

Decolonizing Diets: Idol Food, Jewish Diaspora, and the Crisis of John's Apocalypse

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Received 7 January 2023 | Accepted 17 July 2024 |

Published online 27 September 2024

Abstract

This article explores how Revelation's Jewish Diaspora negotiated the Roman colonial situation of Asia Minor through their stance on idol food. Scholars have suggested that John wrote to Christians suffering imperial persecution under Domitian. Still, others have proposed a perceived crisis, a prophetic rivalry relating to Greco-Roman society, or a summons to a holy war. However, some of these mostly depoliticizing trends presuppose the so-called parting of the ways and neglect to explore the centrality of ritual food and its association with Roman imperial authority. Drawing on Frantz Fanon's analysis of colonial situations and sociological notions of food and eating, I map how John and the inscribed Jewish Diaspora communities of Revelation turned idol food into a locus for negotiating Roman colonial authority in Asia Minor circa 100 C.E.

Keywords

crisis – imperial persecution – Frantz Fanon – decoloniality – ethnicity – wealth – Jewish Diaspora – imperial cult – idol food

Introduction

Echoes of a Crisis

For centuries, scholars argued Revelation addressed Christians suffering imperial persecution under Domitian, and justifiably so.¹ As John of Patmos's visions suggest, those who worship Roman emperors thrive socio-economically while those who refuse to worship their image are killed (13:15). Already, in the assemblies, believers eating idol food thrive within the imperial economy (3:17), while halakhically oriented followers face poverty, imprisonment, and potentially death (2:8–11). Therefore, John denounces idol food consumption as a dangerous pathway into Rome's idolatrous cult and economic corruption. However, Leonard L. Thompson convincingly argued that there is no historical evidence for such empire-wide persecution and that scholars neglected to interrogate the rhetoricity of Domitian's portraits as a bloody tyrant.² Since then, scholars have offered alternative reconstructions. According to Sigve K. Tonstad, Revelation reflects not a conflict between Christians and the Roman empire but between God and the great Dragon.³ Others, such as Adela Yarbro-Collins, argue that the grim realities of some believers in the assemblies contrasted with John's expectation of the Kingdom of God, leading him to experience relative deprivation.⁴ For Paul B. Duff, Revelation's crisis reflects a prophetic rivalry between John, Jezebel, and Balaam over how to relate to imperial culture.⁵ Seeking to undermine these "crisis theories," Leonard L. Thompson suggests John simply wrote to awaken Christians from their complacency, lack of zeal, and coziness with Greco-Roman society.⁶ Departing from such a trend, other scholars read Revelation as a summons to a conflict with empire, contingent on believers' acceptance of the call to be conquerors and John's non-accommodating Christianity.⁷

1 While in his *Apology* Tertullian (ca. 160–220 A.D.) ascribed the persecution to Domitian (*Apol.* 5), Eusebius (ca. 263–339 A.D.) underscored its cruelty (*Hist. Eccl.* 3.17).

2 Tacitus and others vilified the Flavian emperor as a bloody tyrant to negotiate their status under the Antonians.

3 Tonstad, *Saving God's Reputation: The Theological Function of Pistis Iesou in the Cosmic Narratives of Revelation* (New York: T & T Clark, 2006), p. 3.

4 Yarbro-Collins, *Crisis, and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), p. 105–106.

5 Duff, *Who Rides the Beast? Prophetic Rivalry and the Rhetoric of Crisis in the Churches of the Apocalypse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 15.

6 See Thompson's "Ordinary Lives: John and His First Readers" in *Reading the Book of Revelation: A Resource for Students*, ed. David L. Barr (Boston: Brill, 2004), p. 39.

7 Blount, *Revelation: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 12.

Constructive Assessment

Although the alternatives above have advanced the conversation on Revelation's social setting, they misconstrue the lack of empire-wide persecution as an absence of broader systemic oppression.⁸ Hence, as Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza notes, they merit constructive engagement and critique.⁹ Whereas the cosmic conflict perspective, for instance, spiritualizes oppression, the "perceived crisis" view relativizes the inscribed experiences of empire.¹⁰ Although the prophetic rivalries' viewpoint maps how idol food links participants to Rome, the idea of "crisis mongering" overlooks the divisive impact of imperial power on subjugated communities.¹¹ Moreover, Thompson's "assimilated Christians" perspective reinforces a benign image of Roman rule,¹² echoing Theodor Mommsen's notion of "Defensive Imperialism."¹³ Consequently, these views reinforced a depoliticized understanding of the apocalyptic genre, reducing oppression or persecution to a literary topos.¹⁴ Most importantly, although scholars recognize John was a Jew whose critique of empire draws from ancient Israel's scriptural, halakhic, and cultic traditions,¹⁵ they reinforce the "parting of the ways" paradigm,¹⁶ or complex separation between Judaism and Christianity into distinct "religions" towards the end of the first century.¹⁷ As the Jesus movement gained traction among the

8 See Roberto Mata, "From Imperial Persecution to Colonial Situation: Alternatives to Persecution Theories in Revelation Studies" in *Currents in Biblical Research* 21, no. 3 (2023): 225–41.

9 Schüssler-Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), p. 8.

10 Yarbrow-Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*, p. 106.

11 Paul B. Duff, "The Synagogue of Satan': Crisis Mongering and the Apocalypse of John" in *the Reality of Apocalypse: Rhetoric and Politics in the Book of Revelation*, ed., David Barr (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2006), p. 164.

12 Thompson, *Revelation*, p. 34.

13 See Mommsen, *The Provinces of the Roman Empire: From Caesar to Diocletian* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1887).

14 Sarah E. Rollens, "The Viability of Materialist Approaches to Persecution: Revelation a Test Case," in *ASE* 36/1 (2019), pp. 75–93.

15 See Wilfrid J. Harrington, *Revelation*, in *Sacra Pagina* 16, ed. Daniel J. Harrington (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1993), p. 6.

16 According to James D. G. Dunn, the central difference was Christological. After the Second Temple's destruction in 70 C.E., Rabbinic Judaism emphasized the Torah, while Christians focused on Jesus' teachings. See Dunn's *The Partings of the Ways: Between Christianity and Judaism and Their Significance for the Character of Christianity* (London: S.C.M., 2006).

17 Judith Lieu "The Parting of the Ways: Theological Construct or Historical Reality?" *JSTJ* 17 (1995): 101–119.

Gentiles, its liturgical practices and worship of Jesus evolved, setting it apart from Judaism.¹⁸ Using such a framework, scholars often read Revelation as an example of Jewish Christianity, which implies a hierarchy in which Christianity supersedes Judaism.¹⁹ To explain the apparent tensions between ἐκκλησία and συναγωγή or “Jewish hostility” towards Christians,²⁰ scholars imported second century anti-Jewish polemics from martyrological texts (e.g., *Martyrdom of Pionos*). Unsurprisingly, normative approaches viewed the idol food polemic as a matter of proper doctrine rather than proper halakhic and cultic practice.

