

10-2008

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Recommended Citation

Koester, Craig R., "Roman slave trade and the critique of Babylon in Revelation 18" (2008). *Faculty Publications*. 16.
http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty_articles/16

Published Citation

Koester, Craig R. "Roman Slave Trade and the Critique of Babylon in Revelation 18." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 70, no. 4 (October 2008): 766–86.

Roman Slave Trade and the Critique of Babylon in Revelation 18

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JOHN'S VISION of the fall of Babylon in Revelation 18 marks a climactic moment in his critique of economic life under imperial Roman rule. He portrays the city that rules the world as the hub of a vibrant commercial network. Fleets of ships bring a dazzling array of goods to the city, and those engaged in this lucrative trade amass large profits for themselves. Yet John also pictures the city as a haughty prostitute, and those doing business with her as her clients. This garish imagery seeks to show that commerce with the ruling power has a seamy underside, and it calls readers to disengage from it (Rev 18:4). The Christians first addressed by Revelation would have seen similarities between the book's visionary world and the commercial world in which they lived. Ephesus, Smyrna, and the other cities of Asia Minor had a place in the networks of trade that sent goods to the vast markets of the empire. Some of the Christians addressed by John might have regarded Rome's commercial influence negatively, but others did not. They prospered in the Roman economy and found it expedient to accommodate the current order (2:14, 20; 3:17). For such readers, Revelation's visionary rhetoric poses a challenge to see the world differently and to resist practices that are inconsistent with the faith.¹

¹ On Revelation's economic critique of Rome, see Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1993) 338-83; J. Nelson Kraybill, *Imperial Cult and Commerce in John's Apocalypse* (JSNTSup 132; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996); Allen D. Callahan, "Apocalypse as Critique of Political Economy: Some Notes on Revelation 18," *HBT* 21 (1999) 46-65. On the rhetorical quality of Revelation's visions, see David L. Barr, "The Apocalypse as a Symbolic Transformation of the World: A Literary Analysis," *Int* 38 (1984) 39-50; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Proclamation Commentaries; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 20-37, 119-39.

The slave trade is among the practices associated with Babylon/Rome. The merchants in Revelation find it profitable to traffic in human beings (18:13), but John identifies the slave trade with commercial practices that fall under the judgment of God. This aspect of the vision would have been relevant for John's early readers. In the first century, Rome offered a seemingly boundless market for slaves, and the merchants of Asia Minor were actively involved in supplying human cargo to meet the demand. Therefore, we do well to ask how John's critical stance toward the slave trade functions in the vision of Babylon/Rome and how it relates to the contexts of his readers.

Exploring this question is complex because Revelation does not include a sustained discussion of slavery or outline a specific social program that readers are to implement. Nevertheless, several lines of inquiry help to show the significance of the slave trade in John's critique of imperial economic life. First, I assess how Revelation refers to slavery and especially how it distinguishes the degrading slavery of Babylon's empire from the redemptive slavery associated with God. Second, I show how Revelation's portrayal of Babylon draws on common attitudes toward slave traders, which were much more critical than attitudes toward slavery in general. Third, I consider a collection of inscriptions that provide valuable glimpses into the slave trade as practiced in the cities addressed by Revelation. Doing so enables one to see how the visions in the book address a significant aspect of the society in which the readers live.

I. Slavery in Babylon and New Jerusalem

Revelation shapes the perspectives of its readers through contrasting pairs of visions: God exercises power through the slaughtered and living Lamb, while Satan operates through the horrific seven-headed Beast. God's city is the new Jerusalem, which comes down from heaven, whereas the city of the Beast is Babylon, which oppresses the earth. The new Jerusalem is a bride adorned for her husband, but Babylon is a prostitute engaged in bawdy relationships with her clients. Such contrasts work to alienate readers from the powers represented by the Beast and to bind them more closely to the Lamb and his followers.² Given such sharp contrasts, we might expect John to identify Babylon with slavery and God with freedom, yet here things become more complicated. John identifies a negative form of slavery with the Beast and Babylon, but he also speaks of a positive form of slav-

² The contrasts have often been noted. See, e.g., Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (NTT; Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 131-32; Klaus Wengst, "Babylon the Great and the New Jerusalem: The Visionary View of Political Reality in the Revelation of John," in *Politics and Theopolitics in the Bible and Postbiblical Literature* (ed. Henning Graf Reventlow, Yair Hoffman, and Benjamin Uffenheimer; JSNTSup 171; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994) 189-202; Barbara R. Rossing, *The Choice between Two Cities: Whore, Bride, and Empire in the Apocalypse* (HTS 48; Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999).

ery in connection with God and the new Jerusalem. In Revelation, slavery can be either negative or positive.

John's approach to slavery assumes that something takes on its rightful form in relation to God but takes a debased form in relation to God's opponents. This general perspective is evident at points throughout the book. For example, the Lamb and his followers "conquer" (νικάω) evil by remaining faithful in and through the suffering that is inflicted on them (5:5-6; 12:11; 15:2). This is positive. By way of contrast, the Beast "conquers" by inflicting suffering on others (11:7; 13:7), which is negative. Again, the new Jerusalem is adorned with gold, pearls, and jewels, as is fitting for a faithful bride. But when Babylon the prostitute wears gold and precious stones, her appearance seems brazen and garish, since she gains her wealth from debased relationships and uses the glitter to attract new clients. When related to the readers' social world, these visionary elements contrast the victory of the Lamb with the Roman emphasis on military conquest, and underscore the way that the imperial order exerts dominion over the earth by entwining people in its vast network of trade with its seductive promises of wealth.³ Accordingly, we must consider the differences between the forms of slavery associated with God and Babylon/Rome.

The opening lines of Revelation say that the contents of the book were disclosed to John, who is called a "slave" of God. John, in turn, wrote the book for Christian readers, who are also called God's "slaves" (1:1). Although most English translations read "servant," the Greek word is δοῦλος, which is the ordinary term for someone who is a slave rather than a free person (6:15; 13:16; 19:18). To call members of the Christian community "slaves" assumes that they are not free agents but belong to God. Yet the contexts where the word functions this way make clear that belonging to God is a positive and not a negative form of relationship. God's slaves are not mere chattel but are privileged to receive revelations from God.

Rhetorically, there were precedents for using the term "slave" in a positive sense for those who are devoted to God. In Israel's tradition, Moses and other prophets were given the honorable title "slave of God."⁴ Revelation reflects this usage (10:7; 15:3) and extends it by giving the honorific title of "slave" to a Christian prophet like John. There were also precedents for calling any faithful person in Israel a slave of God (Ps 27:9; 2 Chr 6:23; Pr Azar 10), and Revelation also uses

³ On the role of successful military conquest in portrayals of Roman rule, see R. R. R. Smith, "The Imperial Reliefs from the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias," *JRS* 77 (1987) 88-138; Steven J. Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 86-90.

