:7-27 and parallels. Characteristic of apocalyptic literature in general, the content of Revelation involves the communication of a transcendent and eschatological

perspective on human experience. The author purports to have received visions of what is happening in the other world, and what must soon take place. This is coupled with a tone of an expected vindication of the faithful who, at present, are suffering under the unrighteous. In the book, we are left in no doubt as to the authority of God and the divine origin of the revelation mediated to the seer [see Collins 1979:9-18].

0.1. THE AIM OF THE STUDY

This study seeks to examine the socio-literary function of the theme of tribulation as expressed by the author of Revelation. The allusions to persecution and the strong anti-Roman feelings stem from an intense opposition to the imperial cult. It is not the official enforcement of the imperial cult which presents a crisis for the author and his audience, but rather its integrative and all-encompassing influence as an ideological perspective of reality and self-definition. The concept of "self-definition", as will be used in this study, refers to the collective self-understanding of a society or group(s) within a society in relation to the prevailing norms and values of their social environment. Such collective self-understanding can be measured on the basis of the extent to which the social collectivity identifies (or refuses to identify) itself with the dominant norms and values. This, in turn, needs to take into consideration the possible factors influencing the group's identification, or lack thereof, with such social norms

and values. It is within this context that the imperial cult is here understood as an expression of social identity and self-definition. In the words of P.J. Botha the imperial cult,

was tied up with the conflicts and ideals of contemporary society and with its political, social and economic structures. It represented part of the very fabric of reality (1988:97).

As such, it permeated all aspects of life and therefore represented a conceptual framework for a normative self-definition of contemporary society in its entirety. This means that any meaningful participation in the everyday socio-economic and political activities implied, in one way or another, collusion with the imperial cult. Thus, the theme of tribulation in the Book of Revelation serves to advocate an alternative world view which reflects the author's perception of Christian self-definition which is opposed to that provided by the imperial cult.

This study seeks to examine how the author uses the theme of tribulation as a literary device for constructing an alternative world view for normative self-definition for his audience. For the author of Revelation, tribulation arises as a direct consequence of the ideological conception of reality controlled by Rome and manifested through the imperial cult. The idea of depicting the situation of Christians as one of tribulation is in accordance with the author's literary strategy. The author wants to intensify the tension between his audience and the Roman empire so as to evoke

aggressive feelings of his audience against the empire. This serves to alienate his audience from the empire and the ideological perspective which it represents. This, in turn, prepares the audience for the alternative self-definition which the author wants to advocate. This becomes particularly clear when one considers the fact that the author alternates the theme of tribulation with an expected vindication of the faithful who are presently suffering persecution.

0.2. DELIMITATION

The main focus of this study will be on the text of the Book of Revelation itself, with specific reference to the socio-literary function of the theme of tribulation as developed by the author. As such, there are certain questions that have been raised about the Book of Revelation which will not be addressed in this study. The first one concerns the literary structure of the book, the exact nature of which scholars do not agree about. This study is based on the premise that Revelation constitutes a unitary work resulting from a literary composition of one author. It is true that a literary analysis of Revelation shows repetitions, doublets, incoherence, artificial constructions and inconsistencies [see Fiorenza 1985:160]. However, there is no doubt that whatever other sources the author used, both oral and written, were reinterpreted and transformed to suit the author's literary intention. Thus, Revelation may be considered as a unique literary work which can be

understood in its own right.

Secondly, this study will not engage in the debate about the authorship and date of the Book of Revelation. However, a few remarks in this regard may not be out of place. The position maintained by this study with regard to the authorship of Revelation is that held by Collins, namely, that all attempts to link the book with historical persons or figures of the early Church known to us have failed. Therefore, Revelation "was written by a man named John who is otherwise unknown to us" (1984:34). However, from evidence based on the book itself one can infer a great deal about the social identity of the author. The author can be seen as part of the phenomenon of early Christian prophecy [Rev.10:11; 16:6; 18:20; 19:10; 22:6-9,19 cf. Eph.4:11-12]. However, he was clearly influenced by written records and oral traditions about the classical prophets of Israel. The author was a Jew by birth and was probably a native of Palestine or had lived there for a long time. He was either bilingual or trilingual, able to speak Greek in addition to one or more Semitic language(s). His affinity to the Jewish Sibylline tradition as well as his role as an itinerant prophet seem to have had a great impact on the message of his book [see Collins 1984:50].

As for the date of Revelation, this study suggests the reign of Trajan as a probable period in which to locate the book. While the predominant view is that Revelation was written towards the end of

the reign of Domitian [c.95/96 C.E.], the book itself provides no clue whatsoever as to a date during the reign of Domitian. All the elements of internal evidence that have been cited to support this date appear to be ambiguous [see Collins 1984:57-76]. The only clue provided by the book is the reference to Rome as "Babylon" which seems to point to a post-70 C.E. period. The symbolic name "Babylon" is associated in Jewish literature with Rome as the second destroyer of Jerusalem. It must have been used to refer to Rome after she had destroyed the Temple in 70 C.E. This event must have been seen as a recapitulation of the experience of the sixth century B.C.E. Babylonian destruction. Thus, the author of Revelation must have taken this symbolic name from Jewish tradition and its use indicates a post-70 C.E. date. However, this does not in itself prove a date during the era of Domitian.

Moreover, even the use of the book's allusions to persecution as evidence for a date during Domitian's reign is problematic. Recent discoveries have shown that the view of a massive state-initiated persecution of Christians under Domitian is untenable. If the Book of Revelation is viewed as a response to a crisis of persecution at all, a date later than 95/96 C.E. may be possible. In this regard Pliny's letter to Trajan (c.112 C.E) may provide a clue for the date of Revelation. In the words of Downing,

... Pliny and Trajan are taking the first steps in opening the courts to informers against Christians ... Christians are vulnerable to local enemies when a

governor arrives who is intent on imposing order and law. It is very likely appropriate to describe the informers as 'trying it on' with the new governor; but this is the first occasion for such a 'try on' - or, at least, the first successful attempt ... If the Revelation to John and 1 Peter in particular are occasioned by some crisis in Asia Minor then this is it, and it is the first in that part of the world, very likely the first anywhere since Nero's action in Rome. The Beast is waking up (1988:113).

Thus, if Revelation is not a product of the period of Trajan and Pliny, then no historical evidence exists to locate it in a period of genuine state opposition.

0.3. METHODOLOGY: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

In examining the socio-literary function of the theme of tribulation in the Book of Revelation, this study will adopt a sociolinguistic perspective. The use of this approach stems from the fact that this study is concerned about the language associated with tribulation and how the author uses it to express an alternative world view in creating a new self-definition for his audience. The perspective of sociolinguistics is a recent development in linguistic studies [see Halliday 1978]. While it is not easy to give a precise and straightforward definition of what sociolinguistics is, it is possible to provide an outline of its

presuppositions.

0.3.1. Language and Social Context

Language, whether spoken or written, entails soundings or spellings, which in turn, realize wordings that express meanings. As such, language is a form of communication. For the communication process to be successful, both the speaker/writer and hearer/reader must share the meanings encoded in the wordings. Such meanings, in turn, constitute, and are realized from, the social system. Language as a form of communication transmits shared assumptions and a collective set of interpretations of reality that make up the cultural environment of the speaker(s) and the audience. This implies that language is part of social interaction and therefore cannot be divorced from the social context of which it is a product [see Halliday 1978:8-16; Halliday & Hasan 1985:3-14; Malina 1986:2; Malina & Neyrey 1988:xiv; Thompson 1990:28-29].

0.3.2. A Functional Approach to Language

The sociolinguistic perspective is based on the premise that language not only provides information about its social context but also serves certain functions in the process of social interaction. Sociolinguistics is interested "in what language can do, or rather in what the speaker ... can do with it" [Halliday 1978:16]. The meaning encoded in language involves both propositions (the things

expressed) and their illocutionary force (intention located in the way propositions are expressed). Such a meaning provokes a response from the intended audience, as the speaker explores the common ground that he/she shares with the audience and makes assertions about their shared social world. However, a speaker may also make assertions about the world not shared by his/her audience so that the latter's understanding of what the world is like will conform more closely to the speaker's. In this case, "a speaker may evoke and actualize dimensions of a world never before conceived in the mind of the other" [Thompson 1990:29]. It is within this context that this study will explore the functional role of the theme of tribulation in the Book of Revelation.

0.3.3. The Discourse of Antilanguage

Within the wider perspective of sociolinguistics, the model that will be used in this study is that of Antilanguage. This study proposes that the author of Revelation uses the theme of tribulation to express an alternative self-definition for his audience, vis-a-vis the conventional norms of self-definition provided by their contemporary society. To achieve this goal, the author of Revelation resorts to the discourse of antilanguage and, as such, the language associated with tribulation by the author is antilanguage.

An antilanguage is a language that is parallel to, and generated

by, an antisociety, that is, a group/society that is set up within another society as a conscious alternative to it [Halliday 1978:164]. An antisociety arises when a group within a society feels threatened or alienated by the dominant conventional norms of their present social structure and thus sees itself as the bearer of an alternative social reality. The language generated by such a group to express its alternative view of social reality becomes a mode of resistance to the prevailing social order, while at the same time providing norms of self-definition for the group, relative to the self-understanding of other groups in society. Thus, "an antilanguage stands to an antisociety in much the same relation as does language to a society" [Halliday 1978:164].

Viewed within the context of the functional role of language in general, the function of antilanguage is to create an alternative reality. An antilanguage is constructed in order to function in alternation, and serves as a vehicle of resocialization towards a counter-reality, set up in opposition to some established norm. However, it must be noted that it is not the distance between the two realities that is significant, but the tension between them. Above all, an antilanguage not only creates an alternative reality but also serves to maintain it. It is within that framework of an alternative social reality that an antisociety derives its normative self-definition.

0.4. IMPLICATIONS

The proposal advanced in this introduction has some major implications which need to be taken into consideration in this study. Firstly, our frame of reference will be the text of the Book of Revelation itself, particularly the language used in the text. Therefore, this study deals with a written language to which access can be gained through reading. In terms of the sociolinguistic perspective, reading entails identifying an appropriate scenario referred to in the text and then using that scenario as a larger frame within which to situate the meanings proposed in the text as far as possible. As such, a successful interpretation of a text as meaningful communication requires an appreciation of the social system which a text portrays and in which it is rooted. The problem confronting modern readers of biblical documents is the historical distance separating the writers of such documents from their modern readers. Biblical authors operate within the domain of reference shared by their audiences and make no attempt to explain their ancient world in terms which modern readers might understand. Therefore, a considerate modern reader of a biblical text has to attempt to reconstruct and enter the social world of the text, and so "bring a set of scenarios proper to the time, place and culture of the biblical author" [Malina & Neyrey 1988:xiv].

Secondly, the model of antilanguage referred to above, implies the existence of a group, within a given society, that sets itself

apart from, and in opposition to, the dominant norms and values of the social system. Therefore, for such a group, the notion of an alternative self-definition will entail the maintenance of group-boundaries.¹ In this regard, this study will explore the social values attached to the language associated with tribulation by the author of Revelation, and the extent to which such language serves to strengthen or support group boundaries in a situation which renders them porous [see Malina 1986:38]. Thus, group membership becomes the primary focus for self-definition, with a greater orientation towards an insider-outsider dichotomy. It is within this context that the "antilanguaging" function of the theme of tribulation in the Book of Revelation will be explored.

Thirdly, the suggestion that the theme of tribulation serves as the author's literary strategy in creating a new self-definition raises three related issues which will be explored throughout this study. The first one has to do with how to characterize the social crisis addressed by the author of Revelation. How far does the author succeed in giving a picture of the experience of his audience as one of tribulation? To what extent does this picture connect with a massive state-initiated persecution of Christians? What is the relationship between the author's opposition to Rome on the one

¹. The notion of "group-boundaries" here arises when a particular group in society differentiates itself from others on the basis of certain shared social values. Such values not only determine who constitutes the membership of the group, but also become the basis for the exclusion of those who do not abide by them.

hand, and his conflict with other social groups in the empire, on the other? An attempt to answer these questions will be undertaken in Chapter One so as to illuminate the connection between the author's expression of tribulation and the social environment of his audience.

The second issue concerns an examination of the imperial cult as a conceptual framework of self-understanding for the wider society in which the author and his audience were embedded. This will focus on the social functions of the cult and how it provided the inhabitants of the empire with a particular perspective of reality according to which they understood themselves. Such an undertaking cannot lose sight of the differences between the official understanding of the cult and how it was interpreted in the provinces. While bearing in mind the diversity of the interpretations of the imperial cult within the provinces themselves, the focus here will be on the collective assumptions which enhanced the popularity of this cult. With regard to the position of Revelation on this issue, the author's wholesale condemnation of Rome needs some explanation. Granted that the book was written in Asia Minor and that the author's opposition to the cult was aroused by its popularity in that province, why did he single out Rome as his main target? This will be the object of Chapter Two.

Lastly, the author's response to the norms and values of self-

definition expressed through the practice of the imperial cult will be examined in Chapter Three. This will focus on the author's development of the theme of tribulation and its socio-literary function. This study argues that the author is engaged in the discourse of antilanguage. This enables him to create tension between his audience and his opponents, and to form boundaries according to which his audience can define themselves in relation to the opponents. Such a process is based on a strict sense of Christian exclusiveness and a total rejection of the dominant society.

CHAPTER ONETRIBULATION AND THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

One of the main problems confronting commentators on the Book of Revelation is how to explain the relationship between the theme of tribulation addressed by the author and the social setting of the book. The debate on this issue centres around the extent to which Revelation is a response to an officially sanctioned persecution of Christians. While in the past it was common to associate the book with state-initiated persecution of Christians under emperor Domitian, today many scholars regard the existence of such a persecution as doubtful.¹ While this study agrees with the latter view, it suggests a date later than Domitian's reign for the emergence of Revelation. The author's allusions to persecution and strong anti-Roman feelings seem to indicate the author's response to what he considered to be some form of state-opposition to his audience. On that basis, this study suggests the reign of Trajan as a more probable period in which to locate Revelation. However, even if that be the case, the circumstances surrounding the relations between Christians and the imperial authorities during this period did not amount to an officially sanctioned persecution of the

¹ Collins [1984] was the first to suggest that the author 'perceives' a crisis which may not necessarily have been experienced by his audience; cf. Thompson [1986, 1990] who maintains that there is no connection between the literary work of Revelation and socio-historical causality.

Christians. This will be the subject of this chapter, with the hope that in the end a picture of the nature and extent of the social crisis addressed by the author can be reconstructed.

Firstly, this chapter will illustrate the author's concern about persecution by examining the predominance of the concept of tribulation as a literary theme in Revelation. Secondly, a re-evaluation of the view that Revelation is a response to an official state-initiated persecution of Christians will be undertaken. Such a re-evaluation will be made on the basis of the hypothesis that Revelation can be located in the reign of Trajan. It will be demonstrated that while evidence is lacking for an officially sanctioned persecution of Christians during this period, Pliny's actions set the stage where individual initiatives by provincial governors could lead to increased Roman scrutiny of Christianity. Lastly, this chapter will examine the nature of the social tensions reflected in Revelation and the extent to which they amounted to a sense of alienation on the part of the author and his audience. At the end of this exercise this chapter, hopefully, will have demonstrated the complexity of the phenomenon which the author of Revelation characterizes as tribulation in his social environment.

1.1. TRIBULATION / PERSECUTION AS A LITERARY THEME OF REVELATION

As already noted above, the theme of tribulation dominates the entire book of Revelation. Apart from what seem to be references to

incidents of actual persecution [Rev.1:9; 2:13; 6:9-11], the author expresses the expectation of further persecution [Rev.2:10-11]. Through the use of mythical images and symbols, the author points to the identity of the persecutors, namely the Roman authorities. This is coupled with the expected vindication of those who, at present are suffering persecution. The following pages will illustrate the predominance of the theme of tribulation throughout the book.