Proposal

In constructive engagement with the aforementioned views, this article reconstructs Revelation’s social setting as a colonial situation. To do so, it takes three critical methodological steps. First, it disavows the parting of ways framework and places Revelation in its Jewish Diaspora milieu to explore its cultic and halakhic concerns. Second, it incorporates Frantz Fanon’s analysis of colonial situations, which he describes as a matrix of domination that forces the colonized to negotiate colonial violence, often at the expense of one another, to stay afloat within hierarchies of power.²¹ Finally, it draws from sociological and anthropological notions of food and eating that illustrate how John and his interlocutors used idol food to resolve various colonial struggles. From these foundations, I argue that the inscribed *ekklēsiai* of Revelation turned idol food into a locus for contesting and negotiating the Roman colonial situation of Asia Minor and to validate halakhically acceptable notions of Jewishness. Whereas Jezebel, Balaam, and their followers use idol food to negotiate imperial power, build fluid notions of ethnicity, and legitimate their pursuit of wealth, John attempts to decolonize the diets of believers by (1) associating idol food with the imperial cult; (2) enforcing the boundaries of Jewishness, and (3) mapping how the decolonization of the *oikoumenē* impinges upon their economic status and destiny. Reading Revelation as trying to decolonize the diets of believers

18 Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Michigan. W.B. Eerdmans, 2003), pp. 385–387.

19 See John W. Marshall, *Parables of War: Reading John's Jewish Apocalypse* (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press, 2001), p. 8.

20 The juxtaposition is problematic because *ekklēsiai* is a civic term referring to an assembly of citizens. See Wayne Mcready, “Ekklesia and Voluntary Associations,” in *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World*, eds. John S. Kloppenborg and Stephen E. Wilson (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 60.

21 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), p.35.

shows how the Jewish Diaspora enforced and contested halakhic regulations to navigate the Roman colonial situation of Asia Minor circa 100 C.E.²²

Theory and Method

Fanon and The Colonial Situation

This reconstruction of Revelation's social setting draws from postcolonial and empire-critical studies that have theorized Revelation's anti-imperial discourse while considering its halakhic concerns. For instance, John W. Marshall interprets Revelation as a call for the Jewish Diaspora in Asia Minor to join their compatriots in Judaea in a struggle against Rome.²³ Similarly, Sarah Emanuel argues that Revelation's crisis does not reflect a single instance of global communal trauma. Focusing on the "normative character of imperial cult activity," Emanuel explores the "cumulative effects" of traumatization under Rome, to which John reacts, which occurred over time "in both extreme and subtle ways."²⁴ While both Marshall and Emanuel engage Fanon's analysis of colonialism, they have yet to explore his concept of the colonial situation (*La Situation Coloniale*) as a matrix of imperial domination, which forces subjects to negotiate systemic violence and concomitant hierarchies of power.²⁵ In his work, *A Dying Colonialism*, Fanon observes how Algerian women contested French colonial power by maintaining native dress codes, particularly the hijab, symbolizing national identity and the last line of resistance against colonialism.²⁶

22 The dating of Revelation to an early date (pre-70 C.E.) or the Domitianic date (95 C.E.) usually implies a specific reconstruction of its social setting. Whereas proponents of the earlier date argue that the Jerusalem temple is still standing (11:1–2) and that Nero or Galba could be the sixth King (17:9), proponents of the Domitianic date cite forced participation in the imperial cult (13:4–8, 15–16; 14:9–11; 15:2; 16:2; 19:20; 20:4; see also Pliny's Epistles 10:96–97), as well as patristic witnesses (e.g. Irenaeus of Lyon). Using Fanon's notion of the Colonial Situation avoids such a methodological straight jacket, as my alternative is not bound to a specific violent event but to the negotiations of empire reflected in the text. For a broader discussion of Revelation's date, see G. K. Beale's *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cambria: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999), pp. 4–27.

23 Marshall, *Parables of War*, p. 99.

24 Emanuel, *Roasting Rome: Humor, Resistance, and Jewish Cultural Persistence in the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 40.

25 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 35.

26 Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 37–38. Problematising the gendered rhetoric of resistance, Gwenn Bergner argues that such a dynamic turned women into loci to contest power between colonized and colonizing males. Gwen Bergner, "Who Is That Masked Woman?" in *PMLA* 110 (1995): 75–88.

Regarding negotiations of ethnicity, Fanon notes that the colonial situation inflects how colonized identity is constructed, contested, or negotiated. In *Black Skins/White Masks*, for instance, Fanon explains how Martinican soldiers received privileges in the army based on their “refined” French-speaking skills, appearing more European than their Senegalese comrades.²⁷ When the Senegalese soldiers tried to pass as Martinicans to secure the same perks, violence ensued between these colonized subjects.²⁸ Furthermore, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon discusses how the elite and merchant classes align with colonizers to preserve their socio-economic and political privileges, often at the expense of their compatriots, locking them in a symbiotic relationship with the empire.²⁹ Only through decolonization, which entails a violent demise of the colonial apparatus, can the colonized be free and construct a new humanity.

Rather than imposing a modern postcolonial struggle onto Revelation, I use Fanon’s notion of *La Situation Coloniale* to map the contours of Revelation’s imperial-colonial situation and its impact upon the inscribed Jewish Diaspora communities. Clearly, the use of decolonial frameworks requires caution. As Steven J. Friesen observes, the Roman imperial world and its notions of power, religion, or culture are too distant from modern concepts.³⁰ Indeed, Fanon’s Marxist class distinctions differ from Roman divisions between *honestiores* and *humiliores*. Thus, it would be ill-advised to import modern divisions of labor into the texts and its ancient economy. Most important, Fanon’s understanding of colonies diverges from ancient Roman colonies. Stephen D. Moore observes the latter were towns or “civic settlements of Roman citizens settled outside Italy and [were] composed mainly of military veterans.”³¹ Thus, it would be misleading to think of ancient Roman *coloniae* as European colonies of the early modern period.³² Nevertheless, as John W. Marshall observes, the Roman empire may be understood as a colonial empire and its political project as colonialist based on the political, economic, cultural,

27 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (Grove Press; Distributed by Publishers Group West, 2008), p. 26.

28 Ibid., p. 26.

29 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p. 60.

30 Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: reading Revelation in the Ruins* (Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 17.

31 Moore, “The Revelation of John,” in *A Postcolonial Commentary. A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings*, eds. Fernando F. Segovia and R. S. Sugirtharajah (London: T & T Clark, 2009), p. 437.

32 Ibid., p. 437.

and discursive elements.³³ Thus, a clear distinction between negotiation and resistance emerges. Whereas negotiation of the colonial situation implies various degrees of collusion and collaboration with the colonizers, resistance entails direct military confrontation or indirect confrontation by maintaining different cultural and religious practices. While those negotiating the colonial situation merge their socio-economic interests with the empire, those resisting embrace martyrdom in the name of decolonization.

Halakhic and Cultic Concerns

Interrogating the fixed boundaries imposed by the Parting of Ways framework on what was once as “a territory without borderlines,”³⁴ this article reads Revelation as a Jewish text and prioritizes its cultic and halakhic concerns. In this manner, it builds on the work of John W. Marshall, David Frankfurter, and Sarah Emanuel, among others, to show how John attempts to decolonize the diets of the assemblies. As David Frankfurter notes, purity regulations in Revelation are consistent with those present in other Jewish texts, such as Jubilees, 1 Enoch, and the Testament of Levi. In Qumran, purity is the hallmark of holy warriors, bringing communion with angels and proximity to the heavenly sanctuary.³⁵ Similarly, in Revelation, the conquering ones (John’s holy warriors) washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb (17:14). Furthermore, they avoided defilement with idol food, women, and the worship of the Beast (13:1–18). Thus, John, too, can commune with angels, stand before the throne of God, and become a faithful witness by rejecting idol food and the imperial cult. As the undisputed King of Kings and Lord of Lords (19:16), the Lamb makes ritual purity a prerequisite for entering the New Jerusalem (21:27). Only believers who kept their garments pure (3:4), or those who now opt to “wash their robes” will enter the city by the gates” (22:14).³⁶ Conversely, idolaters will be tormented in the lake of fire (21:8). The case can be made that John’s enforcement of halakhic regulations is colonialism, or that his counter imperial ideology is a form of “empire writ large.”³⁷ However, as

33 Marshall, “Gender and Empire: Sexualized Violence in John’s Anti-Imperial Apocalypse,” in *A Feminist Companion to the Apocalypse of John*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine (London; New York: T & T Clark, 2009), pp. 17–32.