⁴ For Moses as δοῦλος, see 1 Kgs 8:56; Ps 105:26; for other prophets, see 2 Kgs 9:7; Dan 9:6; Amos 3:7; Zech 1:6. The words θεράπων (Exod 4:10; Num 12:10) and παῖς were also used for God's servants (Josh 1:7; 1 Chr 16:13; 17:25).

the term for each member of the Christian community (2:20; 19:2; 22:6). This pattern was not unusual. Similar uses of the word “slave” for those devoted to God occur in other early Christian writings as well as in Greco-Roman sources.⁵

People become God’s slaves through purchase. In ordinary social practice it was common for people to acquire slaves by buying them, but in relation to God the practice takes on a different meaning. Revelation says that the Lamb, who is God’s agent, “purchased” (ἀγοράζω) people of every tribe and nation by his own blood (5:9; 14:3-4). This shedding of his blood was an act of love on their behalf (1:5). Purchase comes by the Lamb’s self-sacrifice. In ordinary practice it was also understood that slaves were not to act independently but were to carry out the commands of their masters. Accordingly, God’s people do address God as Lord and Master and are to obey (4:8, 11; 6:10; 12:17; 14:12). But the paradox is that those who become God’s slaves through the Lamb’s self-sacrifice are liberated from subjection to other powers, giving them the dignity of serving as priests and full members of God’s kingdom (1:5-6; 5:9-10).

God’s slaves receive a seal on their foreheads, consisting of the name of the Lamb and his Father (7:3; 14:1). This seal signifies belonging to God, and it assures them of protection from divine wrath—though not from earthly suffering.⁶ The slaves who bear this seal have a place in glory in the new Jerusalem. When John describes the city, he takes readers through its golden streets to the throne of God and the Lamb. There God’s slaves worship, but they do so with the unprecedented privilege of seeing God’s face. To worship in God’s presence with God’s name across their foreheads makes them analogous to high priests, who also bore God’s name (Exod 28:36-38). And in the light of God, they reign forever (Rev 22:3-5). Those purchased by the Lamb to be slaves in God’s city are in positions of honor.

By way of contrast, Revelation depicts the slave trade associated with the Beast and Babylon as degrading. Revelation personifies the city of Babylon as a prostitute, who is at the center of a great network of trade (17:1-18:24). The city

⁵ E.g., Acts 4:29; Rom 1:1; Gal 1:10; Jas 1:1; 1 Pet 2:16. For Greco-Roman examples of those serving a god, see Euripides *Ion* 309; Dio Cassius *Roman History* 63.5.2. On the use of “slave” as a term of honor in Jewish and Christian writings, see Dale B. Martin, *Slavery as Salvation: The Metaphor of Slavery in Pauline Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990) 50-68; John Byron, *Slavery Metaphors in Early Judaism and Pauline Christianity: A Tradition-Historical and Exegetical Examination* (WUNT 2/162; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003).

⁶ The sealed suffer at the hands of the Beast, yet they are spared divine judgment (9:4) and have a place in God’s city. They are protected not *from* suffering but *in and through* suffering for life with God. The term “seal” (σφραγίς, σφραγίζω) was *not* commonly used for the branding or tattooing of slaves, which was degrading. Slaves were *not* routinely marked. This was done as a form of punishment. See C. P. Jones, “*Stigma*: Tattooing and Branding in Graeco-Roman Antiquity,” *JRS* 77 (1987) 139-55; Mark W. Gustafson, “*Inscripta in fronte*: Penal Tattooing in Late Antiquity,” *Classical Antiquity* 16 (1997) 79-105. Rather, sealing has positive connotations of belonging and protection (cf. Ezek 9:4).

has a voracious appetite for goods, and she exemplifies the conspicuous consumption of luxury items. Unlike the slaves who are purchased by God and have God's name sealed on their foreheads, those driven to buy (ἀγοράζω) and sell in the public market receive the mark of the Beast on their foreheads or right hands (13:16-18). This mark consists of the Beast's name or number, and it shows that they belong to him, which sets them against God and the Lamb (14:9-11; 19:20).⁷ The merchants allied with the Beast travel the world to satisfy Babylon's desires and bring their wares to the city in ships. After telling of the city's fiery demise, Revelation depicts merchants and sailors grieving the loss of this lucrative market. They lament the fact that "no one buys (ἀγοράζω) their cargo anymore" (18:11). Then readers are given a list of the kinds of things that had previously been bought in the city:

gold and silver and precious stones and pearls, and fine linen and purple and silk and scarlet, and all the articles of citrus wood and all kinds of articles of ivory and all kinds of articles of fine wood and bronze and iron and marble, and cinnamon and amomum and incense and fragrant ointment and frankincense, and wine and oil and fine flour and wheat, and cattle and sheep and horses and carriages, and *slaves and souls of human beings*. (18:12-13)

The list of trade goods functions on two levels: First, portraying the city as the hub of a network of seaborne commerce is reminiscent of the prophetic depiction of Tyre, whose seafaring merchants traded in many of the goods listed here. As ancient Tyre was condemned by the prophets (Ezek 27:12-36), so is the great city in Revelation. Second, the list also fits imperial Rome, which was at the center of the Mediterranean world's trade network when Revelation was composed. Items such as gold, silver, grain, and wine, which were traded by the merchants of Tyre, continued to be sought after in first-century Rome. Other items, such as pearls, silk, and citrus wood, do not appear in the OT lists but were characteristic of conspicuous consumption in Roman times.⁸ The vision gives John's readers a sense of the vastness of the commercial networks that brought gold and silver to Rome

⁷ The mark of the Beast cannot be neatly identified with any single first-century practice. Suggestions range from specific actions such as using coins bearing the emperor's mark or picture to more general social pressure to join a trade association. See Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984) 126-27; Kraybill, *Imperial Cult*, 138-40.

⁸ Some argue that Revelation's list of goods is primarily based on prophetic critiques of Tyre (Pierre Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John* [trans. Wendy Pradels; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001] 55, 507-9; Iain Provan, "Foul Spirits, Fornication and Finance: Revelation 18 from an Old Testament Perspective," *JSNT* 64 [1996] 81-100). Nevertheless, it seems clear that the list blends items from the OT with important trade items from the Roman world. On the particular items mentioned here, see Bauckham, *Climax of Prophecy*, 338-83; David E. Aune, *Revelation* (3 vols; WBC 52A-C; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997-98) 3. 998-1003; Callahan, "Apocalypse as Critique."

from Spain, costly citrus wood from Morocco, ivory from Africa, spices and incense from the Arabian peninsula, and silk from India. But the vision also includes items that passed through the markets of Asia Minor, such as fine textiles, scarlet cloth, certain breeds of sheep and horses, and especially slaves. The Romans could obtain slaves from many regions, but Asia Minor played a key role in the slave trade. This makes John's treatment of the trade especially significant for readers.