1.1.1. The Messages to the Churches

The theme of tribulation (thlipsis) is prominent in the first three chapters of the book of Revelation. In relation to his audience, the author identifies himself as their brother, "who shares with you in Jesus the tribulation and the kingdom and patient endurance ..." [Rev.1:9]. The general tone of the messages to the seven Churches implies that persecution or tribulation is expected. In the message to Smyrna, the threat of an impending imprisonment which the members of the Christian community are about to suffer is directly associated with tribulation and testing [Rev.2:10]. The juxtaposition of this prediction with an attack on "those who say that they are Jews and are not" [2:9] does not exclude the implication of the agency of Roman authorities in the expected tribulation [see Collins 1983:734]. The expectation of future persecution is further illustrated by the emphasis on the virtue of patient endurance (hypomone). Not only is patient endurance

associated with tribulation [Rev.1:9], but it also guarantees the Christian community exemption from "the hour of trial which is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell upon the earth" [Rev.3:10]. Moreover, the book also alludes to the fact that local Jewish synagogues are a potential source of tribulation [Rev.2:9 cf.3:9].

Within the first three chapters of Revelation, the author mentions two incidents of actual persecution. The first victim of a recent incident of persecution is the author himself, John. Connected with the description of himself as a "brother" who shares with his audience in Jesus "the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance", John says he was on the island called Patmos "dia ton logon tou Theou kai ten marturian lesou" [Rev.1:9]. John gives no further details about the circumstances surrounding his presence on Patmos. However, the use of the preposition "dia" with the accusative implies that he is on Patmos "because of" his activities (that is, proclamation of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus). The connection of this remark with tribulation [Rev.1:9] suggests a reference to an involuntary official separation of the author from the Asian Churches.² Therefore, whatever the exact circumstances of John's presence on Patmos, he implies that he is there due to official repression.

² This renders the interpretations that John went to Patmos either (a) to preach the gospel, or (b) to await revelatory visions, problematic [cf. Collins 1983:732; 1984:55]

While many commentators see in Rev.1:9 a reference to some form of Roman repression, they do not agree on the actual nature and extent of that repression. Collins [1984:102-104] outlines two possibilities which have dominated scholarly debate regarding John's sentence. The first one, based on the testimony of Tertullian and Jerome, is a case of "relegatio in insulam" [Collins 1984:102]. In terms of the Roman imperial policy, "relegatio" involved banishment for life to a particular island for specific offenses ranging from the practice of magic to astrology, divination and prophecy. These offenses were punishable if it was felt that the person involved threatened public interest or was suspected of conspiracy against the state, and "a provincial governor had the power to pass a sentence of 'relegatio'" [Collins 1984:102]. Another possibility regarding John's sentence is that it was a case of "deportatio in insulam" which involved forcible removal to a place of exile. Since this sentence was associated with political offenses, it could not be imposed by the provincial governor himself, but the latter could recommend it to the emperor [see Collins 1984:102].

The difficulty in ascertaining the actual circumstances surrounding John's presence on the island of Patmos stems from the fact that the author does not identify the Roman official responsible for his sentence. Tradition ascribes it to Domitian³ [Eusebius, H.E. III,

³ If this view is accepted, then it confuses the distinction between "relegatio" and "deportatio", since Tertullian, on whose testimony this view is based,

18:101-102], but the Book of Revelation itself provides no clue to this effect. The problem is further complicated by the fact that given Nero's precedent of the persecution of Christians in 64 C.E. and the death of Antipas mentioned in Rev.2:13, it is puzzling that John was banished rather than executed [see Collins 1984:102]. Presently the general view of biblical scholarship is that there appears to be no need to invoke Domitian's personal involvement in John's sentence. It may have resulted from a case of private accusation which the local governor decided to handle using his own discretion, within the limits of his authority [see Collins 1984:103-104; Hemer 1986:28-29; Sweet 1979:28].

The second actual incident of persecution mentioned in Revelation refers to the death of Antipas [2:13]. Pergamum, the city where Antipas died, is described as the place where "Satan's throne is." The reference to Pergamum as the throne of Satan may be an attack on Rome for two reasons. Pergamum was the seat of government of the Roman province of Asia, and it was here that the first provincial temple of the imperial cult was built, meaning that the city retained a leading influence in the cult. Again, as the seat of Roman government Pergamum, with its religious monuments such as that of Asklepios (the serpent-god of healing), must have epitomized for the author all paganism and worldliness characteristic of Rome [see Beasley-Murray 1974:84; Caird 1966:37-38; Mounce 1977:96-97]. Thus, the social function of the symbol is

maintains that John's sentence was a case of "relegatio".

to depict Rome as the latest and greatest agent of Satan, used by the latter to draw the Christians away from their faith. Satan is using Rome and has made his home at the seat of Roman power.

While the author does not mention the details of Antipas' death, he implies that it is due to the agency of a Roman authority. Antipas seems to have been killed because of his "witness" to the faith, and the Christians of Pergamum are commended for holding fast to the faith, in spite of the fact that one of their number has been killed for doing just that [Rev.2:13]. However, the fact that Antipas alone is mentioned as having suffered death means that his death may not have been initiated by official persecution. Some scholars have suggested that it may have been due to mob violence [see Beasley-Murray 1974:85; Caird 1966:38]. If there was any official involvement in the execution of Antipas, it may have been a result of private accusation to the local governor [see Collins 1984:101-102].

1.1.2. Visions of Tribulation

The theme of tribulation dominates many of John's visions in the eschatological message of Revelation [4:1-22:5]. When the fifth seal is opened, there appears under the altar "the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne" [Rev.6:9]. This, no doubt, refers to the Christian martyrs. Whether Jewish martyrs are also included is a question that cannot

be answered with certainty [cf. Beasley-Murray 1974:135; Caird 1966:84; Ford 1975:110]. The idea that they are "under the altar" implies that they have sacrificed their lives for the cause of the word of God. The souls of the martyrs cry for vengeance and request God to bring judgment, through which their cause will be vindicated [Rev.6:10]. They are told "to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been" [6:11]. This implies that the author expects more Christians to suffer martyrdom.

In Rev.7:9 the author refers to an innumerable crowd of peoples from every nation who are clothed in white robes. Later, in 7:14 those who belong to this crowd are identified as, "they who have come out of the great tribulation", and that "they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb." The author also mentions several visions in which tribulation is connected with conflicting or warring situations. This becomes particularly evident in those cases where demonic forces distress the followers of the true God [Rev.11:1-13; 12:1-17; 13:1-14:12; 17:1-19:5]. The imagery of warfare and conflict contains references and allusions to Roman hostility towards Christians. However, it is doubtful whether these references provide a report of actual hostilities and agencies of the Roman and provincial governments. In the words of Thompson [1986:148],

tribulation is a significant theme in the seer's visions,

but that theme must be explored in the context of the seer's linguistic universe rather than in the time and space of the first-century Asia.

Nevertheless, the account of such visions serves to confirm that whatever the social setting in which Revelation was written, the author considered tribulation to be an experience of his audience.

1.1.3. Tribulation and Imitation of Jesus

The author introduces his message as "the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ" [Rev.1:2]. In Rev.19:10 an angel identifies himself as a "fellow servant" with the "brethren who hold the testimony of Jesus." Basic to this understanding of the author's message is the idea that it involves suffering: Not only is John exiled "on account of" his proclamation of this "testimony" [Rev.1:9], but Jesus himself identifies the gospel as "the word of my patient endurance" [Rev.3:10].

For the author of Revelation, the gospel becomes embodied in Christians when they imitate Jesus Christ. This is shown by the parallels drawn by the author between the situations of Christ and those of Christians: In the message to Laodicea, those who conquer are given a promise to sit with Christ upon his throne as he himself conquered and sat with his father upon his throne [Rev.3:21 cf. 2:26-28]. For both Christ and faithful Christians, victory is achieved by being slain. In Rev. 6:9, for example, those whose

souls appear under the altar are victorious because they "had been slain," just as had been the worthy Lamb [5:9]. In Rev.7:14 those from the great tribulation have their robes washed and made white in the blood of the Lamb [cf. 12:10-12]. Thus, the author's message requires imitative witness which involves a re-enactment of the testimony made by Jesus.

The author also expresses his emphasis on imitative witness through what Thompson [1986:152] refers to as "kerygmatic irony". Throughout the Apocalypse, Jesus Christ is depicted as king who reigns and whose royal power and authority is enhanced as a result of crucifixion. Jesus is identified as "the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth" [Rev.1:5], who comes on the clouds in the sight of all as the "pierced one" whom everybody will mourn [Rev.1:7]. As the only one who can open the scroll and its seven seals, Christ is identified as "the lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David" who "has conquered" [Rev.5:5]. Yet, ironically, when he is about to open the scroll, he appears as a "Lamb that had been slain" [5:6].

Similar ironic structures where the victim becomes the victor are applied and encouraged for Christian existence. Just as Jesus gained life through death, the Christians at Smyrna are exhorted to remain "faithful unto death" in return for a promise of "the crown of life" [Rev.2:10]. The Philadelphians have "little power", and yet no one has power to close the open door that has been placed

before them [Rev.3:8]. According to Thompson [1986:152-153], Kerygmatic irony also offers the clue to the compatibility of thlipsis, basileia, and hypomone in 1:9: these terms characterize both Christ and Christian existence, for the tribulation in itself reveals victory, conquest, and kingship.

Therefore, tribulation as a literary theme of Revelation also forms part of the author's emphasis upon imitating the crucified Christ. Closely connected with this idea, of course, is the understanding that preparedness to suffer tribulation also serves as a means of invoking divine vengeance and judgment upon those who oppose Christ and the faithful.

1.2. REVELATION AND THE SUPPOSED STATE-PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS

The author of Revelation's emphasis on the tribulation experienced by his audience, coupled with his apparent hostility towards Rome, seems to suggest a massive state-initiated persecution of Christians. Christian tradition has not only accepted such a persecution as an historical fact, but has also associated it with the reign of Domitian. In the words of Eusebius [HE. III:101], Domitian, indeed, having exercised his cruelty against many, and unjustly slain no small number of illustrious men at Rome, and having without cause, punished vast numbers of honourable men with exile and the confiscation of their property, at length established himself as the

successor of Nero, in his hatred and hostility to God. He was the second that raised a persecution against us, although his father Vespasian had attempted nothing to our prejudice.

Eusebius accepts the testimony of Irenaeus which ascribes Revelation to a date towards the end of the reign of Domitian and concludes that Domitian condemned John to be exiled on the island of Patmos [HE. III:101-102]. This conclusion is based on an official portrait of Domitian presented a few years after his death by a circle of writers around Pliny the Younger that included Tacitus and Suetonius [see Thompson 1990:96-101]. These writers portray Domitian as a tyrant who unleashed a reign of terror against his opponents, whom he had either exiled or executed. Not only is he "notorious" for having intensified the use of informers, but his reign is also depicted as destructive and incompetent [Thompson 1990:100-101]. Above all, Domitian is said to have intensified the practice of the imperial cult and to have demanded to be worshipped as "Lord and God", a factor which is usually cited as evidence for the supposed persecution of Christians who refused to acquiesce to this demand.

Thompson [1990] has undertaken a detailed study of the reign of Domitian and concludes that the standard classical sources do not present an accurate picture of Domitian's reign. These sources are products of officials who were motivated by a desire to flatter Trajan by presenting his reign as a new and better era [Thompson

1990:111-115 cf. Collins 1984:72]. In part, they achieved this by vilifying Domitian and his reign. For example, while the imperial cult preceded Domitian and continued long after his reign, he never modified the cult by demanding greater divine honours than either his predecessors or successors [Thompson 1990:107]. Neither did Domitian encourage divine titles such as "Lord and God" to be applied to himself. Rather, this title was used to refer to Domitian by those people who wanted to flatter him so as to gain his favour. Thompson [1990:106] cites an example of Martial, a poet who sought to gain entrance into Domitian's inner court but never gained it, as one of the potential beneficiaries who used such extravagant titles to show his devotion to Domitian.⁴ Moreover, it is surprising that such divine titles as "Lord and God" do not appear in the official writings associated with the inner court of Domitian, if he demanded to be acknowledged as such [see Thompson 1990:105]. Therefore, the divinization of the emperor was not part of the official policy during Domitian's reign. In the words of Thompson [1990:106],

The danger lies not with imperial policy but with popular opportunism among those seeking benefits from Domitian. From a climate of quick accusations made by people approaching power from below one cannot assume imperial repression and tyrannical madness.

⁴ Interestingly, Thompson [1990:106] further observes that the same Martial later used extravagant titles of repudiation against Domitian to show his devotion to Trajan.

This study accepts Thompson's analysis of the data and agrees with him regarding the lack of evidence for outright state-persecution of Christians during Domitian's era. This study, however, goes even further to suggest that no good reason exists to date Revelation during Domitian's reign. Revelation itself provides no clue whatsoever in this regard. Moreover, the standard classical sources referred to above do not make any connection between Domitian's supposed demands and Christian persecution. As already indicated in the Introduction of this study, if Revelation is a response to some form of state opposition at all, a later date for its emergence during the reign of Trajan is much more likely. Therefore, the following pages will examine the implications of a letter written by Pliny the Younger (c 112 C.E.) to emperor Trajan in which he seeks advice from the emperor on how to deal with those people who have been accused of being Christians [Pliny, Ep.10:96].

1.2.1. Pliny's Letter to Trajan

As the governor of Bithynia, Pliny found himself inundated with private accusations against Christians. Up to the time of the writing of the letter to Trajan, he had been handling these cases himself: He asked those brought before him on the charge of being Christians whether indeed they were Christians. If, after the question has been repeated three times, with a warning of the punishment awaiting them, they persisted in admitting that they were Christians, he ordered them to be executed. Those who denied

that they were or ever had been Christians were ordered to invoke the gods and offer wine and incense to the statue of the emperor, after which they were discharged. This invocation of the gods and reverence of the statue of the emperor, which of course, included reviling the name of Christ, was probably used as a test of their loyalty to the Roman gods and the emperor.

However, Pliny became concerned when he found himself having to deal with more and more charges of this nature [Pliny, Ep.10:96]. Hence he decided to postpone any further examinations until he had consulted the emperor. In the following pages, it will be argued that Pliny's letter does not in itself provide evidence for the existence of an official policy regarding the persecution of Christians, either during Trajan's reign or prior to it.⁵

Firstly, the letter gives the impression that Pliny assumes that there have been cases involving people charged with being Christians before. This impression is implied by his note that he has never been present at an examination of Christians, to which he adds,

Consequently, I do not know the nature of the extent of the punishment usually meted out to them, nor the grounds for starting an investigation and how far it should be

⁵ On this issue, I would like to acknowledge my dependence on Downing [1988], whose analysis of the correspondence between Pliny and Trajan is adopted throughout this section.

pressed. Nor am I at all sure whether any distinction should be made between them on the grounds of age, or if young people and adults should be treated alike, whether a pardon ought to be granted to anyone retracting his beliefs, or if he has once professed Christianity, he shall gain nothing by renouncing it; and whether it is the mere name of Christian which is punishable, even if innocent of crime, or rather the crimes associated with the name [Ep. 10:96].

Thus, on the basis of the contents of Pliny's letter one could argue that there was either a general enactment forbidding the practice of the Christian religion, or that there was an officially instigated "police action" against Christians [see Downing 1988:107-108]. Both of these arguments assume the existence of a standard official policy on the basis of which court cases involving adherence to Christianity were started. Therefore Pliny's words could be taken to imply that such cases have occurred before but that he himself has picked up no information as to how they were handled. However, it must be noted that Pliny claims no knowledge of such previous cases. Neither does he claim that the cases brought before him are a result of an official ruling. Rather, the cases are brought to him by private and anonymous informers. Moreover, it is doubtful that Pliny, in his capacity as an expert in legal matters, would have been ignorant of an official ruling regarding Christians, if there was any. The fact that there was no such ruling is confirmed by Trajan in his reply to Pliny:

You have followed the right course of procedure, my dear Pliny, in your examination of the cases of persons charged with being Christians, for it is impossible to lay down a general rule to a fixed formula. These people must not be hunted out; if they are brought before you and the charge against them is proved, they must be punished, but in the case of anyone who denies that he is a Christian, and makes it clear that he is not by offering prayers to our gods, he is to be pardoned as a result of his repentance however suspect his past conduct may be ... [Pliny, Ep.10:97].

So far, Trajan is merely confirming what Pliny has been doing. However, he discourages too much reliance on anonymous accusations:

But pamphlets circulated anonymously must play no part in any accusation. They create the worst sort of precedent and are quite out of keeping with the spirit of our age [Pliny, Ep.10:97].