34 Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), p. 1.

35 Ibid., p. 411.

36 John Ben-Daniel et al., *The Apocalypse in the Light of the Temple: A New Approach to the Book of Revelation* (Jerusalem: Beit Yochanan, 2003), p. 44.

37 Moore, *The Revelation of John*, p. 452.

Greg Carey observes, Revelation attacks the symbolic structures of the empire and imposes its own to challenge imperial discourse.³⁸

Food Laws and Food Theory

Furthermore, this article draws from the food laws and anthropology of food and eating to map how the assemblies articulated and enforced the boundaries of identity. Indeed, Revelation exhibits longstanding concerns over ritual pollution via idol food. According to Leviticus 11:1–8, the Israelites were to observe strict rules on edible and inedible animals. As part of ritual purity, dietary food restrictions upheld Israel's divine election (Leviticus 20:24–26) and separated Jews from their Gentile neighbors, whose food was associated with idolatry and immorality (Numbers 22).³⁹ Abiding by the food laws was even more significant in the Diaspora, where Jews used them to uphold their identity and difference from others. In Daniel 1:8–16, he resolved to avoid defiling himself with the king's food or wine. Similarly, Apocryphal and Pseudepigrapha texts, such as Tobit (200 B.C.E.), underscore rejecting gentile foods while in exile. For Tobit, extenuating circumstances such as captivity in Assyria did not release Jews from observing the food laws. While many of his compatriots consumed idol food under imperial duress, he refrained from transgressing the boundaries (1:10–11). Furthermore, the author of Jubilees (160 B.C.E.) recounts how Rebecca exhorts Jacob to avoid eating blood and associating with Gentiles because of concomitant ritual pollution (Jub. 21:11). Given the social function of food in Revelation, Anthropologists note it is a metonymy for identity. As Patricia Caplan argues, participation or abstinence from certain foods adds concreteness to the boundaries of ethnic identity. In her view, “simple equations such as ‘we eat meat, they do not,’ ‘we eat horse, they do not,’ ‘they eat insects, we do not,’ affirm, in shared patterns of consumption and shared notions of edibility, our difference from others.”⁴⁰ However, as Revelation shows, construing food boundaries never occurs in a political vacuum. Given the link between commensality and coloniality, Michael Dietler observes that food is “a central arena for working out of colonial struggles, the colonization of consciousness, and strategies of

38 Greg Carey, “Symptoms of Resistance in the Book of Revelation,” in *The Reality of Apocalypse: Rhetoric and Politics in the Book of Revelation*, ed. David L. Barr (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2006), p. 178.

39 Non-canonical sources such as Josephus reject “impure gentile oil” on account of its association with libations (Antiquity 4.137), but also intimate their role in establishing boundaries with Gentiles (*Contra Apionem*, 173).

40 Caplan, *Food, Health, and Identity* (Routledge, 1997), 13.

appropriation and resistance.”⁴¹ The following section illustrates how those strategies function in Revelation’s colonial situation.

You Worship What You Eat: Eating Roast Lamb or Roast Beast

Idol Food as Cultic Concern

In the colonial situation of Revelation, John attempts to decolonize the diets of believers in the Jewish Diaspora of Asia Minor by establishing that God’s Lamb is the legitimate ruler of the world (1:5). Indeed, the acceptance or rejection of idol food determines whether they enjoy the Lamb’s paradise or suffer its wrath and, along with the Beast, roast the lake of fire. Thus, the food polemic becomes a site for contesting the legitimacy of Roman imperial power and its socio-economic allure.⁴² A brief analysis of the polemic in the message to Pergamon and Thyatira shows how John delegitimizes imperial power by vilifying the messengers and their food.

But I have a few things against you: You have some there who have the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the people of Israel so that they would eat food sacrificed to idols and engage in sexual immorality

Rev. 2:14.

Nevertheless, I have this against you: you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practice fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols

Rev. 2:20–2.

Representing teachers promoting idol food, such as Balaam and Jezebel, evokes the topos of pagan kings/queens trying to derail the people of Israel. As Sarah Emanuel observes, in the Numbers account, Balaam is “a seer that cannot see,” and Balak is “a mechanical thing than a self-aware ruler.”⁴³ Similarly, Jezebel evokes the infamous wife of King Ahab, who sponsored the prophets of Baal and

41 Dietler, “Culinary Encounters: Food, Identity, and Colonialism,” in *Archaeologies of Colonialism: Consumption, Entanglement, and Violence in Ancient Mediterranean France*, ed. Joan Palevsky, Imprint in Classical Literature (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2010), p. 266.

42 Dietler, “Culinary Encounters,” p. 266.

43 Emanuel, *Roasting Rome*, p. 103.

persecuted Elijah. Exploiting their link to idolatry,⁴⁴ Revelation misrepresents Gentile sacred foods. While in the cuisine of sacrifice, the Greeks used the label *ιερόθυτον* or *θεόθυτον*,⁴⁵ the Jews labeled such food as *εἰδωλόθυτον* to stress its idolatrous and polluted nature. Such critique reveals John's effort to uphold halakhic and cultic boundaries under colonial duress. As David Frankfurter notes, consumption of idol food constitutes an abrogation of the Torah, which, according to Acts and the Didache, was binding on Jesus' followers (Acts 15:20; Did. 6:3).⁴⁶ While John sees it as apostasy, those consuming idol food do not see it as disrupting their allegiance to God. Therefore, John signifies dissident prophets as foreign, corrupt, and immoral figures through the foods they consume.

Idol Food the Worship of the Lamb and the Beast

Moreover, Revelation's idol food polemic is ritually tied to the worship of the Lamb and the Beast. Nevertheless, Steven J. Friesen argues that the debate over idol food bears no relationship to John's critique of imperial cults or the worship of the Beast, albeit on different grounds.⁴⁷ Thus, he regards as "inappropriate" the importation of imperial cults into the messages to the seven *ekklēsiai*, particularly to the assembly of Pergamon (Rev. 2–3). However, as Jörg Frey suggests, the polemic over idol food sets a foundation to articulate Revelation's Jewish cultic concerns over true vs. false worship.⁴⁸ Indeed, the idol food polemic is associated with the worship of the Lamb and constitutes the primary exigency that elicits John's goal to establish the Lamb as the "ruler of the kings of the earth" (1:5). According to John, the Lamb's sacrifice has liberated believers from their sins, ransoming them from every corner of the *oikoumenē*, and transforming them into a kingdom of priests for God (1:5; 5:9). Hence, the Lamb is worthy of worship and opening the seals that

44 Although the term *εἰδωλόλατρης* occurs only twice in Revelation (21:8; 22:15), *εἰδωλόθυτα* fits the Jewish notion of idolatry as worship of gods other than Yahweh (Lev. 26:1; Deut. 4:23; 2 Chr. 33:22; Isa. 40:19; 44:17; Jer. 10:14; 51:17; and Dan. 11:8). See J. Faur, "The Biblical Idea of Idolatry" in *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 69, no. 1 (1978): pp. 1–15.