John makes the slave trade the culminating item in his list of cargos brought to Babylon/Rome. He also emphasizes it by using a double expression: The merchants lament the loss of trade in "slaves and the souls of human beings." The term for slaves is literally "bodies" (σώματα). This term could be used for any enslaved person (MM, 621), but it is especially suitable for a context in which slaves are regarded as a commodity. Those captured in war could be put on the slave market as "bodies" (2 Macc 8:11). Traders would travel by land and sea looking for "bodies" to buy, so that they could resell them at a profit in slave markets elsewhere.⁹ The sense is reflected in the way other sources use the expression "merchant of bodies" (σωματέμπορος) for a slave dealer, as in the stele of Aulus Caprilus Timothy and the inscription from Thyatira, both quoted below.¹⁰ When taken alone, the use of the term "bodies" to mean slaves could be regarded as simply conventional. Nevertheless, it does suggest the demeaning quality of the slave trade. Slaves were put on the market as "bodies" to be used by their owners.¹¹ Potential buyers could strip a slave, as they might take the blanket off a horse, so that the buyer could inspect the slave's body to make sure that there were no hidden defects (Seneca the Younger *Ep.* 80.9). Slave traders would use cosmetics to enhance the appearance and sometimes the sexual appeal of a slave's body.¹² In the market, slaves might be commanded to jump and dance to demonstrate physical agility, or to withstand inhaling fumes in order to show that they were not ill (Propertius *Elegies* 4.5.51-21; Apuleius *Apol.* 45).

Revelation counters this way of looking at slaves by adding that the merchants were selling not only "bodies" but "the souls of human beings" (ψυχὰν ἀνθρώπων [Rev 18:13]). This latter expression is based on a Hebrew idiom that refers to people, including those sold as slaves (Ezek 27:13). Including it alongside

⁹ For land trade, see *Vita Aesopi* 20. For a translation of this text, *The Life of Aesop*, see Lloyd W. Daly, *Aesop without Morals* (New York: Yoseloff, 1961) 39-40. For sea trade, see *Peripl. M. Rubr.* 8, 36. For a translation, see Lionel Casson, *The Periplus Maris Erythraei: Text with Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

¹⁰ On the σωματέμπορος, see also *Vita Aesopi* 12, 17; Artemidorus *Onir.* 3.17. For the verbal form, see Strabo *Geogr.* 14.5.2.

¹¹ Keith R. Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome* (Key Themes in Ancient History; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 52-54; Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 9-38.

¹² Pliny the Elder *Nat.* 21.97.170; 24.22.35; 32.47.135.

“bodies” is significant, since the second expression qualifies the first. Those trafficking in bodies are actually selling human lives. The slaves have souls or lives (ψυχᾶί), as do the persecuted believers mentioned elsewhere in the book (Rev 6:9; 12:11; 20:4). In the immediate context, John even uses ψυχή for the personified Babylon (18:14). This creates a pointed contrast. In two adjacent verses, Babylon’s “soul” is said to long for expensive merchandise, while the “souls” of others are being sold to her as commodities (18:13-14).

II. Ancient Ambivalence toward the Slave Trade

Slaves, like many of the other trade goods listed in Rev 18:12-13, could be status symbols for those who owned them. People in Rome advertised their wealth and elevated social position by wearing gold, purple clothing, and pearls, using citrus-wood tables at banquets, wearing expensive perfume, and traveling by horse and carriage. Similarly, it gave people a sense of prestige to own slaves—and especially the right kinds of slaves. Many would pay high prices for the premium slaves imported from Asia Minor, and particularly from the regions of Phrygia and Cappadocia.¹³ For a Roman to be attended by slaves when entertaining guests or to have one’s litter carried by them through the streets was a way of emphasizing one’s social status. Provincials also regarded owning slaves as a mark of success (Lucian *Nav.* 22). Nevertheless, people might covet the status reflected in *owning* slaves and yet view those who *traded* in slaves with suspicion or contempt.¹⁴ This more negative attitude toward slave dealers adds rhetorical force to John’s critique of Babylon/Rome.

The grave stele of a slave trader named Aulus Caprilius Timothy is a useful place to begin considering ancient attitudes toward those trafficking in human beings.¹⁵ The stele was found at Amphipolis, east of Thessalonica, and it probably dates from the early first century C.E. (fig. 1; p. 774). Its three panels depict a slave merchant who fits the profile of an ideal business partner for the harlot of Revelation 18. The harlot attracts clients with the promise of luxury (18:3, 14), and the top panel shows the slaver sharing in the good life at a banquet. The harlot’s insatiable thirst fosters a brisk trade in wine (18:13), and the central panel shows the production of wine for market. Finally, the harlot creates a vast demand for slaves

¹³ Martial *Epigr.* 3.62; 10.76; Juvenal *Sat.* 11.146-47; Persius *Sat.* 6.77. See William V. Harris, “Towards a Study of the Roman Slave Trade,” *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 36 (1980) 117-40, esp. 122-23.

¹⁴ Moses Finley, *Aspects of Antiquity: Discoveries and Controversies* (2nd ed.; Middlesex: Penguin, 1977) 153-54.

¹⁵ The photographs were originally published by Jacques Roger, “Inscriptions de la région du Strymon,” *RA* 24 (1945) 37-55, esp. 49-51. The word σωματέμπορος is a variant spelling of σωματέμπορος. On the date, see Hervé Duchêne, “Sur la stèle d’Aulus Caprilius Timotheos, Σοματέμπορος,” *Bulletin de correspondance hellénique* 110 (1986) 513-30, esp. 517-21.

(18:13), and the bottom panel shows a merchant supplying them. The upper panel of the stele projects the image of a successful businessman, and the lower panels show his wealth coming from wine and slaves. He would fit well among the merchants doing business with the harlot in John's vision. But would the readers want to identify with such a figure, or would they be repelled by him? After considering each panel in more detail, I will return to this question.

The top panel pictures the slave trader in a posture of repose, and the inscription beneath gives his identity:

Αὔλος Καπρείλιος, Αὔλο[υ] ἀπελεύθερος, Τιμόθεος, σωματέμπορος

Aulus Caprilius Timothy, freedman of Aulus, slave trader

The person was a former slave named Timothy, who, after obtaining his freedom, adopted the names of his former owner, Aulus Caprilius. He then embarked on a career in slave trading. In the upper panel he reclines luxuriously on a couch at a funeral banquet. He faces forward with his right arm extended, and he holds a cup in his left hand. In front of him is a three-legged table, set with what appear to be several round cakes and a cluster of grapes. On the left is a small figure, who seems to be a servant, and on the right is a majestic horse being led by a groom. In the upper right corner is a tree with a serpent, a creature that appeared in myths and was used as an emblem for heroes.¹⁶ Together, the motifs of banquet, servant, horse, and serpent suggest that Timothy is to be seen as an aristocratic or even heroic figure. Whether he ever enjoyed such status in life is unclear. The Latin satirist Petronius lampoons a former slave turned slave dealer for making enough money to host posh banquets, even though his boorish manners showed that he was no aristocrat (*Sat.* 29, 76). Nevertheless, putting a banquet scene on his tombstone allows the slave dealer to give himself social dignity, regardless of whether he actually obtained it in life.¹⁷