Thus, both Pliny and Trajan are not aware of any previous official policy against those people accused of being Christians. Pliny seems to be asking Trajan to create a ruling. Downing [1988:108, 110-113] observes that in matters where Pliny has acted on the basis of precedents, he makes that very clear, but in this instance of Christians he does not mention any precedent from which he may have sought some guidance regarding past rulings or previous court decisions. Pliny does not say that the test he is using against those who deny that they are Christians is based on a previously

existing court procedure. Rather, he has invented it himself, and wants to get Trajan's opinion on whether it is a decisive test or not [see Downing 1988:108-110].

Therefore, the correspondence between Pliny and Trajan does not prove the existence of an established imperial policy regarding the persecution of Christians. Even if Pliny's actions are taken as the occasion for the writing of the Book of Revelation, that in itself does not provide evidence for the state-initiated persecution which the book seems to imply. Pliny's court procedure is not only an isolated incident, but it is also a result of private accusations and not state policy. Moreover, even Trajan puts it emphatically that there is no fixed formula for such cases, and that Christians must not be sought out [Pliny, Ep.10:97].

It must be noted, however, that Trajan's reply has major implications for the social position of Christians in the empire during this period. Trajan approves of the procedure used by Pliny in handling the cases of those people accused of being Christians [Pliny, Ep.10:97]. While Trajan discourages Pliny from seeking out Christians, he personally concludes that those against whom the charge of being Christians is proved, must be punished if they refuse to renounce their faith. By implication, Trajan officially authorizes and commends the practice of executing persevering Christians which Pliny has therefore been using [Cassidy 1992:25]. This cannot necessarily be taken to imply the beginning of a

widespread policy throughout the empire. Nevertheless, it is not unlikely that Trajan's stand might have encouraged other governors to use Pliny's procedures as a guide in dealing with any problems involving Christians in their respective provinces [see Cassidy 1992:26]. Such developments, coupled with the fact that Ignatius of Antioch was martyred during the reign of Trajan, may suggest some intensification of official scrutiny of the adherents of Christianity, albeit on isolated cases and not based on any standard state policy. That seems to be the context which informs the setting of Revelation. This leads to an examination of the social crisis reflected in the book itself.

1.3. THE NATURE OF THE SOCIAL TENSIONS IN REVELATION

Throughout his book, the author of Revelation depicts irreconcilable tensions between Christians and Rome [e.g. Rev.2:13; 11:1-13; 12:1-17; 13:1-14:12; 17:1-19:5]. However, as already noted in the previous section of this chapter, the explanation of the tensions between Rome and the author of Revelation on the basis of state-initiated persecution of Christians seems untenable. Not only is the evidence for such a persecution non-existent, but even the general tone of Revelation reflects an expected inquisition against Christians, with very few allusions that it is already taking place⁶ [e.g. Rev.1:9; 2:13 cf. 6:9-11; 7:13-14]. A closer

⁶ However, one must also bear in mind the difficulty of ascertaining the actual historicity of those incidents of persecution which the author claims to have taken place.

examination of Revelation indicates that various elements of social crisis coalesced into what amounted to a situation of tribulation for the author and his audience. Thus, the nature and extent of the tribulation addressed by the author need to be examined within the context of the crises emanating from his social environment and which, for him, put his audience in a precarious condition.

While the Roman officials did not initiate legal action against Christians as Christians, Revelation reflects a general feeling of alienation from the Empire. Commentators on Revelation have generally explained this phenomenon by looking at the extent to which the social status⁷ of Christians might have been threatened as a result of either the socio-economic structure of the imperium or the official attitude towards them as a religious group. However, any characterization of the social status of the audience of Revelation depends on the weight individual scholars give to the historicity of the allusions made by the author. This is particularly true of the recent works of Collins [1984] and Thompson [1990], both of whom reject the historicity of state-initiated persecution but hold different views regarding the social

⁷ It must be noted that the notion of "status" is a complex phenomenon in which various dimensions (such as power, occupational prestige, wealth, education, religious and ritual purity, family or ethnic group position, local community status) may be involved in the social ranking of an individual or a group. Moreover, not only would one's status be measured in relation to one's rank in one or more of these dimensions, but also such resultant status would depend on the weight given to each dimension by those making the social ranking [see Meeks 1983:54].

conditions of the audience of Revelation. One must bear in mind, however, that Collins and Thompson did not set out to write about the social status of the recipients of Revelation per se. Rather, their views regarding this issue emanate from their respective discussions of the social world which produced the book.

Collins [1984] understands the social conditions of the audience of Revelation within the context of a "perceived crisis". She maintains that the author of Revelation perceives a massive social crisis which may not necessarily have been recognized as such by all Christians [1984:98]. However, she draws from Revelation a number of elements which must have threatened the social status of Christians in the Empire. She maintains that Revelation reflects the general Eastern resentment of the dominant political and economic power of Rome over the Empire. In this regard, Revelation reflects the same ethos as the tradition of resistance portrayed in the Sibylline Oracles [see Collins 1984:89-94]. Closely connected with this tradition of resistance against Rome, was the social unrest which characterized Asia Minor towards the end of the first century C.E. and persisted until the reign of Hadrian. The major aspect of this unrest was the tension between the rich and the poor, and whatever his socio-economic situation, the author of Revelation seems to have identified himself with the underprivileged [see Collins 1984:94-97].

Collins [1984:97-104] also refers to the precarious relations of

early Christians with Rome as another element of crisis which concerned the author of Revelation. This resulted from the authorities' suspicions that unofficial associations like Christianity could easily become centres of social unrest. Consequently, the social status of Christians was threatened, as Jews or Gentiles could accuse Christians before Roman governors if they had complaints against them.

Collins provides us with more insight into the social conflicts which characterized the relations between Rome and Asia Minor towards the end of the first century and the beginning of the second century C.E. However, her location of the status of the audience of Revelation in such conflicts needs to be qualified. Granted that incidents of social unrest did take place, the author of Revelation himself gives no clue whatsoever as to the extent to which his audience might have been affected by, and involved in, such conflicts. Moreover, given the complex and diverse nature of the Graeco-Roman urban setting, the extent to which social unrest had anything to do with the masses in general, and Christians in particular, is an issue that cannot be determined with certainty [see Carney 1975:120-121].

Collins' classification of Christianity with unofficial associations remains hypothetical. It assumes the existence of some state policy towards Christians as a group, and is but a thin veil for the suggestion of the theory of religio licita. The latter

assumes that Rome had some process of licensing foreign religions, and that since Christianity lacked the necessary requirements for such a process it was automatically regarded as illegal [Boer 1976:43-44; Koester 1982:365]. However, the theory of religio licita has recently been rejected by some scholars [e.g. Esler 1987:211-214]. Moreover, no evidence exists for a direct official policy regarding the position of Christians as a religious group in the Empire. The correspondence between Pliny the Younger and Trajan rules out any possibility of the existence of such a policy, at least during the latter's reign and before [see Pliny, Ep.10:97].

As for Thompson [1990], he uses both extra-biblical and biblical sources other than Revelation to reconstruct the social order of the first century province of Asia in which the seven Churches addressed in the book were situated. He points to the stability of the urban setting of Revelation and suggests that this setting posed no threat to the social position of Christians at all. In his words,

The writer of the book of Revelation may urge his readers to see conflicts in their urban setting and to think of Roman society as "the enemy", but those conflicts did not reside in Asian social structures. The urban setting in which Christians worshipped and lived was stable and beneficial to all who participated in its social and economic institutions [Thompson 1990:167]

Thompson suggests that the author of Revelation was concerned about

life and thought within the Churches, and that he was opposed to Christian accommodation to the Graeco-Roman urban life [1990:125-127]. While this point is well taken, Thompson's assertion that the urban setting was beneficial to all is a generalization. The extra-biblical evidence on which he bases this conclusion comes from either official sources or writers who, in one way or another, were associated with imperial authority. Such sources tend to promote a glorious picture of the Pax Romana, in which the voice of those upon whom the latter was imposed is virtually absent [see Wengst 1987:7-54]. As such, they are one-sided and therefore cannot be relied upon to provide information on the direct experiences of those at the periphery. Moreover, Thompson's generalized conclusion does not take into account the possibility of different responses to the urban setting among Christians themselves, particularly in view of the constraints emanating from the social stratification which characterized life in the cities [see Esler 1987:171-179; Meeks 1983:53-55].

The position adopted by this study is that Revelation does not provide for a generalized conclusion regarding the social status of its recipients. Revelation 1:3 implies that the book was meant to be read aloud to the congregations. This means that the author expected very few of his audience to have had the opportunity of undergoing the expensive training in literacy [see Webber 1988:134]. Revelation indicates that its audience was composed of both the rich and the poor [3:17 cf. 2:9]. An irony manifests

itself in the author's negative attitude towards wealth [Rev.17:4; 18:3, 9-19] and his depiction of the new Jerusalem as wealthier than Rome [Rev.21:9-22:5]. This implies the author's assumption that his audience would appreciate a disparaging attitude towards wealth, while nursing some hope of gaining wealth in the future [see Webber 1988:135].

Any experience of alienation felt by Christians as a religious group can probably be explained within the context of Roman respect for ancestral tradition on the one hand and the status accorded Christianity by the contemporary society on the other. Esler observes that Rome generally gave respect to foreign religions which were seen to be upholding the ancestral tradition of a particular nation, ethnic group or city [1987:214-215]. Jewish religious practices attained official recognition and approval as a result of this [see Esler 1987:212-213]. On the other hand, Christianity was not the traditional religion of any nation or city, but drew its converts from all nations and groups of people [Sherwin-White 1965:101-102]. Moreover, apart from gathering in private, the exclusive monotheism of Christians led some of them to refuse all participation in the traditional religious observances of the Graeco-Roman world. This aroused suspicion that they were engaged in indecent and sinister acts [see Pliny, Ep.10:96]. Hence they became vulnerable to local accusations by their Gentile neighbours to the Roman authorities [Balsdon 1965:196; cf. Pliny, Ep.10:96 & 97].

Pliny's correspondence with Trajan reflects a fundamental suspicion of Christianity as a movement that is antisocial and a danger to the social fabric of the Empire [see Ep.10:96 & 97]. In the words of Thompson,

It was new, foreign, secretive, and exclusive; as such it was superstition intruding into the urban order that supported, and was supported by, traditional, customary, public, and inclusive religious piety [1990:132].

However, overt conflict involving official, legal action against Christians was rare and not a result of deliberate imperial policies against them. Pliny's letter to Trajan indicates that such conflict largely depended on the attitudes and feelings of the local citizens, and on the degree to which provincial governors were willing to pacify popular feeling by co-operating with it [see Pliny, Ep.10:96:4-5]. The Christians were rejected by their Gentile neighbours because they also rejected the socio-religious world-view shared by the Gentiles. Hence the general feeling of alienation expressed by the author of Revelation.

The sense of alienation from contemporary society seems to have been aggravated by the social tensions between Christians and Jews on the one hand, and between the author of Revelation and his Christian rivals on the other. The Christian movement had no legal status in the Roman Empire, and at the same time the Jewish communities did not recognize it as part of their self government

as resident aliens.⁸ Yet the author of Revelation could not find any other identity for the Christian movement, except that they were Jews. Thus the two groups had to compete for the status of legitimate heirs to the heritage of Israel, including the Jewish messianic promise.⁹ Hence the author of Revelation repudiates the claim of his opponents to the Jewish heritage by referring to them as "the synagogue of Satan" [2:9;3:9].

The precarious relations with Gentile neighbours coupled with the rejection by the Jews meant that Christians were faced with two options: either to be rooted in a new collective framework of thought, a symbolic universe antithetical to the dominant socio-religious world view, or to accommodate politically, economically and socially to their environment [see Du Rand 1992:78, 81-82]. However, the first option would result in further alienation from the contemporary society, and therefore the second one would be more appealing for purposes of survival especially among the Gentile converts. Indeed, the fact that some Christians adopted the option of assimilation is reflected by the author of Revelation's

⁸ While the Jewish communities refused to have any association with the Roman gods, they were regarded as a nation and therefore their religion was tolerated. Due to their rigorous commitment to their faith, the Jews were even exempted from participation in the imperial cult, while being recognized as citizens of the empire.

⁹ There is also a sense in which this conflict was a struggle over resources in terms of membership. The attack on Jews in the Book of Revelation is meant to discourage potential adherents from choosing the opposing group, and to prevent the defection of presumably Jewish Christian members to that group [see Collins 1986:314].

attack on his Christian rivals, the Nicolaitans who hold the teachings of "Balaam", and "Jezebel" who claims to be a prophet [Rev. 2:6, 14-15 & 20-23]. The designations of "Balaam" and "Jezebel" are symbolic labels appropriated by the author from the Old Testament tradition. Just as Balaam by his instruction caused ancient Israel to stumble, so the Nicolaitans by their teaching ensnare Christians in order to lead them astray [cf. Num.25:1-5; 31:16]. Similarly, the author of Revelation labels the prophetess in Thyatira as "Jezebel" [Rev.2:20]. From John's perspective just like Jezebel who led Israel astray, so this woman by her teaching draws the Christians in Thyatira away from their faith [cf. 1 Kings 16:29-34; 2 Kings 9:22].

The similarity in the teachings of these rival Christian leaders implies that they were part of the same movement. The charge laid by the author of Revelation against them consists of leading Christians to "eat food sacrificed to idols and practice immorality" [Rev.2:14 & 20]. The conflict between John and his rivals was explicitly one over values, especially the issue of whether Christians should participate in the eating of food sacrificed to Gentile gods. John's rivals seem to have taken Paul's position on this issue, namely, that such practice was wrong only when worship of such gods was implied [cf. 1 Cor 8:8-10; 10:25-29]. On the other hand, John regarded such a "liberal position" as idolatry and therefore a compromise of the Christian faith. In the final analysis, the conflict between John and his rivals involved

the question of how Gentile Christians should relate to non-Christians among their relatives and work associates¹⁰ [see Collins 1986:317]. John's stance on this issue was a strict exclusiveness of the Christian community from Gentile practices and associations. As such, he was opposed to cultural accommodation to the socio-religious world view which characterized the Graeco-Roman world.

1.4. CONCLUSIONS

The discussion undertaken in this chapter was based on the observation that scholarly research on the nature of the social crisis which concerned the author of Revelation has focused on a too narrower view of "tribulation" as addressed in the book. The tendency has been to look for direct official enforcement of the imperial cult and the subsequent persecution of those who did not conform. This study maintains that the crisis addressed by the author needs to be examined at a broader level. The tribulation addressed in Revelation is a phenomenon which involves various elements of social crisis emanating from the author's environment and is much more complicated than mere state-initiated persecution

¹⁰ To some extent, the conflict between John and his Christian rivals can also be seen as competition for scarce status, authority and scarce resources [Collins 1986:317-318]. The manner in which John vilifies his rivals indicates that they were popular in their communities and therefore challenged his authority [Rev.2:14-16, 20-24 cf. 2 Jn 1:4-11; 3 Jn 1:9-12]. If this is true, then John and his rivals were competing for charismatic leadership of the congregations and the hospitality which accrued from the limited financial resources of the individual members and their households.

of Christians. In the words of Downing [1988:119],

The work seems to have been occasioned by the threat of physical violence, related to response to the cult of the Emperor ... But Revelation comes out of a much deeper and more penetrating analysis than this forecast of physical suffering. It is not primarily about the clash of symbols: that only constitutes the symptoms of the real disease. It is about a clash of total cultures, a clash of life-styles. The heart of Revelation's concern is displayed in ch.18, with its picture of the oppression of a society given over to the acquisition of wealth by the few, with their ostentatious consumption. That system is the real beast, the real enemy. Caesar and Rome are merely the obscene figureheads for an underlying and incurable corruption, one that remains as hostile to Christian life and faith whether or not it demands formal cultic homage.