45 The term refers to something consecrated or sacrificed to a deity. Thus, it carries a primarily cultic connotation. For example, in 1 Cor 10:28, Paul uses *εἰδωλόθυτον* while the "Gentiles" use *ιερόθυτον*.

46 Frankfurter, *Jews or Not?* p. 416.

47 Friesen cites as evidence the lack of condemnation for participation in imperial cults in Rev. 2–3 and the lack of dissension on the matter. See his article titled, "Satan's Throne, Imperial Cults and the Social Settings of Revelation" in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 27, no. 3 (2005): 351–373.

48 Frey, "Roman Imperial Cult and the Book of Revelation," in *The New Testament and Early Christian Literature in Greco-Roman Context: Studies in Honor of David E. Aune*, Illustrated ed. (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2006), pp. 224–250.

undermine the Beast's empire and its idolatrous practices. From this follows that the victors in Revelation are halakhically oriented Jews who reject idol food, receive the Lamb's promises, and become its followers. In John's view, they have washed their clothes in the blood of the Lamb (7:14) and are entitled to enter the New Jerusalem (21:27).

Consequently, abstinence from idol food constitutes an act of loyalty to the Lamb and to God. It embodies what John describes as keeping the commandments of God and the testimony of Jesus. As a result, the Lamb promises faithful believers the hidden manna, affirming their identity as offspring of the Woman (Israel) whom God nourishes in the Wilderness (12:13–17). Facing the wrath of the Dragon, these faithful believers accept their martyrdom (12:11) and refuse to worship the Beast (13:15). Unsurprisingly, it is this refusal that ensures their names are written in Lamb's book of Life (13:8). Conquering through death, these believers shall rise again as a kingdom of priests to reign over the earth (5:10), ruling the nations with an iron rod (2:27–28), along with the Lamb. John reiterates this promise in the presentation of the Lamb and his armies (19:15). Anticipating his victory over the Beast, the false prophet, and their idolatrous followers, John addresses Jesus as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Following the success of the Lamb, only the halakhically pure victors, whose names are in the Lamb's book of life, will enjoy the wealth and benefits of the New Jerusalem (21:27).

Idol Food and the Worship of The Beast

Similarly, the exclusion of believers who consume idol food clarifies their relationship to the worship of the Beast. First, the false prophets' participation and promotion of idol food cast teachers as corrupt, immoral, and foreign agents of Satan.⁴⁹ While John locates Satan's throne in Pergamon, he accuses Jezebel and her followers of exploring the deep things of Satan. That he denies the claims to Jewishness of some believers in Smyrna suggests they may have violated the food laws, incurring in the charge that they are not a congregation of God but are a Synagogue of Satan.⁵⁰ Second, John associates the prophetess of Thyatira with Rome vis-a-vis queen Jezebel and concomitant charges of idolatry and immorality (1 Kings 16:31–34). Both the "harlot" of Revelation

49 While idol food is an issue only in Pergamon and Thyatira, and possibly Ephesus due to the presence of the Nicolaitans, it occupies the central stage, as it sets up John's cultic concerns.

50 According to Frankfurter, the Synagogue of Satan is a group within the Jesus movement, who while being observant Jews themselves, allowed a group of Jesus followers who embraced Pauline or neo-Pauline views on the matter of idol food. It is this latter group whom John attacks for not being halakhically pure enough. See Frankfurter's, "Jews or Not?" pp. 403–425.

17 and Jezebel are royalty, and the latter rule over many waters (Rev. 17:1) or nations of the earth. Although Jezebel ruled alongside King Ahab, rumor has it she ran the kingdom's affairs. As consummated "pagans", they also sponsored idolatry and sexual immorality. Whereas Jezebel introduced the worship of Baal, which included ritual sex with temple prostitutes, the harlot supported the worship of the Beast, represented in food offered to idols and fornication. Third, those who consume idol food risk getting the Mark of the Beast, as John sees it leading into the imperial cult (13:17). By consuming idol food, non-halakhic believers collude with Babylon, the Beast, and the Dragon in persecuting witnesses of the Lamb (17:6), whose hallmark is maintaining food regulations and cultic purity, so much so that even angels are self-conscious and adamant that believers should worship God alone (22:7).

Unsurprisingly, John sees the harlot drunk with their blood, the saints' blood (Rev. 17:6), which constitutes the primary charge leading to Rome's judgment (18:24). By consuming idol food, unrepentant believers become enemies of the Lamb, who promises to make war against them with the sword coming from his mouth (2:16), a threat that the Lamb fulfills in the battle against the Beast and its false prophets: "And the rest were slain by the sword of him who sits upon the horse, the sword that issues from his mouth; and all the birds were gorged with their flesh" (19:21). In case any of them had hopes of entering the New Jerusalem, John makes it clear that nothing unclean shall enter the city (21:27). Through their allegiance to the Beast, the Dragon, and Babylon, unfaithful believers partake of their sins (18:4). Unless they wash their robes in the blood of the Lamb, characterized as the paschal Lamb of Exodus 12, their lot is in the lake that burns with fire and Sulphur, which is the second death (21:8). Since for John believers worship what they eat, their choice is between Roast Lamb and Roast Beast.

You Are What You Eat: Negotiating Ethnicity in the Colonial Situation

Identifying the Synagogue of Satan

Since Jesus is the King of Kings, John seeks to decolonize the diets of believers by constructing fixed boundaries of Jewish ethnicity vis-à-vis halakhic regulations on idol food. For instance, in the messages to Smyrna and Philadelphia, John decries the apparent opposition of a group "who claim to be Jews,"⁵¹ but whom he dismisses as "the 'Synagogue of Satan.'"

⁵¹ These assemblies facing opposition are the ones John praises the most, implying their definitive stance against participation in idol food.

I know your tribulation and your poverty, even though you are rich. I know the slander by those who say that they are Jews and are not but are a synagogue of Satan"⁵²

2:9.

I know your work. Look, I have set before you an open door, which no one can shut. I know you have little power, yet you have kept my word and not denied my name. Therefore, I will make those of the Synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not but are lying—I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you

3:8–9.⁵³

Except for their βλασφημία and apparent opposition, John does not release much information on the Synagogue of Satan (συναγωγή τοῦ Σατανᾶ). Consequently, scholars have developed at least three different rhetorical-historical portraits. The first portrait suggests they are Jews, albeit with five variations: (a) hostile Jews from the local synagogues who colluded with Romans to persecute Christians;⁵⁴ (b) Jews from the local Synagogue who did not persecute Christians but to whom John's followers might defect;⁵⁵ (c) Jews with whom John engages in a passionate polemic characteristic of competing Jewish sects (c.f. 1Qs 5:1–2; CD 1:12);⁵⁶ and (d) Jews within the Jesus movement who overlap with the ekklēsia and offered a dangerous model of accommodation to Greco-Roman society;⁵⁷ (e) Jesus confessing Jews who are

52 Οἶδά σου τὴν θλίψιν καὶ τὴν πτωχείαν, ἀλλὰ πλούσιος εἶ, καὶ τὴν βλασφημίαν ἐκ τῶν λεγόντων Ἰουδαίους εἶναι ἑαυτοὺς καὶ οὐκ εἰσὶν ἀλλὰ συναγωγή τοῦ Σατανᾶ.