The central panel is a festive depiction of wine production.¹⁸ On the left and in the center are figures carrying what are probably the baskets used in the grape harvest, and at the right a man carries an amphora, which was used for transporting wine. These motifs are traditional, but placing them on this grave stele may have been particularly appropriate. Wine was one of the principal commodities used in the slave trade. Merchants would acquire jars of wine and other goods that could be transported to the regions supplying slaves. Traders would then exchange the wine for slaves and take their human cargo to market for resale. This was a

¹⁶ On the heroic qualities of the horse and serpent in banquet scenes, see Jean-Marie Dentzer, *Le motif du banquet couché dans le Proche-Orient et le monde grec du VIIe au IVe siècle avant J.-C.* (Bibliothèque des écoles françaises d'Athènes et de Rome 246; Rome: École française de Rome, 1982) 490-93, 495-501; Plutarch *Cleom.* 39.3; Artemidorus *Onir.* 4.79.

¹⁷ Duchêne, "Sur la stèle," 521-22, 529.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 522-28.



Figure 1 Grave stele of Aulus Caprius Timothy Photo by Jacques Roger Published in Pierre Ducrey *Le traitement des prisonniers de guerre dans la Grèce antique Des origines à conquête romaine* (Ecole française d'Athènes Travaux et memoires 17 Paris de Boccard 1968), pl 8 Used by permission of the author

common pattern in Asia Minor, Greece, and other parts of the Roman Empire (Diodorus Siculus *Library* 5.26.3; Strabo *Geogr.* 5.1.8; 11.2.3).

The bottom panel shows the conclusion of the trade cycle: a group of twelve captives being taken away for sale as slaves. In this stark image are eight men in short tunics, bound with chains around their necks. Behind them come two women and two children. They are being led by the figure in front, who may be the slave trader himself. The stele projects the impression that it is fine to seek wealth and status by trafficking in human beings. By way of contrast, most modern viewers will see a glaring contradiction between the image of complacent wealth in the upper panel and the brutality of the slave trade underneath it. John's earliest readers would not have shared all the sensibilities of their modern counterparts, yet many would probably have been reluctant to grant a slave dealer the noble status he claimed for himself.

In the Roman era, merchants were not highly respected. The stereotype was that greed sent them on risky commercial journeys, where they haggled over goods for the sole purpose of maximizing profits (Philostratus *Vit. Apoll.* 4.32).¹⁹ Moreover, slave dealers were especially despised, since it was assumed that the only reason a person would pursue the slave trade was for monetary gain. The Roman satirist Persius writes of them, "Go, sell your soul for gain; buy and sell; ransack cunningly every corner of the earth, let no one outstrip you in patting fat Capadocian slaves in their tight pen; turn every coin into two" (*Sat.* 6.75-78). From this perspective, the slave traders not only sold the souls of human beings (Rev 18:13) but sold their own souls as well.

The obsession with moneymaking was thought to make slave dealers dishonest.²⁰ Potential buyers were warned that they had to be wary because traders used tricks to conceal the defects of the slaves they marketed. They would clothe slaves in such a way as to cover up deformities (*Vita Aesopi* 21). In response, buyers would strip a slave in the marketplace in order to examine the slave's body firsthand (Seneca the Younger *Ep.* 80:9). Dealers might use cosmetics to make a sick slave look more robust and contrive to make a skinny slave look well-fed (Quintilian *Inst.* 2.15.25). Legally, slave traders were required to hang a sign around a slave's neck, stating the slave's nationality and any significant abilities or defects.²¹ Nevertheless, many found that the dealers stretched the truth or simply lied about the people they sold. They might say that a slave could read when

¹⁹ On attitudes toward merchants, see Aune, *Revelation*, 3. 989; Robert M. Royalty, *The Streets of Heaven: The Ideology of Wealth in the Apocalypse of John* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998) 102-11.

²⁰ See J. Albert Harrill, "The Vice of Slave Dealers in Greco-Roman Society: The Use of a Topos in 1 Timothy 1:10," *JBL* 118 (1999) 97-122; Keith R. Bradley, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire: A Study in Social Control* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984) 115-16.

²¹ Varro *Rust.* 2.10.5; Aulus Gellius *Noct. att.* 4.2.1; Seneca the Elder *Contr.* 7.6.22.

he could not, that a slave had been recently enslaved (which was thought to be an advantage) when she had actually been a slave for a long time, or make wrongful statements about a slave's nationality and place of origin (Pliny the Elder *Nat.* 7.12.56).

Slave traders were tainted by the recognition that some obtained their merchandise by dubious or unlawful means. Many persons sold as slaves were once abandoned children, some of whom were freeborn (Pliny the Younger *Ep.* 10.66). There were also those who abducted other people's slaves or even free people and sold them on the market (Chariton *Chaer.* 2.1.7-8). Therefore, slave traders were sometimes dubbed "kidnappers" (ἀνδραποδισταί [1 Tim 1:10]),²² Abduction was illegal, but someone who obtained slaves unlawfully could sell them to a legal slave merchant for resale (Philo *Spec.* 4.14-18). Dealers were also tainted because some marketed slaves to buyers who had a sexual interest. They used various techniques to maintain the sexual attractiveness of the women and boys they sold, such as using makeup and removing unwanted hair from boys to make them appear more effeminate (Pliny the Elder *Nat.* 21.97.170; 32.47.135). For many, slave traders were akin to thieves and pimps, not only because all these figures were despised but because the slave trade was related to prostitution.²³

The slave merchant Aulus Caprius Timothy projected an image of wealth and nobility, but this ran counter to the dominant perspectives, which regarded professional slave dealing with distaste. These negative associations sharpen Revelation's critique of the commercial network of Babylon/Rome. People found the prospect of wealth alluring, but by making the sale of human beings the climactic element in his list of trade goods, John underscores the seamy side of Roman-era commerce. In terms of the stele pictured above, many might be drawn to the ease reflected in the top panel, but John points to the image of slave traffic that lies beneath it. He does not allow readers to contemplate the status associated with wealth—which typically included slaves—without considering the unsavory commercial network that supplied public demand. What gives John's reference to the slave trade special force is the recognition that the readers addressed by Revelation lived in cities where the slave trade—with all of its negative characteristics—was an integral part of the economy.

III. Roman Slave Trade and the Cities of Revelation

Early readers of Revelation would have understood Rome to be the greatest marketplace in their world and the largest purchaser of slaves. In practice, the "reg-

²² Harrill, "Vice," 102-3.

²³ Seneca the Elder *Contr.* 1.2.9; Plautus *Pseud.* 360; Philostratus *Vit. Apoll.* 4.22. See Harrill, "Vice," 108-12.

ular, daily traffic in slaves” took place in the central market in the Roman forum, where newly imported slaves would stand with their feet whitened with chalk, surrounded by the din of the auctioneers.²⁴ The slaves sold in Rome came from many parts of the world (Tacitus *Ann.* 3.53), but Asia Minor was one of the principal suppliers.²⁵ John’s critical comment about trafficking in human lives (Rev 18:13) pertains to practices that were current in the readers’ own contexts.