Therefore, it would appear that the situation which called forth the writing of the Book of Revelation, was an unbearable tension felt by the author. This tension resulted from the discrepancy between what the author thought God ought to do, and what was happening in his social world. In contrast to the messianic expectations and reign of God announced by Jesus, Christians in Asia Minor found themselves faced by the "oppressive" mighty power of Rome, the corrupting influences of the imperial cult, and Graeco-Roman culture. Moreover, they found themselves being a

relatively disadvantaged group within the social, economic and political structures of the empire. This was aggravated by their rejection by the Jews and the tendency by some of their members to accommodate Gentile values which had "pagan" influences. For the author of Revelation, all these factors amounted to a serious crisis which he experienced as real for the people he was concerned about. Whether his audience perceived the crisis to the same extent is a matter we cannot determine with certainty.

If direct official persecution of Christians was not the primary occasion for the writing of Revelation then the author's hostility towards Rome needs to be explained. For the author of Revelation, all the factors which contributed to a sense of alienation for his audience emanated from a social system that was maintained and controlled by Rome. Hence the strong anti-Roman feelings and intense opposition to the imperial cult. The author's opposition to the imperial cult stemmed not from its official enforcement, but rather from its capacity as an inclusive ideological perspective of reality that perpetuated a social system which he considered to be oppressive for his audience. This will be the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER TWOTHE "IMPERIAL CULT" AND NORMATIVE SELF-DEFINITION IN THE
GRAECO-ROMAN WORLD

At a broad level, this chapter will attempt to develop the "domain of reference" shared by the author of Revelation and his audience. This will enable us who are modern readers of Revelation to bring scenarios proper to the social environment in which the text emerged [cf. Malina 1986:4-5]. More specifically, this chapter is concerned with the dynamics of the imperial cult as a conceptual framework for a normative self-definition for the contemporary society from which the Book of Revelation emerged. This will involve an examination of the integrative power and all-encompassing influence of the imperial cult which seems to have provided an ideological expression of reality. By so doing the imperial cult became a manifestation of the established norms and values of self-definition for its society. This chapter will also examine Revelation's polemic against the world view of the empire. Such an exercise will, hopefully, help to illuminate the extent to which the author perceived that world view to be a threat to the self-identification of his audience.

2.1. PRELIMINARY REMARKS ON THE NATURE OF THE IMPERIAL CULT

Before examining the aspect of self-definition manifested through the imperial cult, a few remarks need to be made regarding studies of this phenomenon in general, and the presuppositions of the discussion to be undertaken in the following pages in particular. Firstly, one has to be conscious of the problems involved in the use of such terms as "imperial cult" and "emperor-worship". Here, one deals with a complex phenomenon which involved a variety of cults with different religious meanings and social functions, whose only common factor was the honouring of a ruler [Botha 1988:87]. Terms such as "imperial cult" and "emperor-worship" remain ambiguous, since from the evidence we have about this phenomenon it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which the divinization of the emperor may, or may not, have elevated him to the status of the gods.¹ This problem is further complicated by the observation that neither did the divine honours accorded to the emperor supplant the traditional religious practices of the Graeco-Roman world, nor did the divinized emperor replace the traditional gods of the empire

¹ Many scholars emphasize the fact that the divinization of the emperor did not necessarily elevate him to divine status [see e.g. Bowersock 1982:172; Ferguson 1970:92; Liebescheutz 1979:198; Taylor 1931:203-204; Thompson 1990:162]. However, the complex nature of the imperial rituals and the lack of primary literary evidence on this phenomenon make it difficult for us to understand what its practitioners meant when they referred to the emperor as a "god" [see Price 1984:2-11].

[see Koester 1982:370-371]. However, due to lack of a better term,² this study will refer to this phenomenon by the term that is used by most scholars, namely imperial cult,³ while bearing in mind the above-mentioned problems regarding its use.

Secondly, a general survey of secondary literature on the imperial cult shows a tendency among scholars to be influenced by their prejudices and modern Christianizing assumptions.⁴ The imperial cult is usually seen as serving primarily political ends, with no genuine and valid religious expression attached to it [cf. Balsdon 1965:189; Ferguson 1970:95; Lohse 1976:220; Taylor 1931:212]. The view that the imperial cult merely served as an instrument of practical government sees the cult as either a phenomenon of exploitation manipulated by the Roman state, or as an opportunistic activity for gaining diplomatic profit when viewed from the perspective of the subjects who practised it [Botha 1988:88-89; Price 1984:15-16]. Central to this depiction of the significance of the imperial cult is the modern Christian preoccupation with the

² Botha [1988:87] observes that even the term "Benefactor-cult" is problematic as it is "one-sided and leads to vague and indiscriminate grouping together of evidence and interpretations."

³ It must be noted, however, that to distinguish the Roman imperial cult from its Hellenistic precursors, this study applies the term "ruler cult(s)" for the latter.

⁴ So far, S.R.F. Price's book [1984] is still the only standard work which addresses this problem and attempts to treat the phenomenon of the imperial cult in a comprehensive way. Du Rand [1988] and Thompson [1990] draw their insights on the cult from this source.

distinction between the religious and secular, a distinction which is foreign to the ancient imperial rituals. In the words of Botha [1988:89],

Living with the heritage of the Enlightenment we have difficulty in accepting and conceptualizing the existential power and value of rituals. Imperial rituals were much more than simply honouring someone special. As religious activities they articulated the complexes of symbols making up the intersubjective world of common understandings that not only shaped the world experienced by the ancients but induced distinctive moods and motivations in the individual.

Price [1984:15] maintains that this preoccupation with the distinction between religion and politics is most dramatically manifested in the "consistent misinterpretation by Christian scholars of the persecution of the Christians, which inflates the importance of the imperial cult and posits a stark choice between Christ and the Caesars, between religion and politics". This probably accounts for the problem confronting commentators on the Book of Revelation concerning the explanation of the relationship between the tribulation addressed by the author and the social setting of the book. That problem revolves around the extent to which Revelation addresses a genuine, officially sanctioned persecution of Christians arising from state enforcement of the imperial cult.

While the political significance of the imperial cult must not be underestimated, this cult cannot be reduced merely to an irreligious and impious adulation which was purposely instituted to serve the interests of practical government. To see this factor alone as the primary explanation for the practice of the imperial cult would be to impose an arbitrary explanation into an otherwise complex phenomenon. This study is based on the presupposition that the demarcation between the religious and the secular was alien to the expression of reality and self-definition manifested through the imperial cult. The imperial cult emerged and developed within the context of the religious world view of the Graeco-Roman communities, and it became a voluntary and unforced institution. While the cult served the interests of the empire, its promotion by the central government was not because the emperors "had a cynical concept of human motivation, or because they consciously created an ideology for their own purposes", but rather because it "was part of their reality" [Botha 1988:89]. It is within this context that this chapter will examine the significance of the imperial cult as an expression of self-definition.

2.2. ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE IMPERIAL CULT

A study of the nature of the imperial rituals celebrated in the Roman empire cannot be undertaken in a vacuum. In order to understand fully the significance of the imperial cult, one needs to locate it within the context of the Hellenistic period which saw

its development [Price 1984:21]. For the purposes of this study, the following pages will attempt to develop that context so as to enable us to understand the dynamics of the imperial cult in perspective. The main focus will be on the social functions of the Hellenistic ruler cults and the extent to which the imperial cult was a continuation of them, particularly as it manifested itself in the Eastern Mediterranean. This will be coupled with an examination of the Roman official perception of the imperial rituals vis-a-vis that of the provinces.

2.2.1. The Hellenistic Background

As already noted above, the Roman imperial cult originated and developed from the Hellenistic environment in which rulers were honoured to the extent of being divinized. The Hellenistic practice itself evolved from certain tendencies towards ruler cult which were already evident in the Eastern Mediterranean and Greek worlds which Alexander the Great brought together under his rule during his military campaigns in the fourth century B.C.E. For example, the Orientals were already familiar with the exaltation of powerful rulers to the rank of the gods [Scott 1936:130]. This practice was based on the understanding that rulers were sons of the deity, and that their authority and the laws by which they governed the people were derived from the gods. Hence it was believed that "through the king the deity discloses himself to men, becoming visible through him and in him, and thereby coming into association with them"

[Lohse 1976:216]. On the other hand, while the Greeks did not share the idea of a ruler as an epiphany of deity, they were familiar with divine veneration of important individuals. They believed that some prominent people who had distinguished themselves through heroic deeds could be elevated to the company of the gods. By the same token, such prominent individuals could be viewed as manifestations of the gods appearing on earth in human form [Lohse 1976:216]. It was a combination of these two tendencies that led to the institution of the Hellenistic ruler cult.

As a result of the victorious expeditions of Alexander the Great through the eastern countries, the Greeks came into contact with the oriental version of divine kingship. This led to Alexander the Great being accorded honours which exalted him to the status of the divine. This practice later developed into an institutionalized form during the reigns of Alexander's successors who had divided the empire among themselves [Ferguson 1970:88-89; Lohse 1976:216-217; Walbank 1981:210ff]. Thus, by the time that the rule of Hellenistic kings was finally eclipsed by Roman imperial expansion the institution of dynastic ruler cults was already well established in the Hellenistic world. The Roman imperial cult was a product of this legacy.

In order to understand and appreciate the significance of the Hellenistic ruler cult, however, one needs to examine its social functions. No one can deny that this cult promoted the political

objectives of the Hellenistic monarchs, especially during the era of the diadochi. Even before the Hellenistic period, the oriental concept of divine kingship must have bestowed unlimited power upon the rulers [Lohse 1976:216]. Having adopted Alexander's legacy, the diadochi reinforced the cult by claiming for themselves the divine honours accorded to the great king, and this must have enhanced their dynastic rule. However, when viewed from the perspective of the subjects, the ruler cult can be understood within the context of the benefactor/benefaction mentality which permeated the Hellenistic culture [see Bowersock 1982:171]. In the words of John Ferguson [1970:88],

The sovereign is a mediator between the divine and life on earth; his regalia, the crown, sceptre, orb and throne, proclaim his cosmic function. Upon him fertility of the harvests depends, his touch heals, he has power over life and death, as representative of the divine order he dispences justice and is the arbiter of peace and war.

Central to the development of the ruler cult was a universal yearning for peace which would create a happy and secure life. A ruler who could satisfy this longing was hailed as a divine manifestation and recognized as soter [cf. Bowersock 1982:171; Lohse 1976:218]. It was within this context that the first traces of the Roman imperial cult developed. The effects of the prolonged civil war in the Roman Empire during the first century B.C.E. intensified the desire among the populace for an end to war. This

explains why Octavian's victory was seen as a restoration of true peace and his rule greeted as a divine manifestation in the eastern parts of the empire [Lohse 1976:218-219].

2.2.2. The Divinization of the Roman Emperors

With the collapse of the Hellenistic dynasties as a result of Roman expansion, a stage was set for the deification of Roman rulers. Although Julius Caesar's position on the question of ruler cult is unclear, it appears that he conceived his mission on the model of the ideal rule of Alexander the Great. As a result, after his death Caesar was spontaneously accorded divine honours. These were later sanctioned by the Senate, and thus he was officially accepted among the gods of the state. It was from this background that Octavian was designated as the "Son of the Divinized Caesar" and given the name "Augustus" (One who deserves reverence) by the Senate. While such designations elevated him to a level above ordinary human beings, they did not make him a god, but emphasized the superhuman dimension of his felicitas, that is, an impersonal power which showed itself in the emperor's deeds [see Koester 1982:367-369]. On the other hand, victorious Roman generals and provincial governors who took over the authority of government from the former Hellenistic rulers found themselves increasingly accorded divine honours along the lines of Hellenic homage of benefactor cults, particularly in the eastern provinces [Bowersock 1982:171].

In so far as the Roman imperial cult assumed some form of the deification of a ruler as it developed from the reign of Augustus onwards,⁵ it showed signs of continuity with the Hellenistic ruler cult [see Taylor 1931:190-191]. When Augustus came to power, he introduced religious reforms which included a formal suppression of the benefactor cults for Roman governors in the provinces. Instead, provincial priests were appointed to administer the activities associated with the imperial cult [see Bowersock 1982:172-173]. Such changes gave to the imperial cult a central focus on the imperial families which can be regarded as a thin veil of the former dynastic ruler cult of Hellenistic kings. Nevertheless, the Roman official understanding of the cult differed in many respects from the Hellenistic practices of the deification of rulers.

Koester [1982:366-367] maintains that the Roman official perception of the imperial cult was characterized by tension between the fully developed concept of the Hellenistic royal cult and native Roman concepts of the extraordinary personality. In spite of the divine honours accorded to him, Augustus seems to have avoided breaking the Roman tradition that sharply distinguished between gods and human beings. While Augustus permitted temples or altars to be erected to him both in Rome and in the provinces, he insisted that they be dedicated both to him and to the gods, with the aspects of

⁵ For details of the developments which led to the imperial cult assuming an institutionalized form during the reign of Augustus, see Balsdon 1965:189; Ferguson 1970:90-91; Koester 1982:367-369; Lohse 1976:219; Taylor 1931:185-186.

the cult of the goddess Roma featuring very prominently [cf. Ferguson 1970:90; Koester 1982:369; Lohse 1976:219]. Much as the practices associated with the cult seemed to represent some kind of imperial pretension to divinity, reverence was not accorded to the person of the emperor but rather to his genius (guardian spirit) or felicitas [Balsdon 1965:189 cf. Koester 1982:369]. Moreover, the general pattern seems to have been an expectation of apotheosis, that is, looking forward to a future deification of the emperor after his death,⁶ and thus placing him posthumously among the gods of the state [see Ferguson 1970:91].

The enthusiasm with which the imperial cult was expressed in the provinces complicates the ambiguity of this phenomenon. While Augustus tried to distinguish the imperial cult of Rome from that of the Hellenistic idea of divine kingship, such distinctions were meaningless in the provinces [see Koester 1982:369]. Asia Minor, where the Churches addressed in Revelation were situated, became the center for the Hellenistic interpretation of the imperial ritual. However, it is often unclear whether homage was paid to the emperor himself as a god or to his genius. Bearing in mind this difference between the Roman official perception of the imperial

⁶ Some emperors like Caligula, Nero, and Domitian are often singled out as notorious for having claimed divine status in their lifetime. However, such a conclusion is problematic in view of the complex nature of the imperial cult as part of the network between Rome and the provinces. There appears to be no official evidence that any of these emperors changed in any fundamental way the social expression of imperial rituals [see Thompson 1990:159]

rituals and their social expression in the provinces will be useful in an analysis of the nature of the imperial cult as an expression of self-definition in the contemporary society of the author of Revelation.

2.3. THE INTEGRATIVE AND ALL-ENCOMPASSING POWER OF THE IMPERIAL CULT

The lack of primary literary evidence on the imperial cult makes it difficult to discern the depth of individual emotional attachment felt by the ancient peoples towards imperial rituals. Archaeological discoveries, however, provide us with enough evidence that the imperial cult flourished in the Roman Empire. The distribution and preponderance of physical reminders of the imperial cult in the form of temples, statues and images demonstrate that the cult was part and parcel of the reality of everyday life throughout the provincial cities. As such, a meaningful analysis of the nature of the imperial cult needs to involve an examination of the significance attached to the rituals associated with these physical structures. The following pages will attempt to demonstrate that it was through a combination of these physical structures and the rituals associated with them that the imperial cult attained its symbolic role of self-definition for contemporary society. Such a symbolic role of self-definition is here understood within the context of the integrative and all-encompassing power of the imperial cult.

2.3.1. The Imperial Cult as Part of the Network between Rome and the Provinces.

At the official level, the imperial cult became a reciprocal process through which a relationship was established between Rome and her subjects in the provinces. The devotion of high ranking provincials to the ceremonies for honouring the ruling power provided the Roman government with an unparalleled guarantee of loyalty throughout the empire [Bowersock 1982:172]. Not only were provincial emissaries often imperial priests, but even diplomatic approaches to the emperor were frequently associated with divine honours [see Price 1984:243]. Priesthood of the imperial cult itself became a prestigious post which could see its bearer elevated to senatorial status [Bowersock 1982:172]. In so far as the cult maintained a reciprocal relationship between Rome and the provinces, "it was an equally important means for representing the emperor to those in the province and those in the province to the emperor" [Thompson 1990:158].

