

Johannine Studies

Lecture 11 Study Notes – April 15, 2008

1. **Historical and social setting of the Book of Revelation** - The author claims he is in prison on the island of Patmos, located in the Aegean Sea off the coast of western Asia Minor. The seven churches that chapter 2 and 3 are directed to are all located in the cities of western Asia Minor. This area is a part of modern day Turkey and was in John's day an area of culture, commerce, and agriculture. For example, Ephesus was likely the fourth largest city in the Roman Empire and Pergamum had one of the largest libraries in the world boasting over 200,000 volumes. The communities in which Revelation addresses itself were no cultural backwaters, but in many ways they were cultural and commercial crossroads of the ancient world.
2. By the end of the first century, Christianity was well established in these communities. (see copy of map, Reddish)
3. **Persecution of Christians in Asia Minor** - Persecution of Christians down through the history of Christianity has been an off and on again ordeal, to various degrees. Most people would agree that the severest persecution started in 64 AD concerning the burning of Rome in which Emperor Nero falsely blamed Christians. Tacitus (Ann 15.44) and Clement (1 Clem 6:1) spoke of "great multitudes" of Christians dying by Nero's persecution.
4. In 93 AD, around the time that most people believe Revelation to have been written, Emperor Domitian reportedly began a reign of terror in the Roman Empire directed at his political enemies. Yet some scholars believe that there is no evidence that Christians were persecuted in a large and systematic way like many Christians endured in Rome under Nero. However, Eusebius writing much later, calls Domitian a second Nero who persecuted and murdered Christians.
5. Mitchell Reddish, in his commentary called "Revelation," says that the evidence we have about the situation of the Christian communities in Asia Minor during the Domitian period suggest that Christians, for the most part, were assimilated into the larger society with few problems (page 8).
6. However, there were tensions between Christians and beliefs and the practices of those of the larger society. Eating food sacrificed to idols (Revelation 2:14); practicing sexual immorality; also belonging to civic associations and trade guilds was a problem because they were usually under the patronage of a god or goddess. Look at Acts 19: 23-41 as a good example of the practices of Christians conflicting with the trade guilds.
7. Some literal sources suggest that many residents of the Roman Empire looked at Christians as being antisocial or distrustful and even dangerous.
8. Most people besides the Jews couldn't understand why Christians could not worship all the gods instead of just one.
9. One of the major concerns for Christians in Asia Minor was how far the church should go in adapting and accepting the prevailing culture without losing its own distinctiveness? Paul seemed to accept cultural traditions as long as they were not obvious violations of Christian principles (see 1 Cor 8; Phil 4:8).

10. However, the writer of Revelation had a very harsh view of the world around him. He saw the Roman Empire and its society as antithetical to the Christian faith. In other words, there was very little room for compromise. Paul could, to a certain extent, be all things to all people. John saw little room for compromise. His message throughout the book in regard to Christians and society is “Come out of her, my people, so that you do not take part in her sins, and so that you do not share in her plagues (18:4).
11. The problem, with Emperor-worship, is most evident in Chapter 13 in which the Roman Empire is a beast that demands to be worshiped.
12. According to Reddish, Emperor-worship was an especially slow ordeal in developing. Emperors were special human beings but not always viewed as being divine. Augustus however, while trying to retain the old Roman distinction between human being and a divine being, was officially declared divine after his death by the Roman Senate. Tiberius, his successor, resisted divine honors for himself, while Caligula thought he was the incarnation of the god Jupiter. Claudius followed the practices of Augustus and Tiberius, while good ole Nero was more willing to accept such nonsense. Vespasian joked about the belief of being made divine after ones death, and reportedly remarked on his deathbed, “alas, I think I am becoming a god.” Titus likewise discouraged divine claims.
13. Domitian (AD 81-96) is kind of difficult to tell. He reportedly “insisted upon being regarded as a god and took vast pride in being called “master and god.” However, there’s some evidence that these kind of statements came from his enemies. For example, according to Reddish, his title “of master and god” has not been found on any coin, inscription, or manuscript.
14. In short, there was widespread emperor worship in the Empire and particularly strong worship in Asia Minor. Yet according to Reddish (page 13), that does not mean any widespread enforcement of participation in the imperial cult. In all likelihood, it was an individual and local matter that could be enforced or let slide.
15. However, Revelation sure does speak of severe persecution and bloodshed. Following verses are examples: 1:9; 2:10, 13; 6: 9-11; 17:6.