Inscriptions mentioning the slave trade come from three of the Asian cities addressed by Revelation: Ephesus, Thyatira, and Sardis. These inscriptions warrant careful study, since they are primary texts that provide a window into the social world of John’s readers. The inscriptions allow us to move from the general patterns associated with the slave trade to more specific consideration of the slavers’ roles in the cities mentioned in Revelation. All of the inscriptions use the Latin word *statarium* or its Greek equivalent στατάριον for the slave markets. Both forms of the word are unusual, but the meaning is clear in the inscription from Thyatira that is quoted below. It seems to have designated the specific area in the marketplace where slaves were traded. For example, it was used on a stone identifying the boundary of the slave market in the town of Magnesia, east of Ephesus.²⁶ It is not clear whether the word originated in Greek or Latin, and it may have come into usage precisely in the bilingual contexts of trade in the Greco-Roman world.²⁷

Roman and Italian business people had a long association with the slave trade in Asia. The region of Phrygia was an important source of slaves, and the slave market in the town of Acmonia, which was situated on the road that ran westward from Phrygia to Sardis, was constructed by a Roman citizen in the first century B.C.E. The person named in the inscription is Gaius Sornatius of the *tribus* Velina, who “built the slave market and the altar out of his own means.”²⁸ We will find that inscriptions from the first and second centuries C.E. continue to show a connection between Rome and the slave trade in Asia.

²⁴ On “regular, daily traffic,” see Justinian *Digest* 41.3.44 pr. On slave trading in the Roman forum, see Seneca the Younger *Const.* 13.4. On marking slaves’ feet with chalk, see Pliny the Elder *Nat.* 35.199-201; Juvenal *Sat.* 1.111. On the noise, see Martial *Epigr.* 9.29.5-6.

²⁵ See Harris, “Towards a Study,” 126-28; Bradley, *Slavery and Society*, 31-56; J. P. V. D. Balsdon, *Romans and Aliens* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979) 78-79.

²⁶ I. Magn 240 in Otto Kern, ed., *Die Inschriften von Magnesia am Maeander* (Berlin: Spemann, 1900) 147. For suggestions on the role that Sornatius and other Romans played in developing the slave trade in this region, see A. B. Bosworth, “Vespasian and the Slave Trade,” *Classical Quarterly* 52 (2002) 350-57.

²⁷ Paolo Poccetti, “Gr. στατάριον / Lat. statarium ‘Sklavenmarkt’: Lehnwort oder Bedeutungsentlehnung?” *Glotta* 63 (1985) 172-80.

²⁸ W. H. Buckler and W. M. Calder, *Monuments and Documents from Phrygia and Caria* (Monumenta Asiae Minoris Antiqua 6; Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1939) §260: . . . και τῷ δ[ήμῳ] Γάϊος Σωρνά[τιος Ταίου ?] υἱὸς Οὐελίνα Β[.] στατάριον και τὸν βωμὸν ἐκ τῶν ἰδίων κατεσκεύασεν. See Harris, “Towards a Study,” 127.

A. Ephesus

Ephesus was a major port city on the Aegean, which played a role in the international trade in slaves. Varro used the city as an example when explaining how Latin speakers named their slaves. He posited a situation in which three speakers of Latin had purchased a slave apiece at Ephesus. He said that one might derive the slave's name from the name of the trader, another would call the slave "Ion," since he was purchased in the district of Ionia, and the third would call him Ephesius since he was bought at Ephesus (*Lingua Latina* 8.21). The *Life of Aesop*, although comic in form, also reflects the pattern of slave trade in the region. This work tells of a traveling slave trader purchasing slaves from different regions—Phrygia, Cappadocia, and Lydia—for resale at Ephesus. Those who did not bring a suitable price there were taken to the market on the nearby island of Samos.²⁹

Inscriptional evidence from Ephesus includes two Latin texts that mention the slave market. The first dates from ca. 42–43 C.E. Much of the text can be restored, although the last two lines remain illegible (I.Eph 3025):³⁰

[C. Sallustio Crispo Passieno] Equi[. . .], q(uaestori) Ti. Ca[esaris Augusti, VII], viro [epulo]nu[m, sodali] Au[gu]s[t]ali, soda[li] Titio, [qui i]n statario ne[g]otiantur pat[rono]. . .

To C. Sallustius Crispus Passienus Equi[. . .], quaestor of Ti(berius) Ca[esar Augustus, VII], member of the priestly college of the *epulones*, member of the Augustali, member of the Titii. From those who do business in the slave market to a patron . . .

The honoree was the Roman proconsul in Asia Minor in 42–43 C.E. Originally named Passienus, he was once a Roman orator. He assumed the names of his adoptive father, C. Sallustius Crispus, who was an imperial minister under Caligula. As the adopted son, Passienus inherited considerable wealth and prestige. He married Nero's aunt Domitia and later Nero's mother, Julia Agrippina. The inscription notes that he held the office of quaestor under Tiberius and was a member of the priestly college of the *septemviri epulones*, which was responsible for organizing a great feast to Jupiter. He also belonged to the Augustali, a group of benefactors who funded public celebrations and building projects. The year after he served as proconsul in Asia, Passienus held his second consulship in Rome.

The honor was given by "those who do business in the slave market." The expression *qui negotiantur* was often used for those who those who resided in a certain area for purposes of business. In the second and first centuries B.C.E., Italian and Roman business people established bases of operation in various cities in the eastern part of the Mediterranean world. Although they were integrated into the

²⁹ *Vita Aesopi* 20; cf. 24. The narrative can be read in Daly, *Aesop without Morals*, 36–42.

³⁰ The Latin text is from Recep Meriç, Reinhold Merkelbach, Johannes Nollé, and Sencer Şahin, *Die Inschriften von Ephesos VII,1* (Bonn: Habelt, 1981) 22–23. The translation is my own.

commercial networks in the regions where they settled, these people retained their distinctive identity in the first and second centuries C.E. For example, another Latin inscription from Ephesus, also dating from the mid-first century C.E., honors the emperor Claudius (41–54 C.E.) and mentions “the conventus of Roman citizens who do business in Asia.”³¹ In the inscription quoted above, the Italian or Roman business people are specifically identified with the slave market in this port city. They were well-positioned to supply slaves for sale to local buyers and to the vast markets of Rome itself.³²

The inscription is in Latin even though the principal language of Ephesus was Greek. Italian business people working in the East were typically bilingual and would have used Greek for many of their commercial dealings. Moreover, it was perfectly acceptable to honor a Roman official with a Greek inscription, since that would make the inscription more widely understood by the general public. Therefore, using Latin in an inscription in a predominantly Greek-speaking city seems to have reinforced a sense of group identity among the Italian slave traders. Their knowledge of Latin made them distinct.³³