The significance of the imperial cult as part of the network between Rome and the provinces is clearly demonstrated by the distribution of the cult throughout the provincial cities. The reality of the cult was physically manifested through various forms of civic architecture honouring the emperor, the most important of which were imperial temples. Cities vied with each other for the construction of temples dedicated to the emperor so as to attain

the status of neokoros⁷ [see Bowersock 1982:173; Thompson 1990:160]. It must be noted that such temples could also be used for a wide range of activities such as festivals, cultic rituals, meetings of official bodies, execution of civic offices, trading and banking, and also serving as museums and libraries [Botha 1988:92]. The widespread construction of temples went hand in hand with the erection of imperial sanctuaries and altars, in addition to physical portraits of the emperor in the form of statues and images, all of which were adorned with divine attributes. All these physical representations demonstrate the extent to which the imperial cult was incorporated into everyday life. Commenting on the significant contribution of these physical representations of the cult to the people's understanding of their relationship to the emperor, Botha [1988:92] has this to say:

The architectural emphasis on the emperor and especially imperial temples served an important sociological role. The Empire brought a new, cosmopolitan ideology that changed the traditional and ethnic boundaries and made religious and social identity a serious problem. The imperial cult was an expression of redefinition, connecting new factors with old interpretations.

Thus, the imperial cult served as an existential power through

⁷ It was an honour for a city to be granted the status of a neocorate, about which the final decision was made by the senate and emperor. This status granted a city claim to an imperial temple with provincial status, and a city that could boast several imperial temples could in turn pride itself with the formal honour of as many neocorates.

which the provincial subjects expressed their self-understanding in relation to the new reality brought by the Roman Empire. This becomes particularly evident in the manner in which the cult permeated public life. Apart from cultic rituals, imperial cult activities also included celebration of annual festivals, the most important of which was the emperor's birthday [Thompson 1990:161]. Such festivals featured athletic games in honour of the imperial house, and competitions in music and poetry, for which the emperor's greatness would be the theme. While all these activities took place in a holiday atmosphere, the high priest of the imperial cult presided over them, and they were accompanied by sacrifices, display of imperial images and the recounting of sacred tales about the emperor [Bowersock 1982:173]. Moreover, not only did these festivals often take place in prominent public buildings such as gymnasia, but they also attracted large numbers of people from all social ranks and professions [cf. Botha 1988:91; Thompson 1990:161-162]. The popularity of these festivals among the provincials indicated the extent to which the imperial cult was accepted as part of the very fabric of social reality.

2.3.2 Significance of Imperial Rituals

While the imperial cult was a flourishing institution in the Graeco-Roman world, it was also a rare topic of discourse. This does not mean, however, that the rituals associated with the cult had no significance. The cult "was taken for granted not because it

was insignificant but precisely because it was so integral to life in the empire" [Bowersock 1982:174]. It must be noted that imperial rituals for honouring the emperor were frequently performed in his absence and institutionalized on a regular basis [Price 1984:1]. Therefore, most provincials would only have known the emperor from his bust or statue and images displayed during sacred processions. Such sacred processions, in turn, probably evoked some emotional attachment on the part of the participants, in one way or another. In the words of Bowersock [1982:173-174],

The impact of this spectacle must have been considerable, even if the emotions it inspired could not be described, in the modern sense, as particularly religious. No one, it seems, was moved to stretch out his hands in prayer; but he cannot have escaped a consciousness of temporal power at least, and of divine power potentially. By looking upon the emperor's image, by joining in sacrifice, and by enjoying the imperial games, a citizen of the Roman Empire was reminded of who ruled the world.

Thus, imperial rituals were not merely a series of "honours" addressed to a ruling power, but rather constituted a system of conceptualizing the world, the focal point of which was the emperor [see Price 1984:7-8]. In order to appreciate the significance of imperial rituals, one needs to understand them within the context of the world view out of which the entire cult emerged and flourished. That world view was the product of a fusion of Roman and Hellenistic traditions which resulted in a socio-religious

perspective that sustained the permanence and stability of the empire as perceived by its inhabitants.

Even during the days of the Republic, the official Roman conception of life was characterized by a religious dimension. Religion was regarded as the foundation of both public and private life. The stability and well-being of the state and its citizens depended on a proper observation of the rules governing the relationship between the gods and the inhabitants [Balsdon 1965:182]. Such rules were not concerned with ethical behaviour but rather with the proper performance of rituals and sacrifices to the gods. Therefore, religion for the Romans was centered on the exact observation of established rites, on which the welfare, success and prosperity of the entire community depended:

Piety ... was not understood in terms of the religious experience of the individual ... Rather, piety meant the faithful observation of ritual duties because the life of the individual, as well as of the community as a whole, was permeated by these divine powers, whether in birth, marriage, or death, the seasons of the year, popular assemblies or warfare [Koester 1982:363].

As a result of this attitude towards divine powers, Roman religion was generally open to other rituals associated with foreign cults. Previously unknown religious powers could be accommodated into the official religion or given space for an altar or temple in the city so as to secure the favours of such new deities. This tolerance of

foreign cultic rituals formed the basis, and contributed to the success of the consolidation of the Roman Empire. In the provinces, the Romans supported the veneration of local cults as they believed that the welfare of the communities depended on the goodwill of their protecting deities. On the other hand, however, the provincials were expected to respect the Roman gods in the imperial setting [Sherwin-White 1965:101]. This explains why the imperial cult neither became a new religion nor a substitute for the traditional cults of the Graeco-Roman world:

This cult was rather a supplementary glorification of the official religion which served the Roman state. No one was urged to accept the emperor cult as a replacement of his traditional religion. On the contrary, the Romans earnestly supported the veneration of all gods in their native cities and nations, and they expected these gods would in turn lend their support to the Roman state [Koester 1982:370-371].

On the other hand, the popularity of these rituals in the provincial cities stemmed from the Hellenistic tradition of honouring benefactors. After the turbulent years which saw the fall of Hellenistic kings, people were grateful for the establishment and preservation of peace by the emperor, and hoped that the gods or powers of fate would continue to enable the emperor to secure peace and prosperity [Koester 1982:371]. Imperial rituals could also be associated with requests for privileges and beneficia [Botha 1988:93]. That explains why the provincials voluntarily

incorporated the imperial cult into their traditional religious values. This, in turn, enabled the cult to assume its integrative power and all-encompassing influence over all aspects of life.

Moreover, imperial rituals, like the cults of the traditional gods, represented a relationship of power between the provincial subjects and the emperor:

The ambiguous range of ritual practice and language used for honouring the emperor reflects the conviction that the emperor stood at the focal point between the divine and the human. It was impossible to consider the gods without reference to the emperor, just as to be reminded of the emperor was to be reminded of the gods. Conversely, the well-being of both individual and society was inextricably linked to the emperor as elected by and manifestation of the gods [Botha 1988:97].

Thus, imperial rituals as expression of the cult constituted a stabilized and structured socio-religious order of the world [Price 1984:248]. It was in this capacity that the imperial cult represented the reality of the Roman Empire, and thus became an expression of self-definition for contemporary society.

2.3.3. The Imperial World View

It has already been noted in the previous pages that the practices associated with the imperial cult served to express a particular

socio-religious world view, in terms of which the inhabitants of the empire understood themselves. What remain to be explored, though, are the fundamental assumptions which sustained such a world view. Such an exercise will, in turn, help to explain why the imperial cult became so popular in the Graeco-Roman world. For the purposes of this study, three related aspects will be examined in an attempt to characterize the world view expressed through the wide range of honours accorded to the emperor.

Firstly, the imperial cult reflected the provincial subjects' perception of the power of Rome, with a particular focus on the personality of the emperor. Such a perception was not a result of deliberate official policies imposed by Rome, but rather constituted part of the response of the provincial subjects to the new reality presented by Roman rule. Price [1984] traces the development of such a response among the Greek cities from the cults of Hellenistic kings. He observes that with the accession of Hellenistic kings, the cities had to come to terms with a new type of power which was alien to their traditional setting. The solution adopted by the cities was to represent to themselves the new power by finding a place for the kings within the traditional framework of the cults of the gods [see Price 1984:29-30]. The same process was employed as the cities responded to the advent of the Roman Empire, albeit under different actual power relations [Price 1984:43-44]. Thus, the practices associated with the imperial cult initially developed as reactions to imperial power. When these

practices assumed a regular and institutionalized form in the provinces, they served to articulate the subjects' recognition of the reality of the dominant power of the emperor.

It must be noted, though, that mere recognition of imperial dominance among the subjects does not explain fully the popularity of the imperial cult in the provinces. The power relationships between Rome and her subjects, as reflected through the imperial cult, assumed the form of what Price refers to as "a system of exchange" [1984:65-77]. In such a system of exchange, the actions of both the Roman authorities and the provincial subjects were equally crucial for the continuation of the cult. On the one hand, the procedure for setting up the cults of the emperor in the provinces indicated some form of official control from Rome. For example, offers made by the cities for the establishment of the cults had to get approval from the emperor and the Senate. Even when such cults had been established, Roman officials like governors and imperial priests were directly involved in leading the regular festivals and celebrations associated with cults [see Price 1984:66-71]. On the other hand, the success of the imperial cult in the provinces was dependent on the fact that this cult was tied up with the ideals and expectations of the provincial subjects, as will be demonstrated below.

One of the factors which enhanced the power of the imperial cult was its acceptance by the provincial subjects as a crucial path for

the advancement of their communities. Price [1984:78-100] observes that the imperial cult flourished in communities whose culture was Greek and were both urban and communally organized. In these settlements, the imperial cult was strongly Greek with respect to its ritual, even though some of its peripheral elements were of Roman origin [Price 1984:87-89]. Price explains this phenomenon as an attempt by the cities to negotiate their position in a world dominated by Rome [1984:99-100]. Thus, in their response to imperial rule, the cities not only accommodated the new power of the emperor into their own traditional setting, but also secured for themselves freedom of action in so far as the expression of that power was concerned [see Price 1984:99]. This, in turn, was seen as contributing to the advancement of the communal, urban Greek culture within the entire imperial setting. Hence the imperial cult became an accepted reality of everyday life among the provincial subjects.

As the imperial cult became institutionalized, it became intertwined with the competitive values which characterized the provincial setting. Earlier on, reference has already been made to the prevailing inter-city rivalry for the construction of imperial temples so as to gain the status of neokoros [see pp.58-59]. Such rivalry among the cities was coupled with competition among the local elites. Within the cities, individual elites sought to outdo each other in respect of contributions to the promotion of the cult, with the hope of enhancing their status and prestige [see

Price 1984:62-65; 99-100]. Added to the competitive spirit of the provinces, was the context in which the imperial cult was understood to be serving local interests. Not only were offers of the cult made with requests for privileges, but also such offers were regarded as expressions of gratitude for benefactions already received from the emperor [see Price 1984:54-56]. All these factors served to enhance the integrative power of the imperial cult. As such, the regular expression of this cult among the provincial subjects became a constant reminder of who the ruler of the world was, namely the emperor.

The second aspect of the imperial world view entailed the divine nature of imperial power. As already noted above, the only model available to the provincial cities for accommodating the new power imposed by imperial rule was to incorporate the person of the emperor into the traditional framework of the cults of the gods. The actual expressions of the close relationship between the emperor and the gods were often fraught with ambiguities. While various measures were taken to subordinate the emperor to the gods, it was not uncommon to find certain expressions of the imperial cult which implied the elevation of the emperor to a status that was either equal to, or higher than, that of the gods [see Price 1984:146-156; 212-220]. Moreover, while the Roman official position was based on the apotheosis of the emperor after his death, in the provinces the emperor could be called theos in his lifetime [Price 1984:75]. Nevertheless, such variations made no difference to the

basic assumption that the emperor possessed such overwhelming power precisely because of his association with divinity.

Thirdly, if the source of the power of the emperor was connected with his divine nature, then the universality, permanence, stability and eternity of imperial rule could well be assumed. Such a perception of imperial rule was first demonstrated by a proposal made by the Roman governor of the province of Asia Minor to start the new year on Augustus' birthday:

(It is hard to tell) whether the birthday of the most divine Caesar is a matter of greater pleasure or benefit. We could justly hold it to be equivalent to the beginning of all things, and he has restored at least to serviceability, if not to its natural state, every form that had become imperfect and fallen into misfortune; and he has given a different aspect to the whole world, which blithely would have embraced its own destruction if Caesar had not been born for the common benefit of all. Therefore people would be right to consider this to have been the beginning of the breath of life for them, which has set a limit to regrets for having been born ... [see Price 1984:55].

Hence the provincial cities began to celebrate, on a regular basis, not only the birthday of Augustus but also all imperial festivals. Such festivals were coupled with sacrifices to the gods so as to secure continued divine protection for the emperor [see Price

1984:210-215; 233]. Moreover, the widespread distribution of imperial temples and rituals served to sustain the continuity and stability of imperial rule [Price 1984:161-162].

2.4. THE BOOK OF REVELATION AND THE IMPERIAL CULT

Revelation 13 seems to portray the author's perception of the all-encompassing influence of the imperial cult. The reference to the beast rising out of the sea [Rev.13:1] alludes to the Roman Empire, and the seven heads are the emperors who were deified as gods [cf. Rev. 17:10]. The reference to the "blasphemous name" upon the seven heads of the beast [13:1] seems to be connected with the description of the scarlet beast "which was full of blasphemous names", in 17:3. The idea of blasphemous name(s) may be a reference to the titles of divine honour bestowed upon the emperor [Court 1979:126, 131]. The second beast arising from the earth [Rev.13:11] mirrors the first beast which arose from the sea and its mandate is to see to it that people will worship the first beast. The image of the beast arising from the earth seems to be a reference to the imperial priesthood which promoted the cult in the provinces [Thompson 1990:164].

The author of Revelation also reflects the preponderance and popularity of the cult among the provincial subjects.⁸ The first

⁸ It must be noted that while the author of Revelation depicts Rome as the villain, his book was written within the context of developments in Asia Minor.

beast was given authority over "every tribe and people and tongue and nation, and all who dwell on earth will worship it ..." [Rev. 13:7-8]. The popularity of the cult is demonstrated by the question asked by its worshipers: "Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?" [Rev.13:4]. John seems to emphasize two factors which account for the provincials' perception of the might and permanence of the imperial cult. Firstly, the seer describes one of the heads of the first beast as having a "mortal wound, but its mortal wound was healed" [Rev.13:3]. Later, in verses 12 and 14, the wound is assigned to the beast itself. While this may be an indication that John was influenced by the legend of Nero Redivivus,⁹ the manner in which he made use of it in his book is difficult to determine [see Court 1979:127-129]. The miracle of the "healing of a mortal wound" seems to have enhanced the worship of the cult, as "the whole earth followed the beast with wonder" [Rev.13:3 cf. 17:8]. Secondly, for the author of Revelation the imperial cult flourished because of the extent to which it was promoted by the provincial priesthood, as represented by the imagery of the beast rising from the earth [Rev.13:11-17].

While the author of Revelation depicts the all-encompassing influence of the imperial cult, he equally polemicizes against it. The very depiction of the Roman Empire as a beast rising from the sea is a parody aimed at associating the imperial system with evil.

⁹ When Nero committed suicide in 68 C.E. there was a widespread belief that he was not really dead but would return one day.

The beast is a servant of the dragon [Rev.13:4] which in Rev.12:9 is explicitly identified as "that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world." Thus, the emperor and his allies in Asia Minor are depicted as the manifestation of the mythical beast of rebellion and chaos.

In this state of affairs, the author of Revelation characterizes the situation of his audience as a cosmic battle between God and the Devil. This becomes particularly evident in his emphasis on dualism. In the words of David Barr,

... the reader must remember that we move in a world of angels and monsters, whores and virgins, Christ and Antichrist. It is a world characterized by near-total dualism, with no consideration of a middle way [1984:40].

Revelation draws a clear distinction between the forces of Good and those of Evil, the former coming from the world above and the latter from the world below (abyss), with the earth as the plane of struggle between the two. This understanding was probably taken by the author from the combat myths of the ancient Near East which he then reinterpreted to construct a picture of the social realities of the world of his audience [see Collins 1984:147-148; Court 1979:123-124].