53 Οἶδά σου τὰ ἔργα, ἰδοὺ δέδωκα ἐνώπιόν σου θύραν ἡνεωγμένην, ἣν οὐδεὶς δύναται κλεῖσαι αὐτήν, ὅτι μικρὰν ἔχεις δύναμιν καὶ ἐτήρησάς μου τὸν λόγον καὶ οὐκ ἠρνήσω τὸ ὄνομά μου. ἰδοὺ διδῶ ἐκ τῆς συναγωγῆς τοῦ Σατανᾶ τῶν λεγόντων ἑαυτοὺς Ἰουδαίους εἶναι, καὶ οὐκ εἰσὶν ἀλλὰ ψεύδονται. ἰδοὺ ποιήσω αὐτοὺς ἵνα ἤξουσιν καὶ προσκυνήσουσιν ἐνώπιον τῶν ποδῶν σου καὶ γνῶσιν ὅτι ἐγὼ ἡγάπησά σε.

54 Philip L. Mayo, *"Those Who Call Themselves Jews": The Church and Judaism in the Apocalypse of John* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2006), 67; Adela Yarbro-Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*, p. 86.

55 Paul B. Duff, *"The Synagogue of Satan,"* p. 164.

56 Adela Yarbro-Collins, "Vilification and Self-definition in the Book of Revelation" in *The Harvard Theological Review*, 79 (1986): pp. 308–320.

57 Barr speculates that the Synagogue of Satan is a Jewish group that also follows Jesus but is not in the same group as Jezebel and Balaam's followers. See David L. Barr, "Idol Meat and Satanic Synagogues," in *Imagery in the Book of Revelation*, eds. Michael Laban, and Outi Lehtipuu (Leuven; Walpole, Mass.: Peeters, 2011), p. 6.

distancing from John's radical messianism to avoid confrontation with Rome.⁵⁸ The second portrait of the Synagogue of Satan suggests they are Gentiles or God-fearers (θεοσεβής) who had partially converted to Judaism (e.g., Acts 17:17).⁵⁹ Finally, a third portrait posits that those who "claim to be Jews and are not" are Pauline and Neo-Pauline proselytes within the Synagogue whose lax halakhic observance is, in John's view, not enough to merit the designations as Jews.⁶⁰

Although each of the views above carries significant explanatory power, the majority sideline the role of the colonial situation and its impact on colonized subjectivity.⁶¹ As Frantz Fanon has observed, colonial conditions force subjects to negotiate ethnic identity to navigate socio-economic and political hierarchies, often at the expense of other colonized groups. Thus, I read John's polemic, passionate or not, with the Synagogue of Satan as negotiating ethnicity, which Roman imperialism both triggers and inflects. As the central thesis of this essay holds, Jewish believers turned idol food into a site for mapping, contesting, and negotiating the boundaries of Jewishness. With John Marshall, David Frankfurter, and Sarah Emanuel, I see halakhic practices playing a central role in identity construction and and patrolling of its boundaries. In my view, "those who claim to be Jews" are indeed Jewish believers within the *ekklēsia* who transgressed halakhic boundaries by consuming idol food and participating in the Roman economic system, which the author frames as idolatry and fornication, compromising their identity as God's people. Faced with precarious political relations with Rome and a difficult tug-a-war with the Greek cities of Asia Minor over acculturation, these Jesus-confessing Jews strategically adapted their halakhic observance on idol food.⁶² Rather than confronting Rome and the Greek cities⁶³ they operated with a fluid understanding of Jewishness, which enabled them to navigate the socio-political climate of Asia Minor.⁶⁴

58 Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, *The Words of Prophecy: Reading the Apocalypse Theologically* in *Studies in the Book of Revelation* ed. Steven Moyise (New York: T & T Clark, 2001), p. 15.

59 Stephen G. Wilson, "Gentile Judaizers," *NTS* 38 (1992): pp. 613–15.

60 See Frankfurter's, "Jews or Not?" p.422.

61 Citing Thompson, Frankfurter suggests the imagery of suffering, imprisonment, and overall tribulation are characteristic of the apocalyptic genre. See Frankfurter, "Jews or Not?" pp. 403–425.

62 Barr, "Idol Meat and Satanic Synagogues," p.6.

63 According to Schüssler-Fiorenza, the conflict was political. Jewish believers who were socio-economically and politically established wanted to distance themselves from radical messianic contingents in Asia Minor and Palestine. See Schüssler-Fiorenza, "The Words of Prophecy," p.15.

64 Leonard L. Thompson, "A Sociological Analysis of Tribulation in the Apocalypse of John," p. 149.

Mapping the Boundaries of Jewishness: You Are What You Eat and Drink

As with Jezebel and the Balaamites, the Synagogue of Satan is excluded from God's congregation. However, what is precisely their transgression? According to David Frankfurter, their lax halakhic observance invalidates their claims to Jewishness and is what makes them Satanic.⁶⁵ I have suggested they consumed idol food and participated in the Roman economy, which the author labels as idolatry and fornication. Such disregard for halakhic boundaries places "rogue" believers under Satan's authority. While Jezebel and her followers explore the deep things of Satan in Thyatira, the Balaamites operate in Pergamon, where Satan's throne is. However, John warns their laxity amounts to collusion with the Dragon, Babylon, and the beast in the murder of fellow Jews who keep the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. For instance, in his vision of the Great Whore (17:1–18), John notes she was holding "a golden cup," which was full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication" (17:4). She was "... drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the martyrs of Jesus." (17:5–6), which could include Antipas of Pergamon. Thus, as Sarah Emanuel notes, "the Whore violates the central Jewish law not to consume another's lifeblood" because blood is life (Deut. 12:23).⁶⁶ Babylon mixed the lifeblood with the "wine of fornication," to inebriate the inhabitants of the earth. However, as Emanuel notes, John compares Babylon's "non-halakhic tumbler" with her genital fluids, suggesting her sympathizers are drinking directly from the source."⁶⁷ Therefore, the charges of idolatry and fornication against Jezebel and Balaam suggest believers are drinking Babylon's non-halakhic elixir, which is mixed with the blood of saints and prophets, and all victims of imperial violence (18:24). If believers are what they eat and what they drink, Babylon's sympathizers are not only tainted, but drink what Rome's golden chalice signifies: idolatry, corruption, immorality, and death.⁶⁸ Such transgression of halakhic boundaries turns them into a Synagogue of Satan.

Enforcing the Boundaries of Jewish Ethnicity

Therefore, John decolonizes the diets of the Jewish assemblies by constructing the boundaries of Jewish ethnicity around abstinence or consumption of idol food. While I agree with Frankfurter that the contestation of Jewishness based on degrees of halakhic observance is a characteristic of inter-sectarian

65 Frankfurter, "Jews or Not?" p. 417.

66 Emanuel, *Roasting Rome*, p. 159.

67 Emanuel, *Roasting Rome*, p. 160.

68 Emanuel observes that "The non-halakhic content of the Whore's cup drips through her, infecting the bodies of those who kneel before her." See, *Roasting Rome*, p. 162.

or intra-Jewish polemics,⁶⁹ I argue that the controversy over idol food reflects how the colonial situation under Rome impinged upon two Jesus-confessing Jewish groups, forcing them to contest and redefine the boundaries of Jewishness. Although some scholars see *Ioudaioi* as a religious category, the concept, as Shaye Cohen observes, had an ethnic-geographic meaning in the Diaspora and a religious or political one. As he notes, Josephus often used the term “*genos Ioudaioi*” as an ethnic category (*A.J.* 11:173). In addition, the term is usually translated as “race,” ethnicity, and descent so that one can speak of Jewish ethnicity and Jewish descent.⁷⁰ In Cohen’s view, what makes Jews distinctive is that they observe the laws and practices of the Jews: they kept the Sabbath, attended the Synagogue, and followed the food laws.⁷¹ Indeed, John’s characterization of θεόθυτον as εἰδωλόθυστα invokes dietary restrictions that distinguish Jews from their gentile neighbors. Non-canonical sources such as *The Letter of Aristeeas* (200 B.C.E.) are more poignant when noting that “Jewish dietary laws established impenetrable iron walls between Jews and Gentiles” (139–42). Nevertheless, even if not every Jew maintained this distinction, as John M. G. Barclay notes, “it typically bound the Jewish community together against others, thus solidifying Jewish ethnic identity daily.”⁷²