Using Latin to honor Roman officials also emphasized their special connection with the honorees. The proconsul was a Roman and the slave dealers spoke the language of Rome, namely, Latin. As they gave the proconsul honor with this inscription, they advertised their special bond with him. This was a way of enhancing their own status in the community. By setting up a monument, the association publicized its link to someone in power and asserted its place within the wider society. Many people in Ephesus would not have understood the Latin, but using it in this way on the monument asserted the slave dealers’ own sense of importance.³⁴

The slave traders identify the proconsul as a “patron.” This is probably a way of commending him for various forms of support for the city of Ephesus.³⁵ Such benefactions often included the construction of buildings and other public works and funding activities beneficial to the community. The slave dealers’ reasons for honoring him are not clear. The extant lines of the inscription do not identify specific actions taken on their behalf. Nevertheless, it is clear that during his term in

³¹ I.Eph 3019: “conventus c(ivium) R(omanorum) qui in Asia negotiantur.” Cf. I.Eph 409, 658, 884, 2058.

³² A. Cameron, “Latin Words in the Greek Inscriptions of Asia Minor,” *AJP* 52 (1931) 232–62, esp. 259; Thomas Wiedemann, *Greek and Roman Slavery* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981) 107; Harris, “Towards a Study,” 127.

³³ J. N. Adams, *Bilingualism and the Latin Language* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 642–86.

³⁴ Philip A. Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations: Claiming a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) 159–60.

³⁵ This is suggested in Merç et al., *Die Inschriften von Ephesos VII,1*, 23. See also the use of “patron” in I.Eph 659a; 3006.

office, the proconsul was perceived as someone favorable to the slave dealers' interests.³⁶ By publicly honoring the person who is completing his term in office, the slave dealers lay the groundwork needed to maintain good relations with his successor. By showing that favorable treatment brings public honor, they encourage the next Roman officeholder to continue dispensing favors to the city—and to supportive groups like the slave dealers' association.

A second inscription is similar (I.Eph 646). It dates from the early second century during the reign of Trajan.³⁷

[Ti. C]laudio Secundo viatori tribunicio et accenso velato et lictori curiato, faviori civitatis Ephesiorum. qui in statario negotiantur

To Ti. Claudius Secundus, Viator Tribunicius, Accensus Velatus, Lictor Curiatus, for his favors to the citizens of Ephesus. From those who do business in the slave market.

The honoree is Ti. Claudius Secundus, a Roman who has held several offices.³⁸ As *viator tribunicius*, he would have attended the Roman magistrate in the province. One of his main functions would have been to summon people into the magistrate's presence. As *accensus velatus*, he would also have attended the magistrate. This was not a permanent position but one that the person held as long as a particular magistrate was in office. As *lictor curiatus*, he would have assisted with sacrifices in the Roman religious tradition. Since several inscriptions honor him for his benefactions to Ephesus, he was probably a person of wealth.

This honorific inscription is given by those who do business in the slave market, as in the first inscription noted above. Here it is clear that the reason for giving the honors is the man's benefactions to the citizens of Ephesus, which included building projects that adorned the city (I.Eph 1545). The continued use of Latin shows that in the late first and early second centuries the slave traders maintained a distinctive sense of identity and connection to Rome. Other groups in the city used Greek (I.Eph 1545) or both Greek and Latin when honoring Ti. Claudius Secundus for his benefactions (I.Eph 1544). Using only Latin stresses the close

³⁶ On Passienus and the slave traders, see Harris, "Towards a Study," 130. On reasons that an association might honor a patron, see Harland, *Associations*, 152-55.

³⁷ The Latin text of I.Eph 646 is from Helmut Engelmann, Dieter Knibbe, and Reinhold Merkelbach, *Die Inschriften von Ephesos III* (Bonn: Habelt, 1980) 41-42. The translation is my own.

³⁸ On this figure, see Jörg Rüpke, Bernd Nüsslein, and Helmut Pannke, *Fasti sacerdotum: Die Mitglieder der Priesterschaften und das sakrale Funktionspersonal römischer, griechischer, orientalischer und jüdisch-christlicher Kulte in der Stadt Rom von 300 v. Chr. bis 499 n. Chr.* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 2005) 892; Çengüz İçten and Helmut Engelmann, "Inschriften aus Ephesos und Kolophon," *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 120 (1998) 83-91, esp. 83-84. On the office of *accensus velatus*, see Jean Andreau, *Banking and Business in the Roman World* (Key Themes in Ancient History; Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999) 48.

bond between the slave traders and the Roman official, and it is a tacit reminder about the important link between the slave trade and Roman rule itself. When Revelation identifies the slave trade as a prominent feature of trade with Babylon/Rome, it critiques what was common practice in a city like Ephesus.

The inscriptional evidence shows that, despite their distinctiveness, the slave traders claimed a place in Ephesian society. Their actions parallel those of other groups in the city. For example, Ti. Claudius Secundus was also honored by an inscription given by the *gerousia*, an association of elders in Ephesus, who may have been associated with a gymnasium (I.Eph 1544.7).³⁹ The fact that the slave traders gave a similar honor to the same Roman official shows that they sought a role that was akin to other associations in the city. By using inscriptions, the slave dealers and other associations attempted to define a set of relationships in stone. The inscriptions are both public and enduring. They make an open statement of the slavers' good relationships with Roman benefactors and put these in marble so that they endure for generations. They present a view of civic life in which slave traders have an integral and proper place.⁴⁰ In Revelation's vision of Babylon, however, this is part of the problem. Many recognized that selling "the souls of human beings" was disreputable, but in John's vision and in Ephesian society, it is a routine part of commercial life under the ruling power—and yet what seems to be routine is subject to the negative judgment of God.

B. Thyatira

This inscription from Thyatira is somewhat later than the texts from Ephesus. It comes from the second or perhaps third century C.E. (TAM 5/2.932).⁴¹

Οἱ τοῦ σταταρίου ἐργασταὶ καὶ προξενηταὶ σωμάτων ἐτείμησαν καὶ ἀνέθηκαν Ἀλέξανδρον Ἀλεξάνδρου σωματέμπορον ἀγορανομήσαντα τετράμηνον ἀγνώως καὶ ἐπιδόντα ἐκ τῶν ἰδίων τῇ πόλει πολυτελῶς ἐν ταῖς ἑορτασίμοις τῶν Σεβαστῶν ἡμέραις.

The workers in the slave market and those who broker in slaves honored and set up (a dedication) for Alexander son of Alexander, a slave dealer, who oversaw the market with integrity for four months and gave generously from his own means to the city in the festival days of the Augustan celebration.

The man honored in this inscription was a slave dealer, or literally a "merchant of bodies" (σωματέμπορος). His name, Alexander son of Alexander, indicates that

³⁹ On the *gerousia*, see David Magie, *Roman Rule in Asia Minor, to the End of the Third Century after Christ* (2 vols.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950) 2. 855-60.