The author makes his audience to see their tribulation under the power of Rome no longer in terms of an earthly conflict, but as a manifestation of a cosmic war between God and Satan. He uses holy war imagery typical of the Jewish tradition during the late

Hellenistic and early Roman periods [see Collins 1977:243-245]. His audience are to suffer persecution and death in the present, but they must expect a future violent resolution of the conflict in which heavenly forces will defeat their enemies. The author gives no indication that his audience will actively take part in the eschatological battle. However, he intends to convince and reassure them that the social crisis which they experience presently is part of a conflict of cosmic proportions in which they are called to take sides [cf. Bauckham 1988:31].

Closely connected with the holy war imagery is the author's emphasis on voluntary death in the context of tribulation. In the messages to the seven Churches, the author encourages the virtue of "hypomone" as a stance to be taken in a situation of tribulation [Rev.2:3, 19: 3:10-13 cf.1:9; 2:10,13,25; 3:8]. In the vision of the opening of the fifth seal, the souls of the those who had been slain for the word of God are said to be "under the altar" [Rev.6:9]. By implication, they have sacrificed their lives for the word of God and, no doubt, serve as examples to be followed by the author's audience. The reply to their request for divine judgment through which their cause will be vindicated [Rev.6:10] is that they must rest a little longer until their number has been complete [Rev.6:11]. This implies that a fixed number of Christians must meet death before the vindication of the faithful can be accomplished.

Basic to the virtue of hypomone which, by implication, means facing tribulation to the point of death, is the idea of bearing witness to ten marturian 'Iesou Christou [Rev.1:2]. While on one hand the "testimony of Jesus" is actually testimony about Jesus [Rev.1:9], on the other hand, it refers to Jesus' testimony of his own death which John encourages his audience to imitate [see Barr 1984:42]. Hence both Jesus (the Lamb) and those whose souls are under the altar are victorious because they "had been slain" [cf. Rev.5:9; 6:9-11]. Similarly, the innumerable crowd of those who have come out of the great tribulation have their robes washed and made white in the blood of the Lamb [Rev.7:14 cf. 12:10-12].

Underlying the notion of voluntary death in the midst of tribulation, is the understanding that this virtue leads to the ultimate vindication of those who suffer under the present establishment dominated by the beast. For the author's audience facing alienation and tribulation, it would be a consolation to know that there is a limit to the activities of those who oppose them. It would be a source of encouragement to know that the witness of those who had sacrificed their lives for the sake of their faith is not in vain, but that their cause will be avenged. The author calls on his audience to expect to suffer more tribulation, even to the point of death, but assures them that only through preparedness to die for their faith can they hasten the dawn of their vindication.

Throughout his book, the author of Revelation seems to advocate Christian withdrawal from, and total rejection of contemporary society. In Revelation 18, the author pronounces the coming judgment and total destruction of Rome and the entire imperial system. This stems from his opposition to the socio-religious world view advocated and controlled by imperial Rome. John perceives this world view to be a serious threat to the Christian self-understanding of his audience.

Thus, the explanation for Revelation's opposition to Rome lies in a clash of values, featuring the tension between the imperial cult and the Christian acknowledgment of the risen Christ as Lord. The Christian message demanded exclusive loyalty to one God and refused to recognize any other divine object of worship. Within the provincial setting of Asia Minor, the imperial cult was, for the most part, assimilated to the cult of the Graeco-Roman gods. Thus, Christians rejected the imperial cult as a correlate to their wholesale rejection of traditional cults [Koester 1982:371; Thompson 1990:164]. It must be noted that Revelation's polemic against the imperial cult was aroused by this cult's popularity among the provincials. While the cult was not enforced by the authorities, it is possible that those who sought the emperor's favours adorned him with divine honours. Moreover, those entrusted with imperial administration in the provinces could use the cult against Christians as a test of loyalty to the emperor, as is clear from the correspondence between Pliny the Younger and Trajan

[Pliny, Ep.10:96,97].

2.5. CONCLUSIONS

The all-encompassing influence and integrative power of the imperial cult indicates that it involved more than mere honouring of a powerful ruler. Rather, it became a socio-religious expression of reality and self-definition for contemporary society. The incorporation of the cult into the framework of traditional religious values served to affirm society in the truth of those values. As such, the cult served to confirm the status quo and helped people to express their own interest in the preservation of the world in which they lived [Botha 1988:97].

The Book of Revelation's opposition to the cult reflects a clash of values and world views, central to which are basic differences in the experience of the Divine. The Graeco-Roman world view was rooted in "an experience of the world as a plenitude of divine forces and beings, where the supernatural interpenetrates all empirical zones" [Botha 1988:98]. As such, this world view was characterized by a perception of reality based on the emphasis of continuity between humanity, the cosmos and divine forces. This understanding was in irreconcilable tension with the early Christian experience of the divine. Christian adherents saw themselves as citizens of a "different world" [see Koester 1982:371]. Since the imperial cult constituted part of contemporary

society's self-definition, opposition to the cult meant a rejection of the very structure of its experienced reality. In the light of this, the suspicion directed at Christians by their Gentile neighbours becomes understandable:

Not only was the basic recognition of what made one a full member of the Roman empire at stake, but also the deepest values that made sense of and gave purpose to life [Botha 1988:98].

Thus, if Christians found themselves in a precarious position within the Roman Empire, this was a direct result of their refusal to recognize contemporary society's expression of reality and self-definition. While the hostility reflected in Revelation is an attempt at making sense of being rejected by contemporary society, such rejection resulted from neighbours protecting what was important to them rather than from official policy [Botha 1988:98]. It is within this context that the author of Revelation's allusions to tribulation need to be understood. For him, this state of affairs was a direct consequence of the ideological conception of reality and social identity controlled by Rome. Hence the strong opposition to the imperial cult. The author's depiction of the condition of Christians as one of tribulation seems to be in accordance with his literary strategy. It served to alienate his audience from the empire and the ideological perspective which it represented. This, in turn, would prepare the audience for the alternative symbolic framework of self-definition which the author wanted to advocate.

CHAPTER THREETHE SOCIO-LITERARY FUNCTION OF THE THEME OF TRIBULATION

The discussion to be undertaken in this chapter is based on the premise that what the author of Revelation refers to as "tribulation" is a crisis which is much more complicated than mere state-initiated persecution of Christians. The author reflects a mode of resistance to the entire social system of the Roman Empire. He regards it as a threat to the self-understanding and group solidarity of his audience. As such, he and his audience constitute an antisocial group, and the theme of tribulation serves to create an alternative framework of self-identification for his audience.

In this chapter, the model of antilanguage will be used to illustrate the socio-literary function of the theme of tribulation as developed by the author. The main concern will be with the social values attached to the language that the author uses in connection with the theme of tribulation, particularly the manner in which he describes his opponents and the situation of his audience. Through his depiction of the situation of his audience as one of tribulation, the author is engaged in the discourse of antilanguage. He creates tension between his audience and his opponents, and forms boundaries according to which the former can define themselves in relation to the latter. He advocates a strict sense of Christian exclusiveness and a total rejection of the

contemporary social setting. Such a stance, in turn, serves as the vehicle of an alternative self-definition for his audience.

3.1. THE THEME OF TRIBULATION AS ANTILANGUAGE

As already noted in the Introduction of this study, an antilanguage is a language that is parallel to, and generated by an antisocial group, that is, a social collectivity that is set up within another society as a conscious alternative to it [Halliday 1978:164; Malina 1985:11]. The language generated by such an antisocial group reflects the group's opposition to the prevailing social structure and therefore serves as a mode of resistance to the overarching conventional norms of the social reality in which it is embedded. In his description of the phenomenon of antilanguage, Halliday [1978:164-182] specifically finds its expression among criminals, individuals put in prison and adolescents.¹ Malina [1985:11] notes that various factors account for the emergence of an antisocial group, among which are "being labelled a deviant, with active hostility by society at large

¹ While Halliday makes a passing reference to the fact that "the early Christian community was an antisociety, and its language was in this sense an antilanguage" [1978:171], he does not develop this idea. This is understandable, in view of the fact that his work is concerned with a modern study of sociolinguistics in general and not addressed to a particular society. The examples that he draws from the antisocial groups of Elizabethan England, modern Calcutta and Polish prisons merely serve to illustrate the characteristic features of antilanguage as an instance of the prevailing sociolinguistic order [see Halliday 1978:164]

against such individuals, lack of social concern for certain individuals, with a resulting passive social symbiosis, exile or rejection due to negative outcomes to an uprising or revolutionary [sic], and the like."

An examination of the social tensions reflected in the Book of Revelation indicates that the author presupposes the existence of a social collectivity that, due to its socio-religious world view, is regarded with suspicion by the wider society and therefore looked upon as deviant [cf. Du Rand 1992:78]. The author's emphasis on tribulation as the experience of his audience depicts a general feeling of alienation which results from being rejected by their neighbours who uphold the dominant norms of social reality as reflected in, and maintained by, the overarching social setting of their contemporary world. While the author of Revelation presupposes a social collectivity that stands opposed to specific notable social groups such as Rome and her allies [Rev.13:1-18; 17:1-18; 18:1-24] the Jewish community [Rev.2:9; 3:9] and Christian rivals [Rev.2:6, 14-15, 20-23], his development of the theme of tribulation serves as a mode of resistance not only to the prevailing social setting, but also to the dominant ideological conception of reality which sustains such a social setting. Therefore, John and his audience constitute an antisociety and the language associated with the theme of tribulation in the Book of Revelation is antilanguage.

3.1.1.1. Characteristic features of Antilanguage

The simplest form that can be assumed by the phenomenon of antilanguage involves a process of relexicalization, that is, a distinctive development and use of new words in the place of old ones. However, this process of relexicalization is partial, not total, as it does not necessarily imply a process of fission from the established language. An antilanguage uses the same grammar as the established language, and not all words found in the established will have new equivalents in the antilanguage. What distinguishes an antilanguage from the dominant language of the wider society is its penchant for different vocabulary only in certain areas, typically those areas that are of central concern for the interests and activities of the antisocial group and that set it off most sharply from the established society [see Halliday 1978:165; Malina 1985].

The process of relexicalization features in the manner in which the visionary narrative of the Book of Revelation is developed. The author's main area of central concern revolves around his understanding of his vision as "Apokalypsis 'Iesou Christou" which finally derives from God [Rev.1:1] as an authoritative prophecy for his audience [Rev.1:3; 10:7,11; 19:10; 22:6-10, 18-19]. The author also refers to his vision as a revelation of "what must soon take place" [Rev.1:1; 4:1]. As the narrative develops, it turns out that the actual content of "what must soon take place" is an experience

of tribulation. In the messages to the seven Churches, the author mentions two recent incidents of actual persecution of Christians [Rev.1:9; 2:13] and expects more to occur in the future [2:10-11; 3:10]. Among the visions, the author alludes to two incidents of persecution that have occurred in the past [Rev.6:9-11; 7:9-14]. The author also mentions several visions in which tribulation is connected with conflicting or warring situations [Rev.11:1-13; 12:1-17; 13:1-14:12; 17:1-19:5] containing allusions to Roman hostility towards Christians.

Thus, while the author claims to receive his vision "en pneumatē" [Rev.1:10; 4:2; 17:3; 21:10] he begins not from his own private "ecstatic" experience, but within the historical experience of alienation and powerlessness which he and his audience have in common [Boring 1986:262; Barr 1984:40-41; Du Rand 1992:78-79]. Whatever the nature of that experience may have been, the author of Revelation relexicalizes it as "tribulation" [Rev.1:9]. This process of relexicalization is further intensified in the manner in which the author, while he attributes the source of the experience of tribulation to Roman hostility on the one hand, tries to deny Rome any claim to permanent and absolute control of this state of affairs, on the other. The plague sequences of seven seals, trumpets and bowls, in which tribulation is illustrated in various recapitulatory² ways, show features which emphasize God's action

² The Recapitulation theory maintains that the Book of Revelation is not a strictly consecutive account of a sequence of events, but a repeated description of the

in redirecting tribulation against the perpetrators of Christian suffering [see Court 1979:71]. While the seals and trumpets appear to affect humanity in general, the bowls are specifically directed against God's enemies. Moreover, the author's emphasis upon imitating the crucified Christ [Rev.1:5-7, 9; 2:10,26-28; 3:8,10,21; 5:5-6,9; 6:9; 7:14; 12:10-12] reflects an understanding that preparedness to suffer tribulation will hasten divine retribution and judgment upon the enemies of his audience.

The author of the Book of Revelation further engages in the practice of relexicalization by using new words or labels for his opponents and those factors which he believes to be responsible for the tribulation suffered by his audience. Thus, the Roman Empire, and the entire social setting associated with it, is presented in the imagery of a beast [Rev.13; 14:9,11; 15:2; 16:2; 17:3,8,11-16; 19:19-20; 20:4,10] whose ultimate service is in the hands of Satan [cf.2:13; 12:9; 13:4]. The power and splendour of the city of Rome are reflected in the clothing of the woman seated on a scarlet beast [Rev.17:3-4] who is ironically described as a harlot [17:1-6,15]. Indeed, if for the inhabitants of Asia Minor the Roman imperial structure constituted an established social reality that was taken for granted, for John and his audience it was a

same facts in different forms. While the question of whether this theory is applicable to the plague sequences may be debatable, there is an extent to which the parallelism between the latter amounts to a repetition of ideas which serve to emphasize the same meaning [cf. Barr 1984:4; Court 1979:71-81].

manifestation of blasphemy and abomination [Rev.13:1,5-6; 17:3-4].

Apart from the Roman Empire, for John and his audience tribulation arises out of the activities of certain social groups which he regards as their opponents. Among these are the Jewish communities whom John refers to as the "synagogue of Satan" [Rev.2:9; 3:9] and some Christian rivals who are designated as the Nicolaitans [Rev.2:6,15] Balaam [Rev.2:14] and Jezebel [Rev.2:20]. Not only does the author of Revelation regards the teaching of his Christian rivals as false [Rev.2:2,20], but he also associates them with the "deep things of Satan" [Rev.2:24]. As such, the author's condemnation of his Jewish and Christian opponents is a correlate to his condemnation of the entire social setting of the Roman imperial world which he regards to be demonic.

The extent and significance of the author's literary technique of relexicalization become particularly evident in what David Barr [19884:42] refers to as "symbolic transformations" at crucial points of the visionary narrative. One such crucial point is the vision of a new heaven and a new earth in chapter 21. This vision presents a symbolic picture of the alternative world for which the author has been preparing his audience throughout the book. The significance of this symbolic world comes out in 21:7-8 where the author distinguishes between the conquerors on the one hand, and the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, murderers, fornicators, sorcerers, idolaters, and liars, on the other. The conquerors are

those who have resisted the abominations of the beast. They are those who are the victims of tribulation because of their refusal to associate themselves with Rome and the imperial cult. They are the ones who, through endurance in the midst of tribulation, become the inheritors of God's new creation. It would be a source of encouragement to the author's audience to know that while they are suffering at present and therefore appear to be losers, in the end they are going to be winners [cf. Barr 1984:42].

On the other hand, the cowardly, the faithless and the polluted are those who, due to fear of "persecution",³ have given in to the obscenities of the beast and the harlot and have therefore complied with the demands of Rome. The murderers are Roman agents in the killing of Christians.⁴ Fornicators, sorcerers and idolaters are variations of the "idolatrous" worship of the followers of Rome. Liars are those who, from the author's perspective, have committed themselves to the falsehood of the temporary power of Rome [cf. Rev.13:4,14]. All these symbolic labels are relexicalized forms of social groups who constitute the established society to which John

³ Here "persecution" is not necessarily understood to involve direct, official state action against Christians, but is rather used within the context of how the author of Revelation relexicalizes social conditions of the audience.

⁴ This must not be assumed to imply it to be an historical fact that such killings did occur. The significance of the symbol of "murderers" lies not in its historicity, but rather in what the author wants to achieve by using it. As such, it must be understood within the context of the general technique of relexicalization.

and his social collectivity stand opposed. By the same token, the symbol of conquerers is a relexicalized form of the state of alienation experienced by John and his audience. The contrast between the fate of those who uphold the values of the established society [21:8] and the heritage of the conquerers (that is, those who constitute the antisocial group) serves not only to assure the present victims of their ultimate victory, but also to discourage any of them who, due to the pressure of tribulation, would decide to lapse and join the beast.