Since idol food is synonymous with idolatry, immorality, and otherness (Exod. 32; Num. 25), the Synagogue of Satan becomes like Gentiles, who disregard the law and fall under condemnation (e.g., Pss 50:16–20; 109:2–7; 119:53,155). While referring to another Jewish faction as Gentiles or sinners was a common trope in intra-Jewish polemics (e.g., 1 Mace 1:34; 2:44, 48; 1 Enoch 5:4–7; 82:4–5; Pss. Sol. 4:8; 13:6–12), in Revelation it is part of a strict enforcement of identity boundaries. As J.D.G. Dunn notes, since Gentiles were seen as lawless, the term could be used as more or less synonymous with “Gentiles” (Ps 9:17; Tobit 13:6).⁷³

Consequently, their βλασφημία places them alongside the worshippers of the Beast, whose key trait is the blaspheming activity against God (13:5–6; 16:9). Indeed, in the vision of the Great Whore, the scarlet beast John sees is full of blasphemous names (17:4). Although some strands of Revelation scholarship translate βλασφημία as “slander” and see it as a reference to Jewish hostility

69 Frankfurter, “Jews or Not?”, p. 416.

70 Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1999), p. 70–71.

71 Ibid., p. 59.

72 John M. G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora: From Alexander to Trajan* (323 B.C.E.–117 C.E.), (Edinburgh: T & T Clark), p. 437.

73 Dunn, “Echoes of Intra-Jewish Polemic in Paul’s Letter to the Galatians” in *Journal of Biblical Literature* (1993):459–77.

against Christians,⁷⁴ it is doubtful that βλασφημία refers to any denunciation of Christians before Roman authorities.⁷⁵ Hence, as David L. Barr observes, “their βλασφημία does not entail some charge they bring against John’s community, but their claim to be Jewish while participating in the trappings of idolatry—they slander not John but God.”⁷⁶ In John’s view, these believers are apostates excluded from the New Jerusalem and set to share the fate of Gentiles.⁷⁷ For John, the nations are antagonistic to God’s people. They persecute God’s prophets, trample the holy city (11:2,9–10), and participate in the imperial cult (13:7; 14:6,8).⁷⁸ Furthermore, they conspire with the kings of the earth (1.5; 6.15; 17.2, 18; 18:3; 9–10; 19.19; 21.2), Rome (17.2, 17; 18:3), and the Beast. Thus, some are destroyed in the eschatological battle (19:19–21),⁷⁹ while others appear in the Lamb’s victory parade (21:27). Just as Jesus promised believers in the assembly of Philadelphia, the Synagogue of Satan will bow down and recognize Jesus’s love for halakhically minded Jews (3:9).

Negotiating the Boundaries of Jewishness

Despite its apparent fixity, John’s halakhically based Jewishness and the vilification of the silenced voices as false prophets or apostates have slippages.⁸⁰ Indeed, its boundaries may be more porous than John admits and, therefore, negotiable. To map such slippages, I use Denise K. Buell’s concept of “Ethnic Reasoning,” which she defines as the modes of persuasion that may or may not include a specific vocabulary of peoplehood.⁸¹ According to Buell, such discourse provided believers with a way to define themselves relative to “outsiders” and to compete with other insiders to assert the superiority of their

74 See J. Lambrecht, “Jewish Slander: A Note on Revelation 2, 9–10” *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 75, no. 4 (1999): 421–429.

75 Paul B. Duff, “*The Synagogue of Satan*,” p. 161.

76 Barr, “Idol Meat and Satanic Synagogues,” pp. 1–11.

77 In Duff’s view, what awaits the Synagogue of Satan in the eschaton is divine correction. See Duff’s “*The Synagogue of Satan*,” p. 158.

78 See McNicol, *The Conversion of the Nations in Revelation* (London; New York: T & T Clark, 2011), p. 31.

79 See also Ronald Herms’s discussion of the fate of the nations in Revelation in *An Apocalypse for the Church and for the World: The Narrative Function of Universal Language in the Book of Revelation* (Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2006), p. 169–181.

80 According to Schüssler-Fiorenza, “All three terms, ‘Nicolaitans,’ ‘Balaam,’ and ‘Jezebel,’ theologically label prophets who allowed their followers to eat food which had been sacrificed to idols and to participate in pagan religious festivities.” See Schüssler-Fiorenza, *The Words of Prophecy*, p. 15. For Frankfurter, this list of opponents includes the false apostles of Ephesus and the Synagogue of Satan. See Frankfurter, “Jews or Not?” p. 414.

81 Buell, *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 2.

varying visions of identity.⁸² While she applies the concept to second-century competing notions of Christiannes, Ethnic Reasoning may also illuminate how John and those he derides as Synagogue of Satan are deploying what Buell describes as a double discourse of “fixity and fluidity” of ethnicity. On the one hand, John enforces fixed boundaries of Jewishness through strict halakhic observance of the food laws and the rejection of idolatry. In doing so, he cast his version of Jewishness as the most authentic type, which, as Sarah Emanuel indicates, includes “... John’s self-designations, as well as the text’s literary heritage, halakhic worldview, nationalistic orientation, and focus on Jesus as the Christ.”⁸³ On the other hand, those he dismisses as Synagogue of Satan have opted to negotiate rather than resist the colonial situation by transgressing John’s halakhic boundaries. The archaeological record supports the idea of Jews fully integrated into the socio-economic fabric of Asian cities. In the complex geopolitical situation, John’s fixed discourse of Jewishness exposes the community to martyrdom, while the fluid version that Jezebel and Balaam promote enables them to operate within increasingly hostile Roman socio-economic structures.

Eating Your Money’s Worth: Idol Food and the Reversal of Fortunes

Idol Food Poverty and Wealth

In the colonial situation of Revelation, believers’ position on idol food determines their prospects of poverty or wealth. Their food choices indicate the imperial city to which they have pledged loyalty. Given Babylon’s violent demise and the rise of the New Jerusalem, John discloses a contradictory reality for believers. While Jesus tells the materially poor assembly of Smyrna that they are rich (Rev. 2:9), he tells wealthy Laodiceans they are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked (3:15–18). Given the projected loss of their trade partner and their wealth’s depreciation, the Laodiceans’ only choice is to buy from Jesus himself. Traditionally, scholars such as Wilfrid J. Harrington have explored this construction of wealth and poverty in theological terms, noting that believers are materially poor but rich in spiritual goods. Distinguishing between heavenly and earthly wealth, Robert Royalty sees Rome’s wealth as *sordida et vulgaris*. Other scholars view it as a symbol of inner or outer poverty or wealth. Frantz Fanon’s notion of decolonization, which triggers a violent reversal of fortunes, may explain the apparent contradiction. Because no

82 Ibid., 2.

83 Emanuel, *Roasting Rome*, p. 36.

one can buy nor sell without the Mark of the Beast,⁸⁴ the prosperity of the Laodiceans hints at their consumption of idol food and worship of the Beast. As Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza posits, the Laodiceans probably assumed a type of Pauline teaching similar to that adjudicated to the Nicolaitans, Balaamites, and Jezebel, whose teaching justified participation in the socio-economic structures of the empire.⁸⁵ Their vacillation amounts to indecision, inevitably leading to their exclusion: “Because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out my mouth.” (3:16).