⁴⁰ Greg Woolf, "Monumental Writing and the Expansion of Roman Society in the Early Empire," *JRS* 86 (1996) 22-39; Harland, *Associations*, 158-60.

⁴¹ TAM is the abbreviation for Joseph Keil and Peter Herrmann, eds., *Tituli Lydiae* (Tituli Asiae Minoris 5/2; Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1989). The Greek text is on p. 342. The translation is my own.

he was of Greek origin. For a period of four months he served as the overseer of the public market. This position was assumed by various people who had financial means, and terms of four to six months were typical.⁴² Those holding the post were to ensure that things in the market went smoothly. If the food supply ran short, leading to high costs, the market overseer might be expected to fix prices or to subsidize products like grain and oil, so that they remained affordable (TAM 5/2.942). This inscription does not suggest that Alexander had to perform such extraordinary service during his term as market overseer. He is simply commended for having done his job well.

People serving as market overseers often incurred expenses that they had to meet out of their own resources, and in return the community gave them honor for their service. For a slave dealer to serve in this way put him in the company of other benefactors who were highly regarded. Other market overseers in Thyatira included those with outstanding records of public service. Most had held multiple public offices, such as *στρατηγός*, scribe of the council of the people, recorder, overseer of youth, head of a gymnasium, distributor, grain commissioner, member of the finance committee, city administrator, asiarch, priestly offices, and curator of the *conventus* of the Romans.⁴³ For the slave dealer to occupy the position of market overseer placed him among many who were held in high civic esteem. No other public positions are ascribed to the slave dealer, yet even this single term as market overseer shows that a man like Alexander claimed an honorable place in Thyatiran society.

The specific benefaction mentioned is that he helped underwrite the costs of a local festival in honor of the emperor. The slave dealer presumably supplied the funds needed for the sacrifices, banquets, and contests that were held during the festival. Supporting a festival of any sort helped to foster good relations with others in the city, who would enjoy the celebration. Funding events in honor of the emperor also helped to show loyalty to Rome.

Some market overseers received inscriptions that included honors by the council and the people, while other inscriptions focus on the honor given by a trade association, which is the case here.⁴⁴ Alexander the slave trader is honored by his own co-workers. These include “the workers in the slave market,” who perhaps are people like the auctioneer, those who documented the transactions, and any others involved in the ordinary running of the market.⁴⁵ Next, those who “broker in

⁴² On the position of market overseer, see Magie, *Roman Rule*, 2. 1511-12.

⁴³ For others holding the position of market overseer at Thyatira, see TAM 5/2.930, 942, 963, 966, 970, 982, 989, 991, 1002.

⁴⁴ For example, honors were given to market overseers in Thyatira by associations of dyers (TAM 5/2.991) and shoemakers (TAM 5/2.1002). For honors given to market overseers by the council or the people, see TAM 5/2.930, 970, 982.

⁴⁵ On the auctioneer, see *Vita Aesopi* 21-22. For an example of the documentation needed

slaves” are the middlemen, who connect slave sellers with potential buyers. Finally, a slave dealer such as Alexander was someone who bought and sold slaves at a profit. This often involved traveling from place to place in order to obtain slaves, then bringing the slaves to the market for an auction, working through the brokers, or otherwise finding buyers for this human merchandise.⁴⁶ The number of people involved indicates that Thyatira was at least a regional market for slaves, and it seems likely that some of the slaves who passed through the hands of these traders ended up being sold or resold on the wider networks of Roman commerce.

I noted that the inscriptions from Ephesus cultivated goodwill between the slave dealers and influential Romans. The situation was somewhat different at Thyatira, since the person being honored was himself a slave dealer. Being honored by one’s coworkers gave the benefactor his due and would have encouraged others to assume similar responsibilities. Yet listing the various groups involved in the slave trade in the inscription also helped to enhance the public status of those groups. The inscription showed that one of their own had assumed a position of honor. By publicly identifying with him, his coworkers claim a share of that honor in status and public life.⁴⁷ For the author of Revelation, however, honoring a slave dealer for fostering commerce and supporting the imperial cult would simply be another indication of the debased quality of life under imperial rule.

C. Sardis

The following inscription from Sardis can be dated to the Flavian period (69–96 C.E.), which is approximately the time that Revelation was composed:⁴⁸

Ὁ δῆμος ὁ [Σαρδια]νῶν ἐτέμ[ησεν] κατὰ ψήφισμα γινόμενον ἐν ἐκ[κλησία] πανδήμῳ
 Τ[.....] Ἰούλιον Λέπι[δον . . .]γενιανὸν τὸ[ν τῆς] τε Ἀσίας καὶ [πόλεως] φιλοκαίσαρα
 [ἀρχιερέα] πρῶτον τῆς [πόλεως] διὰ φιλοδοξ[ίαν καὶ] τὴν ἀσύνκρ[ιτον εἰς] τὴν
 πατρίδα εἰ[ς] ἴδιαν ἀνα[στήσαντων] [ἐκ τῶν ἰδί]ων τὴν τιμῆ[ν τῶν ἐν τῷ] σταταρίῳ
 πρα[γματευο]μένων.

The Sardinian people, by a decision taken in a general assembly, honored T. Julius Lepi[dus —]genianus, devoted to Caesar as [high priest] of Asia and the city, foremost person of the [city], for love of honor and incomparable goodwill toward the homeland [. . .], the dedication being set up, out of their own means, by those who do business in the slave market.

when selling a slave, see *P. Turner* 22, which records the sale of a slave at Side in southern Asia Minor. An English translation is available in Bradley, *Slavery and Society*, 2.

⁴⁶ On the traveling slave dealer, see *Vita Aesopi* 12–24. The travels involved in slave trading are also noted in inscriptions. See Bosworth, “Vespasian,” 351.

⁴⁷ Harland, *Associations*, 147, 158–60.

⁴⁸ On this inscription, see Peter Herrmann, “Neues vom Sklavenmarkt in Sardeis,” *Arkeoloji Dergisi* 4 (1996) 175–87. The Greek text appears on p. 177. The translation is my own. On the date, see *ibid.*, 178–79. See also SEG (Supplementum epigraphicum graecum) 46 (1996) §§1523, 1524.