Apart from relexicalization, the other characteristic feature of an antilanguage is the tendency to overlexicalize. In addition to the use of new words for old ones, an antilanguage also tends to employ a large range of lexical items to cover the same area [Malina 1985:12]. For example, Halliday [1978:165] refers to Bhaktiprasad Mallik as having documented a proliferation of twenty-one words for "bomb" and forty-one for "police" in the underworld language of modern Calcutta.

Similarly, Revelation employs a wide range of lexical items to refer to the author's opponents. For example, multiple terminology is used to refer to Rome and the entire imperial system, namely, the beast [Rev.13:1-18; 14:9,11; 15:2; 16:2; 17:3,8,11-16; 19:19-20; 20:4,10], Babylon the Great [Rev.14:8; 17:5; 18:2], and the harlot [Rev.17:1-6,15]. The entire imperial system is said to be in the service of Satan who is variantly described as the great dragon, the Devil, and "that ancient serpent" [Rev.12:3-9]. The

author's Christian rivals are designated as the Nicolaitans [Rev.2:6,15], Balaam [Rev.2:14] and Jezebel [Rev.2:20]. These are variant descriptions of those Christians who accommodate the norms and values of the social setting to which the author is opposed.

The technique of overlexicalization as used in Revelation becomes more evident in the author's literary composition of his message around the issue of tribulation. One of the indicators of overlexicalization as a feature of antilanguage is the preponderance of linguistic variants which describe contrasting spheres of existence and opposing modes of living [Malina 1985:12]. In the Book of Revelation, this phenomenon comes out very clearly in those visions in which a scene of war is depicted, such as the vision of the one hundred and forty-four thousand who, presumably, symbolize the messianic army [see Backham 1988:21-28].

Revelation 14:1-5 presents the seer's vision of a Lamb standing on Mt Zion with the one-hundred and forty-four thousand, accompanied by a song from heaven. The imagery in this passage is that of preparation and readiness for the decisive messianic battle to overcome rebelliousness against God in general and hostility towards Christians in particular, as described in chapter 13. This is shown by the reference to Mt Zion which, in Old Testament tradition, denotes the seat of the messianic kingdom [Is.24:23; 52:7; Obad.21; Mic.4:7]. The Lamb symbolizes the crucified Christ [see Rev.5:5-6, 9-10] who emerges as the conqueror.

The Lamb is shown as standing firm in contrast to the beasts who are rising [Rev.14:1; cf. 13:1,11]. The Lamb stands on a mountain while the beasts rise from the sea and the land. The one hundred and forty-four thousand have the name of the Lamb and his Father's name written on their foreheads in contradistinction to the followers of the beast who have its mark on the right hands or foreheads [Rev.14:1; cf. 13:16-17]. It is the followers of the Lamb alone who can understand the heavenly song which presumably is a war-song for the messianic victory [Rev.14:2-3].

The above imagery is contrasted with the judgment pronounced by the second angel upon Rome [Rev.14:8]. It portrays total degradation and ultimate failure of Rome, and stands in total contradistinction to the power of the beast displayed in chapter 13. The imagery of the judgment that is to befall Rome serves to discourage anyone of the author's audience who, for one reason or another, would want to align himself or herself with Rome.

Another indicator of overlexicalization is the manner in which language is used to express a particular mode(s) of meaning. Halliday [1978:166 cf. Halliday & Hassan 1985:19-20] distinguishes three general modes of meaning in any given linguistic system, namely, experiential, textual and interpersonal modes. The experiential (sometimes called ideational or referential) mode of meaning refers to a linguistic representation of some recognizable phenomenon of the real world, and applies to what is being said or

described. The textual mode refers to qualities of linguistic signs and therefore pertains to how one speaks. The interpersonal mode pertains to the personal qualities of the communicating parties and functions in the process of social interaction [see Halliday & Hassan 1985:19-20; Malina 1985:12-13].

Halliday [1978:166] notes that antilanguages are characterized by a functional orientation away from the experiential mode of meaning towards the textual and interpersonal modes. While this is a normal feature of everyday language, antilanguages are characterized by a relatively greater orientation in this direction, and it is this process that produces overlexicalization [Halliday 1978:166; Malina 1985:13]. This phenomenon is probably a reflection of the fact that the existing reality contradicts the world view of those using antilanguage. The Book of Revelation does reflect this tendency to de-emphasize the experiential and focus upon the textual and interpersonal alone. In the words of Collins,

To some extent the language of the book of Revelation is referential. It is that quality which allows us to relate the book to its historical context and to discover social information in its pages. But the primary purpose of the book is not to impart information. It is rather to call for commitment to the actions, attitudes, and feelings uttered... It makes no attempt to report events or to describe people in a way that everyone could accept ... it presents and interprets some aspect of reality,

expresses a response to it, and invites the reader or hearer to share in the interpretation and the response [1984;144].

In his application of the model of antilanguage to the Fourth Gospel, Malina notes that the textual orientation towards overlexicalization is distinguished by various forms of verbal display, ambiguity and irony [1985:13]. This process features very prominently in the Book of Revelation. For example, in the vision of the scroll with seven seals the author is told that only the "Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David" can open the scroll [Rev.5:5], but he only sees a Lamb that had been "slain" [Rev.5:6 cf. 1:17-18; 2:8]. The contents of the scroll are not made known through reading as the idea of "Biblion" would first imply that they are written [cf. Rev.5:1]. Rather, the prophesied events are enacted in the author's vision. This dramatic connection between the prophecy and the events prophesied is probably in line with the author's intention of making his audience to conform to his perception of the world.

Verbal display in the Book of Revelation is also manifested through the author's ironical depiction of the cosmic battles in which the Lamb and his followers are engaged against the followers of the beast. In all those passages where the author gives accounts of warring situations [Rev.12; 14; 19:11-21], he does not describe any battle, but simply jumps from battle setting to the announcement of victory. Moreover, such victories are claimed for the Lamb and his

followers who, ironically, conquer not by the sword, but by suffering and death [see Barr 1984].

Closely connected with the assured victory of the Lamb and his followers in which the author wants his audience to share, is the verbal display reflected by the author in his description of the New Jerusalem on the one hand, and Babylon the harlot city on the other. In Revelation 21:9-14 the author is carried, "in the spirit", by an angel to a great high mountain where he is shown the holy city. The significance of this scene for the victory of the author's audience lies in the parallels and contrasts between verses 9-11 and what has taken place in chapter 17. It is the same angel of divine wrath who showed John the passing of judgment on the great harlot, who now shows him the splendour of the holy city [cf. 17:1 & 21:9]. In both cases the author is carried off in ecstasy [cf. 17:3 & 21:10] and is shown a bejewelled woman who is also a city [cf. 17:4,18 & 21:9-11].

However in 17:3 the author is carried into the wilderness whereas in 21:10 he is carried to a great high mountain. In the former instance the woman is seated on a "scarlet beast ... full of blasphemous names [17:3], whereas in the latter the holy city descends out of heaven from God, "having the glory of God" [21:10-11]. The woman in chapter 17 is a harlot and the one in chapter 21 is a "bride, the wife of the Lamb". The destruction of the harlot city is described in chapter 18 where the mourning, weeping and

wailing of those who benefitted from her splendour are drowned by the dirge of the angel who seems to rejoice over it [see Thompson 1986:151]. Within the context of Revelation, through these contrasts the author wants to inspire in his audience the conviction that the beast and his followers are destined to be replaced by the rule of the Lamb (Christ) and his followers. Hence the overthrow of the harlot city is followed by the establishment of the bride city.

As for the interpersonal mode of meaning, overlexicalization in the Book of Revelation is particularly indicated by the words that the author uses to describe the ideal forms of behaviour which he wants his audience to emulate. For example, each of the messages to the seven churches ends with a promise to the "one who conquers" [Rev.2:7,10,17,26. 3:5,12,21]. These promises link the messages to the heritage of conquerors in the vision of the New Jerusalem [cf. Rev.21:7]. Moreover, those who conquer share in the victory of Christ [Rev.3:21 cf. 2:26-28] who, in the author's vision, appears as a Lamb that was "slain" [Rev.5:6]. As such, the followers of the Lamb also conquer by being slain [cf. Rev.6:9] and having their robes washed and made white in his blood [Rev.7:14]. In so far as the symbol of the Lamb is associated with the death of Jesus, it suggests powerlessness [cf. Is.53:7]. Yet, this very symbol of weakness is reversed into a symbol of power and conquest [cf. Rev.5:8; 14:1-5]. Thus, the audience is urged to emulate the Lamb by voluntary acceptance of death in the context of tribulation,

with the assurance that this response leads to their ultimate victory.

The model to be adopted by those who want to share the victory of the Lamb is shown in the description of the one-hundred and forty-four thousand in Revelation 14:1-5. The hundred and forty-four thousand are to be identified with those who have been sealed with the seal of God in chapter 7:4. In addition to the reference to them as followers of the Lamb is their description as "houtoi eisin hoi meta gunaikon ouk emolunthesan, parthenoi gar eisin ..." [Rev.14:4]. While the English translation of the Revised Standard Version refers to them as "chaste", the juxtaposition of the Greek "parthenoi" with the fact that they "have not defiled themselves with women" suggests that they are literally "male virgins", a description which is used here in a figurative sense. Within the context of Revelation, given the use of "porneia" for idolatry, these male virgins may be those untainted by idolatry.

If the presupposition that in this passage we are given the scene of a messianic battle is correct, then the idea that the one-hundred and forty-four thousand are virgins is a symbol taken from the Old Testament tradition about ceremonial purity in the battlefield [see Deut.23:9-11 cf. 1 Sam.12:5; 2 Sam.11:6-11]. This provided John with a symbol of moral purity from the seduction of Rome, the great whore of Babylon [cf. Rev.17]. The one-hundred and forty-four thousand have never been polluted by Rome as they

abstained from the "wine of her impure passion" [cf. Rev. 14:8-12]. The author, no doubt, encourages his audience to emulate this example, and sees it as the only proper stance through which they can hope to attain victory against their enemies.

It must be noted that the orientation towards the textual and interpersonal modes accounts for the way social values are highlighted and underscored in the linguistic framework of an antilanguage [see Halliday 1978:166; Malina 1985:13]. Since such values are new values in opposition to the conventional ones, they are reflected through sharp contrasts between what is happening and what should in fact, be happening. Thus, within the wider context of the Book of Revelation as a whole, the author seeks to alienate the allegiances of his audience from the present symbols of Roman power by ascribing to it images of impurity, ultimate failure and defeat. The audience faces a decision either to worship the evil powers embodied by Rome and to become followers of the beast [cf. Rev. 13:2-5] or to worship God and become companions of the Lamb on Mt. Zion. The imagery of the eschatological victory of the Lamb and his followers seeks to evoke the emotions of the audience and to persuade them to make the right decision here and now.

3.1.2. The Origin and use of Antilanguage

Apart from their characteristic features, antilanguages can also be discerned by their functions. The presence of an antilanguage in a

particular linguistic framework can best be explained by both what gives rise to it and what it seeks to achieve. Drawing from the observations of Mallik and Podgorecki, Halliday [1978:166] notes the need for secrecy and closed communication as one of the purposes for which antilanguage is used. To some extent, the Book of Revelation seems to reflect a tension between "revealing", that is, making known what has been hidden and therefore kept secret on the one hand, and a closed communication of that "revelation" on the other.

The author of Revelation expects what he has written to be read aloud and heard [1:3]. He is instructed not to "seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near" [22:10]. Yet, the author couches his prophetic message in symbolic terms, meaning of which, presumably, he believed could be accessible to the members of his social collectivity only. Moreover, at some points in his book, the author implies some form of secrecy as characterizing his message. For example, in the message to Pergamum, those who conquer are promised some of the "hidden manna" and a white stone, "with a new name written on the stone which no one knows except him who receives it" [Rev.2:17]. In the vision of the little scroll, the author hears the sound of seven thunders, but when he is about to write what he has heard he is told to "seal up what the seven thunders have said, and do not write it down" [Rev.10:4]. Similarly, in the vision of the Lamb on Mt Zion no one knows the new song from heaven except the one-hundred and forty-

four thousand [Rev.14:3]. Therefore, there is a sense in which the antilanguage of the Book of Revelation serves to preserve some secret knowledge among the members of the author's audience.

However, the main social function of antilanguage seems to be more than a preservation of secrecy. In the words of Halliday,

... the fact that an antilanguage is used for closed communication and for verbal art does not mean these are what gave rise to it in the first place. It would be possible to create a language just for purposes of contest and display; but this hardly seems sufficient to account for the origin of the entire phenomenon... Secrecy is a feature of the jargon rather than a determinant of the language [1978:166].

The clue to the origin and use of antilanguages lies in their "replications of social forms based on highly distinctive values that are clearly set apart from those of the society from which antisocial members derive" [Malina 1985:13]. Just like the established language of the wider society, an antilanguage is a bearer of social reality, but the social reality it bears is an alternative that runs counter to the one maintained by society at large. An antilanguage arises from a group of people whose experience and perception of social reality is set up in opposition to some established mode of conception of reality. It becomes crucial to the social reconstruction and maintenance of the alternative social reality. As such, an antilanguage serves as a

vehicle of the resocialization of the members of the antisocial group.

As a process of resocialization, the social reality generated and maintained by antilanguage is characterized by tension with the established norms of the overarching society. As such, it tends to put emphasis on social boundaries in order to distinguish members of the antisocial group from the rest of society. The author of Revelation achieves this goal through a systematic vilification of his opponents. The author vilifies Rome and her allies by ascribing their activities to Satan [e.g. Rev.2:13] and depicting them as the manifestation of the mythical beast of rebellion and chaos [Rev.13]. Not only does the author set a boundary between Rome and his own group of Christians, but he also discourages Christian participation in Gentile practices, including the use of coins with the emperor's image [cf. Rev.13:11-17]. Hence the audience is expected to rejoice over the destruction of the power and wealth of Rome [Rev.18].

The author also underscores the maintenance of group boundaries when he vilifies his Jewish opponents, whom he refers to as "the synagogue of Satan" [Rev.2:9; 3:9]. Through this label, the author draws a clear boundary between "those who accept Jesus as the anointed of God and those who still await the messiah or identify him otherwise" [Collins 1986:314]. The attack of the Jews not only discourages potential adherents from choosing the opposing group,

but also serves to prevent the defection of some of the author's audience to that group. The vilification of the author's Christian rivals [Rev.2:6, 14-15,20-23] serves a similar purpose.

Closely connected with the process of resocialization, is the metaphorical nature of antilanguage:

The antisociety is, in its structure, a metaphor for the society; the two come together at the level of the social system. In the same way the antilanguage is a metaphor for the language, and the two come together at the level of the social semiotic [Halliday 1978:175-177].

The metaphorical quality of antilanguage lies in its allusions both to the social reality to which the antisociety stands opposed and to the alternative social reality which it espouses. In the Book of Revelation, this process is reflected throughout the visionary narrative. While the visions reflect the exposure of the seer to the heavenly realm, they are not separate from the everyday life of the author and his audience. The author uses them to construct an encompassing vision that includes the everyday social realities in the Roman province of Asia Minor.

The author of Revelation also uses mythical images and symbols in his presentation. In reading the book, one moves in a world of stars, lamps, beasts, horses, lambs, numbers and various other kinds of symbols. While sometimes it becomes difficult to understand the meaning behind this symbolic world, the author often

provides us with clues or explicit meanings to some of these images [e.g. Rev.1:20; 12:9 cf. 13:2; 17:7-18]. It must be borne in mind that these symbols also point to the everyday social realities of the mundane world shared by the author and his audience [see Barr 1984:40-41].

A clear example of the metaphorical nature of the alternative social reality espoused by the author of Revelation is shown by the vision of a new heaven and a new earth in 21:1-22:5. This symbol is derived by the author from Isaiah 65:17-20. While Isaiah has in mind the transformation of the present order of things, it is unclear whether the author of Revelation has the same idea or has in mind a totally different world. The idea that "the first heaven and the first earth had passed away" [Rev.21:1] would imply a completely new universe. However, the utterance of "he who sat upon the throne" that, "Behold, I make all things new" [Rev.21:5] seems to denote a renovation of that now existing. This problem is overcome if one considers the question of the "concrete nature" of the new world as not one which the author's prophecy is concerned about. Uppermost in the author's mind, is the qualitative aspect of this new creation, that is, the kind of life to be enjoyed by those who, at present, are victims of tribulation but whose cause will be vindicated in the end.