Wealth, Poverty, and The Fall of Babylon

John links the ekklēsia at Laodicea and its economic activity with the merchants, Babylon, and the worship of the Beast. He begins by associating the Laodicean claims to wealth and prosperity in Rev. 3:17b with “the merchants of the earth,” who grew rich from their trade with Rome (Rev. 18:3).⁸⁶ They ferry all kinds of goods, including enslaved people and weapons, to Rome. The second implication of their participation in idol food is their direct link with Rome, which their imputed claims of self-sufficiency betray: For you say, “I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing” (Rev. 3:17a). Similarly, Rome boasts of its power and self-confidence: As she glorified herself and lived luxuriously, “I rule as a queen; I am no widow, and I will never see grief” (Rev. 18:7). Third, John uses the economic activity of the Laodiceans to implicate them in the Beast’s worship. In Revelation 13, no one can buy or sell (δύνηται ἀγοράσαι ἢ πωλῆσαι) without the Mark of the Beast (Rev. 13:17), which is allegiance to Rome,⁸⁷ rather than a literal tattoo.⁸⁸ John’s revelation of their proper condition is the turning point. In his view, the Laodiceans are “wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked” (3:17). Such characterization reflects their inability to see the impending fall of Babylon, which the devaluation of their wealth and economic collapse. Thus, the merchants will “weep and mourn” because “no one buys their cargo anymore” (18:11). As Rome’s associates, the rich Laodiceans are now poor because Rome’s wealth is gone: “For in one hour, all this wealth has been laid waste!” (Rev. 18:16–17). Their blindness also impedes them from seeing the

84 Royalty, *The Streets of Heaven*, p. 166.

85 Schüssler-Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 199), p. 198.

86 Through the verb πλουτέω and its cognates πλούσιος and πλούτος, John presents them as reaping the benefits of participating in the imperial economic system.

87 Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1998), p. 220.

88 Harrington, *Revelation*, p. 142–145.

futility of worshiping the Beast, whom the Lamb will destroy, along with the false prophet and all those who worshiped its image (14:9).

Therefore, to avoid economic collapse, the Laodiceans must trade with Jesus and the imperial city he represents: “Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich, and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen, and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see” (3:18). This invitation to buy gold from Jesus is not only a reference to the New Jerusalem, which is a city of gold pure as crystal, but also a call to switch allegiances and avoid captivity, along with the shame and nakedness that it implies.⁸⁹ Since guilt and nakedness reflect the confinement from worshiping the Beast, Jesus’ invitation to buy white robes, a promise to the conquerors, is also an invitation to repent and change their fates. However, the invitation to purchase white robes also highlights John’s halakhic concerns because nothing impure will enter the New Jerusalem (22:14). Despite the economic control that the Beast exercises “over every person and language and nation (13:7), the Lamb’s sacrifice triggered the decolonization of the *oikoumenē*.

The Poor Who Are Rich and the Rise of the New Jerusalem

Similarly, Jesus invalidates the Smyrnan’s claim to poverty and links their fortunes to the rise of the New Jerusalem: “I know your tribulation and your poverty, even though you are rich (2:9). The three descriptive terms—affliction, poverty, and wealth—shed light on the precarious and contradictory situation of the assembly at Smyrna. Through the term θλιψις, which scholars often translate as affliction or persecution, John links the tribulation of the *ekklesiā* at Smyrna with his “tribulation” at Patmos, which is on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus (Rev 1:9). Thus, he places them squarely amongst those dressed in White who have emerged from the Great Tribulation (7:14). Rather than localized persecution, θλιψις refers here to Dragon’s ongoing oppression halakhically minded followers of Jesus (Rev. 12:17). Thus, John promotes martyrdom through faithful witnessing in three ways: first, Jesus is the one “who was dead and came to life” (2:8c); second, the call to be faithful until death (2:10d); and third, the promise of immunity from the second death (2:11b). Unlike the Synagogue of Satan, these Jews conquer through their rejection of idol food and martyrdom (12:11). Whereas those who

89 Roloff interprets this statement theologically: “For its poverty, the church needs “gold,” that is, true wealth, which only he can give; for its nakedness, the white garment of salvation (v.5); and for its blindness, a salve for the eyes, which grants spiritual sight.” Roloff, *Revelation*, p. 65.

call themselves Jews negotiate the colonial situation by transgressing halakhic boundaries, faithful Smyrnans uphold such boundaries as the expense of their own lives.

In both cases, the outcome illustrates the distinction between negotiation and resistance. Since the Beast controls Roman economic systems, the faithful's rejection of idolatry explains their economic hardships and potential martyrdom (Rev.13:15–17). Presupposing the fall of Babylon and the rise of New Jerusalem, Jesus tells the impoverished Smyrnans they are rich. Although Robert Royalty argues that “they are rich in deeds, in suffering and endurance.”⁹⁰ I suggest they are rich because their Torah observance qualifies them to enter the New Jerusalem and access its wealth. Replacing and surpassing Babylon, the New Jerusalem is a golden city clear as glass, like the kind Jesus offers the Laodiceans (Rev. 21:18–21). Indeed, as Sara Emanuel notes, this wealth appears elsewhere,⁹¹ perhaps in Babylon itself, as the merchants of the earth ferried all kinds of jewels and merchandise into it. As part of its victory parade, the rulers of the nations will bow before the Lamb (Isa. 49:23). This would also fulfill the promise that Jesus will make the Synagogue of Satan bow before faithful believers and recognize Jesus' love for them (3:9). Most significant, Isaiah suggests that believers will also eat the wealth of the nations: “And you will eat the wealth of nations, and in their riches, you will boast’ (Isa. 61:5–6). Because of the decolonization of the *oikoumenē*, which the descent of the New Jerusalem enunciates, the wealth of faithful believers is assured.

Implications

Revelation's Colonial Situation

Formulating Revelation's social setting as a colonial situation illumines how the Jewish diaspora addressed the realities of Roman imperialism in Asia Minor. In doing so, this article disavows the parting of the ways framework and the various reconstructions of Revelation's social setting that hinged partly on it. Thinking with Frantz Fanon's notion of *La Situation Coloniale* and underscoring Jewish halakhic concerns, I have argued that the inscribed Jewish Diaspora communities not only resisted or colluded with Rome but negotiated the colonial situation through fluid halakhic practice and cultic concerns. While John attempts to decolonize their diets by patrolling and enforcing halakhic and cultic boundaries on idol food, the dissident voices—Jezebel,

⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 78.

⁹¹ Emanuel, *Roasting Rome*, p. 190.

Balaam, the Nicolaitans, and the “Synagogue of Satan”—adopt an open stance, partaking and encouraging others to consume it. In doing so, they turned idol food into a site of contestation, resistance, and negotiation of imperial power.