The man honored by this inscription was Julius Lepidus. His first name, which begins with “T,” might have been Titus or Tiberius. His cognomen is unclear.⁴⁹ The reference to the homeland or *πάτρις* indicates that he was a native of Sardis, where he was considered to be the “foremost” or leading citizen of the town. Here he is honored for various benefactions given to the city. The honor is given on behalf of the people of Sardis by formal action taken in an assembly.⁵⁰

Socially, T. Julius Lepidus is closely associated with Rome. He is identified as someone devoted to Caesar, as is evident from his role as high priest in the imperial cult on both the local and provincial levels. The term “high priest” is restored to the text above on the basis of another inscription from Sardis, which makes clear that this man served as high priest in the provincial imperial cult and was in office during the celebration of the provincial games in honor of the emperor.⁵¹ The honoree also seems to have had family connections in a broader network of local aristocrats, who had long-standing ties to Rome. Members of the Lepidus family are mentioned in inscriptions at Thyatira. Among these, M. Antonius Attalus Lepidus was “high priest for life” in the local imperial cult, while his son M. Antonius Lepidus and his grandson C. Julius Lepidus rose to the rank of “high priest of Asia,” holding office in the imperial cult at the provincial level.⁵²

The decision to grant the honor was made by the people of Sardis, but funding for the monument was provided by “those who do business in the slave market.” The Greek expression used for these business people is parallel to that used in Latin inscriptions from Ephesus. Significantly, both the Greek and Latin forms are used in an inscription given by the Italians, who did business in Sardis during the first century B.C.E.⁵³ The editor of our principal text, Peter Herrmann, notes that the continued use of this expression in earlier and later inscriptions suggests that the slave traders’ association retained its connections with the Italian business community in the late first century C.E.⁵⁴ For people in these regions, the flourishing slave trade was clearly linked to Roman networks of trade, and John’s vision

⁴⁹ Suggestions for restoring the cognomen are *Διο-*, *Θεο-*, *Ισι-*, and *Νεογενιανόν*. See Herrmann, “Neues vom Sklavenmarkt,” 178 n. 15.

⁵⁰ The nature of a “general assembly” is not clear. Some have suggested that it was a meeting in which at least a quorum of members was present. See Herrmann, “Neues vom Sklavenmarkt,” 177-78 n. 12.

⁵¹ I.Sardis 46 in W. H. Buckler and David M. Robinson, *Sardis*, vol. 7/1 (Leiden: Brill, 1932) 62; Herrmann, “Neues vom Sklavenmarkt,” 179-80.

⁵² On these figures, see TAM 5/2.934; 968; I.Sardis 8.99 in Buckler and Robinson, *Sardis*, 19; Herrmann, “Neues vom Sklavenmarkt,” 180.

⁵³ The text of the inscription reads: Italic[ei quei Sardibus] nego[tiantur] L. Mun[atio C. f. Planco] Ἰταλικοί [οἱ ἐν Σάρδεσιν] πραγμα[τευόμενοι] Λευκίω[ι Μονατίω Πλάγκω]. For the text, see SEG 46 (1996) §1521. The Latin and Greek portions are parallel. My translation is: “The Italians who do business in Sardis (honor) Lucius Munatius Plancus.”

⁵⁴ Herrmann, “Neues vom Sklavenmarkt,” 184-86.

of Babylon lifts up this connection between slavery and Rome for critical scrutiny. John could expect readers to grant that the slave trade was a typical feature of commerce with Babylon/Rome. The question is whether they will simply accept the legitimacy of such commercial relationships or whether they will come to see them as a form of “prostitution” that degrades those who are involved.

Inscriptions show that the slave dealers claimed a place in society alongside other associations. They may have honored T. Julius Lepidus, but so did the ἔφηβοι, the local official gymnastic group of young men.⁵⁵ The slave traders’ inscription mentions the support of the people and the general assembly of Sardis, and the gymnastic association’s inscription mentions the city council. By linking themselves to the wider community in their inscriptions, both groups help to project and define their own importance within that community. In the late first century, the slave traders wanted to be seen as significant members of society in Sardis, and John’s vision of Babylon agrees that such merchants do play a dominant role. But for John this illustrates the problem (Rev 18:23). This social pattern does not belong to the kingdom of God but serves powers opposed to God. Therefore, readers are not to accept the ruling power’s approach to commerce but to resist it, since it comes under God’s judgment.

IV. Conclusion

The slave trade was a hallmark of Roman commerce in Asia Minor, and it was an integral part of the local economies in the cities where John’s readers lived. Inscriptions show that the network supplying the human cargo to meet the empire’s demand extended into the marketplaces of Ephesus, Thyatira, and Sardis. In the social world of the readers, many people aspired to the status of owning slaves, but the vision of Babylon challenges this practice by evoking the negative stereotypes associated with dealing in slaves, since those who made profits by selling human beings were generally not deemed worthy of respect. The inscriptions also show that slave dealers claimed a public place in society, but from the perspective of the vision, this simply brings the seamy underside of commerce with Rome into plain view.

Revelation’s exhortation to the readers, who are confronted with the debased quality of life in Babylon’s empire, is “Come out of her, my people” (18:4). The book calls for disengagement from commercial practices that are inconsistent with the faith, and the slave trade is one of these. John does not take up slavery as a topic

⁵⁵ The inscription is I.Sardis 46 in Bucker and Robinson, *Sardis*, 62, but note the revisions in SEG 46 (1996) §1523. On the associations at Sardis, see Philip Harland, “Spheres of Contention, Claims of Pre-eminence: Rivalries among Associations in Sardis and Smyrna,” in *Religious Rivalries and the Struggle for Success in Sardis and Smyrna* (ed. Richard S. Ascough; Studies in Early Christianity and Judaism 15; Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005) 53-63.

in its own right, but the way he tells of merchants selling human “souls”—and not just human “bodies”—along with gold, grain, cattle, and horses underscores the problems inherent in a society that turns everything into commodities that can be sold to meet the insatiable demand of the ruling power.

John’s visions work by shaping the basic commitments of the readers. His visionary rhetoric presses them to see things in a certain way and engages them in reflection about the implications of what they see. John warns that the commercial practices associated with Babylon/Rome fall under divine judgment, and if this is the case, then readers must ask what implications this might have for the way they live in the present.⁵⁶ The readers reside in cities that thrive on the kind of commerce that the vision condemns. Ivory and frankincense may have been transported to Rome from other parts of the world, but the readers’ own cities were enmeshed in the slave trade that marks the climax of John’s list of trade goods. Selling human bodies and souls was not a remote form of commerce but a familiar practice in the places where the readers lived (18:13).

Revelation challenges readers to work out the implications of its message in both negative and positive ways. In a negative sense, people are called away from the allure of Babylon, the power that reduces human beings to one commodity among others. In a positive sense, people are called to faithfulness toward the God of the new Jerusalem, where those who are called God’s “slaves” are given life and honor. God’s method of purchase is redemptive, through the blood of the Lamb, and God’s action does not degrade people but gives them the dignity of belonging, serving, and worshipping among the faithful. Although the new Jerusalem remains future, John understands that God already claims people for life, and this presses readers to ask what it means for them to live out the implications of this redemptive action of God and the Lamb in the contexts where they live.

⁵⁶ In the nineteenth century, those seeking to abolish slavery in the United States pointed out that the slave trade was among the practices that brought Babylon under divine judgment, according to Revelation. See the abolitionist texts cited by Callahan, “Apocalypse,” 60 n. 44. On the use of “Come out of her, my people” (Rev 18:4) in abolitionist circles, see Henry Mayer, *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1998) 300-304, 368-69.