Central to this new creation is the fact that the new Jerusalem descends from heaven [Rev.21:2]. Whatever the form of the new Jerusalem is, in the context of the vision it symbolizes the seat

of God in the new creation. It is closely related to the divine declaration that "he skene tou Theou meta ton anthropon, kai skenosei met' auton, kai autoi laoi autou estai" [Rev.21:3]. The fact that the new Jerusalem descends from heaven, so that God dwells with human beings means that the barrier between heaven and earth has been removed. Hence tears, death, mourning, crying and pain are no more [Rev.21:4 cf. Is.65:19]. This implies the eradication of evil which has long been the source of separation between God and humanity. That the qualitative aspect of this new life is characterized by the eradication of evil is shown by the absence of the "sea" which, elsewhere in the book, is associated with the forces of evil [cf. Rev.21:1; 13:1].

Therefore, the symbol of the new heaven and the new earth serves as a metaphor of the transformation which the author expects the established society to undergo. For example, in the new Jerusalem, the nations and kings of the earth are allowed to walk in and bring tribute to the holy city [Rev.21:24-36]. Not only does this assure the author's audience of their victory, but it also indicates that their opponents, who at present are deceived by the beast [Rev.13:14], will ultimately surrender and offer their tribute and adoration to God and the Lamb, that is provided they repent, so that they are written in the Lamb's book of life, as nothing unclean nor anyone who practices abomination or falsehood shall enter the city [Rev.21:27].

3.2. THE THEME OF TRIBULATION AND ALTERNATIVE SELF-DEFINITION

As an expression of resistance to the overarching social setting, which amounts to a process of resocialization, the antilanguage associated with the theme of tribulation in the Book of Revelation also serves as a vehicle of an alternative self-definition. The author sees a pressing need for such a self-definition because of certain factors which he regards to be a threat to the social identity of his audience. As a new religious group, Christians are viewed with suspicion and generally rejected by their Gentile neighbours [cf. Du Rand 1992:78; Pliny, Ep.10:96]. The letter to the church in Smyrna suggests that Christians have been excluded from the Jewish synagogues and that certain members of the Jewish community are pressing for legal proceedings by civil authorities against Christians [Rev.2:9-11 cf.3:9]. Such a decisive breach between Judaism and Christianity can only serve to reinforce Gentile suspicions of Christianity and therefore put its adherents in a more precarious position. Moreover, for the author of Revelation rejection by the Jews creates a crisis of identification as he cannot find any other identity for his audience except that they are inheritors of the Jewish messianic promises. Hence his repudiation of the opponents' claim to the Jewish heritage which, by implication, puts emphasis on Christians as the only true Jews [Rev.2:9; 3:9].

The author of Revelation's exclusive claim of the Jewish heritage

for his audience suggests that members of his audience are largely Jewish Christians. His claim to Jewishness, coupled with his opposition to assimilation into the Gentile world, may be the basis on which he wishes his supporters to avoid contact with, and contamination by, Gentile Christians who are probably descendants of the Pauline mission in the area. The author's aim of excluding these Gentile Christians, however, is undermined by the fact that his audience's claim to Jewishness is disputed by the members of the synagogues. Such a situation is likely to encourage some of the author's audience to opt for assimilation to Gentile norms and values, for purposes of identity, survival and self-expression. For the author of Revelation, this stance amounts to idolatry and therefore further obscures the social identity of "true" Christians, as evidenced by his vilification of the Nicolaitans, "Balaam" and "Jezebel" [Rev.2:6,14-15,20-23]. Such a situation calls for an alternative self-definition based on a strong sense of exclusiveness. Closely connected with such a process of self-definition, is the intensification of social boundaries which distinguish the members of the author's audience from those who are not.

The importance of social boundaries lies in the fact that they divide life inside the Christian community from life outside [Thompson 1990:76]. The author of Revelation further intensifies such social boundaries to the extent where they serve to distinguish Jewish Christians from Gentile Christians. To maintain

the social boundaries between his audience and the wider society, the author of Revelation uses norms and values at the centre of which is the conflict with certain proponents of Judaism, and the rejection of assimilation to Graeco-Roman culture. Thompson [1990:125-126] notes that in the seven messages, the Christian communities that are praised by the seer are both in conflict with local Jews and refuse to assimilate to urban society while those who receive condemnation for assimilation do not appear to be in conflict with Judaism. On that basis, he concludes that,

... a Christian community that sets up high boundaries between itself and the rest of the world and that holds to a concomitant "separatist" definition of the church ... sees both Judaism and Greco-Roman society as demonic; but a Christian community that is less concerned with sharp boundaries and exclusive self-definition seems to have little conflict with either Judaism or Greco-Roman urban institutions [1990:125].

It must be noted, though, that for the author of Revelation the local conflicts with Jewish and Christian rivals are manifestations of a deeper conflict with the entire social system dominated by imperial Rome, central to which is a clash of values. Mary Douglas [1970:137-139] notes that social groups which have negative opinions about the world surrounding them often live in closed communities. Such groups tend to personify the world as hostile and perceive themselves as passing through a period of persecution, a situation which is often magnified and projected into hostility on

the part of cosmic powers. Thus, the notion of normative self-definition for such a group derives from its projection of the social position of members as one that is characterized by conflict with the established social structure. This appears to be exactly what the author of Revelation wants to accomplish through relexicalization and overlexicalization.

The literary theme of tribulation, as developed by the author of Revelation, presupposes a threatening situation which the author perceives to be a major crisis for his audience. For the author's message to be effective, it has to be believed, and for it to be believed the author gives it divine authority. The visionary aspect of the message serves this function. Not only is the author in ecstasy when he is exposed to the heavenly realm, but he also gets instruction to write what he sees either directly from Christ or from angels. Thus, the author's new framework of self-definition provides room for self-identification on the part of the audience in its capacity as a divinely-oriented one.

Through the use of symbols and dualism, the author wants to evoke aggressive feelings on the part of his audience by creating and intensifying a situation of crisis of which they otherwise might not have been aware [cf. Segal 1981:251]. To some extent Thompson underestimates the tension reflected by the dualistic nature of Revelation when he suggests that the book depicts no contradictory oppositions but an unbroken wholeness [1990:91]. It

cannot be denied that in the final analysis the boundaries drawn by the author between the forces of Good and those of Evil become blurred, so as to reflect a process of transformation [see Thompson 1990:86-91]. However, such a process of transformation is preceded by an intense conflict between God and the Devil, and between their respective followers, with its climax being the war in heaven [Rev.12:7]. The book provides allusions to the fact that this cosmic conflict manifests itself in the life of the audience - in their position as Christians vis-a-vis their opponents like Rome and her allies, Jews and those among themselves who deviate from the "true" Christian faith by accommodating Gentile values and practices.

Moreover, the Book of Revelation not only evokes aggressive feelings among the addressees, but it also transfers that aggression to another source. On the one hand, the author intensifies the audience's feeling of alienation from the social, economic and political life of the empire and thus evokes hostility against Rome. On the other hand, he transfers this aggression to a cosmic realm. Closely connected with this, is the hope of their vindication which will be accomplished through divine intervention, as God, whom they serve and follow, will finally triumph over the forces of evil.

Thus, the author of Revelation achieves normative self-definition for his audience through a negative portrayal of their situation.

This is shown by the negative labels associated with the Roman Empire and its social setting. This attitude arises out of a feeling of alienation from the social structures supported and dominated by Rome. Thus, the Roman Empire becomes evil because those who support and represent its ideological perspective of social reality put the Christian community in a precarious position. Moreover, such a perspective of reality contrasts with the socio-religious world view held by the author's audience. As such, the author discourages his audience from appropriating the norms of identification represented by the social structure which alienates them. Thus the negative aspect of his development of the theme of tribulation serves to prepare his audience for an alternative framework of self-definition.

However, much as the author of Revelation magnifies the negative aspect of the experience of tribulation suffered by his audience, he also develops some positive framework of self-definition around it. This is shown through the author's transvaluation of symbols of weakness or suffering into images of power and conquest [see Barr 1984:41-42]. The imitative witness of the death of Christ encouraged by the author transforms the value of tribulation from one of powerlessness and defeat to one of victory. The author changes the audience's perception of their situation. Their suffering amounts to martyrdom, and from the author's perspective, the martyrs are the real victors [see Bauckham 1988:31-32]. In so far as the experience of tribulation is depicted as a path to

victory, the audience is made to see it as a virtue, and are therefore encouraged to identify themselves with it. Therefore, tribulation itself attains a value through which the author's audience can express its alternative normative self-definition in opposition to the established norms of their social environment.

The author puts emphasis on the relationship between tribulation and martyrdom on the one hand, and the victory of martyrs on the other. This provides the author's audience with a perception of social reality that challenges the basic assumptions of the imperial world view already referred to in the previous chapter. That reality concerns who the ultimate ruler of the world is, in terms of whose values the members of society have to understand and define themselves. For the author of Revelation that ruler is God, the Almighty. The author's emphasis on, and exclusive use of the word "Pantokrator" for God demonstrates his understanding of God as the only legitimate authority in the universe [cf. Rev.1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7,14; 19:6,15; 21:22].

Revelation's use of the title "Pantokrator" is associated with the insistence on the exclusive legitimacy of one throne, namely that of God. It is within the context of the throne image that heavenly beings sing praises to God, "hagios, hagios, hagios kurios ho Theos ho Pantokrator" [Rev.4:8]. Elsewhere, such praises are connected with the acknowledgment of the rule of God, "Alleluia! hoti ebasileusen kurios ho Theos [hemon] ho pantokrator" [Rev.19:6].

Thus, the emphasis on God as the Almighty refers to God's supremacy over all things. It also serves as a response to the counterfeit thrones of Satan and the beast [see Boring 1986:259-260; Du Rand 1992:80-81]. As such, God as pantokrator challenges and subordinates the emperor. Therefore, such a perception of reality undermines the dominant assumption regarding the universal and integrative power of imperial rule.

Closely connected with the idea that God alone is pantokrator, is the exclusive claim for God of the title "kurios" [Rev.1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7; 19:7; 19:6; 21:22] This serves to challenge the emperor's claim to divine status and therefore undermines the very foundation on which the power of imperial rule is based. For the author of Revelation, if God alone is divine and therefore the only legitimate sovereign power, then the assumption regarding the universality, permanence, stability and eternity of imperial rule has no basis. As the only claimant to the title of pantokrator, God is "ho on kai ho en kai ho erchomenos" [Rev.1:8; 4:8 cf. 11:17; 16:5]. This is directly connected with description of God as "to alpha kai to Omega, ho protos kai ho eschatos, he arche kai to telos" [Rev.22:13 cf. 1:8]. From the perspective of the author of Revelation, this is a reality against which imperial claims to permanence and stability cannot stand. Hence he can confidently assure his audience of the ultimate destruction of the entire imperial system and everything that it stands for.

With reference to the social setting of the author and his audience, the theocentric perspective of the author's message serves as a rhetorical response to the prevailing understanding of social reality. For the author, knowledge of the true condition of his audience depends on whether one sees reality from an earthly or heavenly perspective. The power and splendour of Rome are part of the everyday experience of the author's audience, and form an earthly view of reality which many of them are likely to be tempted to share. From this view, the pressure of the power of the beast upon those who refuse to compromise with it, makes the beast to appear as divine and all-powerful. However, from a heavenly perspective, those who suffer under the seemingly irresistible might of Rome are the real victors [see Bauckham 1988:31]. This perspective serves as a counter to the dominant understanding of social reality dictated by the terms of the Roman Empire, and becomes an expression of an alternative self-definition for the author's audience.

3.3. CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has demonstrated how the author of Revelation engages in the discourse of antilanguage to portray the situation of his audience. Such antilanguage serves as a literary strategy used by the author to construct a symbolic world for his audience. Such a world is an alternative to the one in which his audience is embedded. This is a world in which losers are winners and winners

are losers, in which victims of the present world become victors, while the present victors become victims to their own oppressive activities. This world is based on the conviction that at present the members of the author's social collectivity are suffering and alienated, but in the end they will be vindicated.

The author's intention, however, is to do more than create an alternative world. Above all, he calls for commitment. His audience must commit themselves to the cause of this alternative world through exclusiveness, thus forming a boundary between themselves and the wider society. This stance will provide them with a sense of self-identification which distinguishes them sharply from non-members. Thus, the author's development of the theme of tribulation becomes a literary strategy which he uses to advocate an alternative self-definition for his audience.

CONCLUSION

This study has attempted to examine the significance of the theme of tribulation in the Book of Revelation, with a particular focus on the author's literary intention for developing such a theme. An attempt to characterize the nature and extent of the tribulation addressed by the author shows that the latter is responding to a complex phenomenon in which various elements and forms of social conflicts coalesce. For the author, such conflicts result in a sense of alienation for his audience and therefore amount to tribulation. While such conflicts emanate from everyday interaction with other social groups such as the Jews, Gentile neighbours, and Christian rivals, Rome is the real enemy. This understanding stems from the author's conviction that the ultimate source of the alienation of his audience is the social system promoted and dominated by imperial Rome. This explains the author's intense opposition to the imperial cult and his prediction of the total destruction of the entire Roman imperial system.

The author's response has been examined within the context of his development of the theme of tribulation and the implications thereof. Using the model of antilanguage, it has been argued that the author and his audience constitute an antisociety, that is, a social collectivity which stands opposed to the norms and values of the wider society. Emphasis on tribulation enables the author to advocate a strict sense of Christian exclusiveness and a total

rejection of the contemporary social setting. Such a stance serves a particular social function. It marks a process of self-identification for the author's social collectivity, and provides them with a framework for an alternative self-definition as a distinct group from other social groups in the empire.

It must be noted, however, that this study does not claim to have exhausted an examination of the concept of tribulation and its use by the author of Revelation. Two related issues arising from the author's emphasis on Christian exclusiveness need to be explored further. The first one revolves around an evaluation of the adequacy of this response in relation to the author's social environment. Given the form of Christianity in the Graeco-Roman world, particularly that of the Pauline tradition, it is unlikely that Gentile Christians would have been attracted by the author's brand of exclusiveness. Instead, the particular association of exclusiveness with the Jewish heritage would have revived the old Jewish-Gentile "hostility" and alienated the Gentile Christians even more. Moreover, it is doubtful whether the stance of passive resistance against the socio-economic and political structures of Rome would have a wide appeal to the Christian community, for two reasons. Firstly, Christians in Asia Minor were not a homogenous class of people, but were composed of both the rich and the poor. Those who were well off and benefitted from participation in the socio-economic structures of Rome would probably be happy with assimilation and see no contradiction between such a practice and

their faith, as the author of Revelation did. Secondly, if it be true that the severe strains between the rich and the poor often led to social unrest in the cities, then it is debatable whether the majority of the poor among the Christians would have been content with a hope for an eschatological end of the world rather than a practical and immediate solution to their plight.

It must also be granted, however, that the author of Revelation had no other alternative. Faced with the strong military power of Rome, an open revolutionary challenge to Rome was unthinkable. This was particularly true in view of the fact that the destruction of Jerusalem (70 C.E.) was still fresh in the author's mind. Hence the hope for divine intervention. This was aggravated by the fact that the Christians were rejected by the Jewish communities who otherwise would be expected to be closer to them than the Gentiles, given their shared common Scriptures and messianic tradition. The author also felt that the Christian faith was being corrupted by Gentile practices. Hence the need for an exclusive Christian identity and self-definition.

The second issue which needs to be explored further so as to throw more light on the aspect of tribulation in the Book of Revelation concerns the actual social identity of the author and his audience. The nature of the Christian exclusiveness advocated in Revelation indicates that if the author himself was not an exile, at least his message was addressed to Jewish christian exiles who, for various

reasons arising out of the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., had left Palestine and settled in Asia Minor. If that be the case, then Jewish Christian exiles would have problems in assimilating to the Jewish synagogues in the empire. This factor, coupled with their sense of alienation from the political and socio-economic imperial structures, must have led to an identity crisis for them. It might be that the author of Revelation was addressing a small group of Christians facing a crisis of identity arising from their position of exile. However, this is beyond the confines and scope of this study.

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