Halakhic Messianism

The Lamb’s decolonization of believers’ diets through halakhic boundaries highlights the role of Revelation’s “halakhic messianism.” Indeed, Revelation’s conquering messiah⁹² encourages believers to keep the commandments of God, so much so it evokes Jesus’s pro-Torah declaration in Matthew 5:17: “Do not think I came to abolish the Law but to fulfill it. Hence, John is keen on keeping the commandment against idolatry.” While R. H. Charles noted the Torah is not mentioned in Revelation, he bypasses the fact that keeping the commandments of God is a central feature of John’s notion of peoplehood and faithful witnessing (Rev.12:17; 14:12). Thus, the Lamb represents those who transgress halakhic and cultic boundaries as idolatrous foreigners (e.g., Jezebel and Balaam) and agents of the Dragon (e.g., Synagogue of Satan).⁹³ In addition, the conquering activity of the Lamb is tied to the conquering activity of its followers, who, through their rejection of the idol, affirm that only Jesus is worthy of worship as king of King and Lord of Lords (19:16).⁹⁴ Thus, Halakhic and cultic concerns are inseparable in Revelation and settle the broader question of true vs. false worship. Having washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb (7:14), only the followers of the Lamb may enter the city (21:27)⁹⁵ and enjoy its benefits (22:14).⁹⁶ By regulating access to the New Jerusalem based on ritual purity, Revelation’s Davidic messiah, “the bright morning star” (22:16),⁹⁷

92 George W. E. Nickelsburg, *Ancient Judaism and Christian Origins: Diversity, Continuity, and Transformation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), p.130.

93 Thus, the author’s ethnic mapping contrasts the specificity of Israel with the multiplicity of Gentiles (Rev. 10:11; 11:9; 17:15).

94 See Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 66–73.

95 According to Frankfurter, the centrality of the Holy City, with or without a temple, illuminates the “abiding value of these themes for Jews outside Judea and Galilee. See Frankfurter’s, “The Revelation to John” in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 2011), p. 465.

96 Μακάριοι οἱ πλύνοντες τὰς στολὰς αὐτῶν, ἵνα ἔσται ἡ ἐξουσία αὐτῶν ἐπὶ τὸ ξύλον τῆς ζωῆς καὶ τοῖς πυλῶσιν εἰσέλθωσιν εἰς τὴν πόλιν. ἔξω οἱ κύνες καὶ οἱ φάρμακοι καὶ οἱ πόρνοι καὶ οἱ φονεῖς καὶ οἱ εἰδωλολάτραι καὶ πᾶς φιλῶν καὶ ποιῶν ψεῦδος (22:14). See also Rev. 15:6; 19:8, 14.

97 The author borrows the first of the two titles from Isaiah 11:10, and applies it to Davidic Messiah, whereas the second title comes from Numbers 24:17 and alludes to the warrior messiah who is to conquer the enemies of Israel.

turns halakhic boundaries into concrete boundaries.⁹⁸ The question remains if Revelation's imposition of the food laws is reverse colonialism, as only a select few enter God's paradise while the rest are excluded.

Negotiating Ethnicity in the Diaspora

Reading John's polemic with "The Synagogue of Satan" as a negotiation of ethnicity under colonial duress informs current conversation regarding the identity of John's opponents. Although scholars identified the Synagogue of Satan as Jews (hostile, non-hostile, or Jesus confessing Jews inside or outside the *ekklēsia*), Godfearers, or Neo-Pauline Christians, some operate with the parting of ways paradigm. As a result, they downplay the halakhic regulations, cultic concerns, and the role of empire in identity construction and maintenance. Using Fanon's insight into how colonized subjects patrol, contest, and negotiate ethnicity under imperial pressure, I argue that the Synagogue of Satan may very well be Jesus confessing Jews within the *ekklēsia* who operated with fluid halakhic practice and understanding of Jewishness, which John finds unacceptable given the idolatrous empire. For Revelation, the identity of Diaspora Jews hinges on their halakhic practice. It determines whether they become ritually pure followers of the Lamb, or idolaters who worship the Beast, collude with Rome and become agents of the Dragon. Reading against the grain, it would be unproductive to cast John's others as apostates. Instead, it appears they negotiated the colonial situation through their fluid halakhic practice rather than confronting the empire, as John certainly wanted.

Reversal of Fortunes as Decolonization

Moreover, this essay shows how the decolonization of the *oikoumenē*, which the fall of Babylon and the rise of the New Jerusalem enunciate, determined the economic prospects of believers.⁹⁹ As Fanon observes, decolonization is always a violent phenomenon that presupposes the overturning of the colonial apparatus, where the last shall be first. Such insight adumbrates the loss and acquisition of wealth in Revelation. Whereas certain scholars viewed wealth/poverty as symbols of inner or outer piety,¹⁰⁰ others juxtaposed material poverty with spiritual wealth.¹⁰¹ A third position suggests that the vilification of wealth is simply a recurrent topos in Second Temple Judaism. While the

98 For an analysis of the term Messiah, see John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star: The Messiahs of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Ancient Literature* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), pp. 16–20.

99 Roloff, *The Revelation of John*, p. 48.

100 Ibid., p. 48.

101 Harrington, *Revelation*, p. 58.

former reinforces a theological paradigm that spiritualized oppression,¹⁰² the latter reinforces the idea that oppression in Apocalyptic texts is but a literary trope. Although such views illuminate the author's concern for drafting firm boundaries around wealth, it sidelines the role of Roman imperialism and John's cultic concerns in its construction. Considering Fanon's insights on decolonization, I have argued that Revelation ties the fortunes of believers to the power they align with vis-a-vis the acceptance or rejection of idol food. Since the Lamb's sacrifice has triggered the decolonization of the world, the New Jerusalem stands to displace Babylon, effectively enacting a socio-economic reversal of fortunes. Thus, the merchants of the earth lament the loss of their economic prospects, while halakhically oriented believers stand to access the wealth of the New Jerusalem.

Conclusion

This article reconstructed Revelation's social setting as a colonial situation that believers negotiated vis-à-vis their stance on idol food. Distancing themselves from the imperial persecution hypothesis, scholars proposed various scenarios for John's crisis rhetoric: a cosmic conflict between God and the Dragon, a perceived crisis, a prophetic rivalry, and a wake-call to Christians who assimilated into Greco-Roman culture. However, these alternatives reflected two critical shortcomings. First, the majority assumed that the absence of imperial persecution represented a lack of systemic oppression. Second, they presupposed the parting of ways between Christians and Jews to explain perceived tensions between church and synagogue. In a critical paradigm shift, postcolonial, empire-critical, and trauma studies adumbrated Revelation's halakhic concerns while mapping the operations of imperial power. Building on their insights and Frantz Fanon's notion of the colonial situation (*La Situation Coloniale*), this paper reads Revelation's social setting as a colonial situation of domination.

In my view, Revelation's food polemics illustrate how Jewish Diaspora communities in Asia Minor turned idol food into a site for negotiating imperial power, patrolling or contesting Jewish identity, and carving new economic opportunities. In his response to such a strategy, John seeks to decolonize the diets of believers by enforcing cultic and halakhic boundaries against those consuming idol food. Since, in his view, believers worship what they eat, those who consume idol food do not consume the Lamb of Exodus 12 but the roast

¹⁰² Mata, "From Imperial Persecution to Colonial Situation," p. 225–241.

Beast of Revelation 19. Finally, Revelation's reversal of fortunes enunciates the decolonization of the *oikoumenē*. Given the fall of Babylon and the rise of the New Jerusalem, one's food choices could lead to utter bankruptcy or enduring wealth in the golden city. Ultimately, the New Jerusalem's walls are halakhic walls, which are insurmountable in the language of Aristéas. Reading against the grain, I have also noted that the silenced voices (Jezebel, Balaamites, and Nicolaitans) operated with a fluid understanding of Jewishness to negotiate the complex reality of the Jewish Diaspora in Asia Minor circa 100 C.E.