APOCALYPSE AS CRITIQUE OF POLITICAL ECONOMY:
SOME NOTES ON REVELATION 18

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Introduction

Chapter 18 of the Apocalypse, the climax of terrestrial judgment in John's visionary drama, is a critique in apocalyptic idiom of the political economy of imperial Rome. The seer has tied the political order he described in apocalyptic images in chap. 17 to the network of maritime luxury trade that supported Roman domination of the Mediterranean basin. The text of Revelation 18 is an indictment, an indictment of wealth and those who worship it. The indictment of the text is a complex critique of relations, relations that include the audience, which the text addresses directly in vv. 5 and 6. Thus it is a warning, by dint of its discursive embrace, to us: as contemporary readers we are constrained to hear the unnerving call of an apocalyptic summons.¹ John's critique of political economy has received scant attention in the history of interpretation. "This condemnation of Rome's economic exploitation of her empire," observes Richard Bauckham, "is the most unusual aspect of the opposition to Rome in Revelation, by comparison with other Jewish and Christian apocalyptic attacks on Rome, and it has received the least

¹Walter Wink has suggested the contemporary relevance of Revelation 18 for North Americans in the United States. The global dominance of the United States is historically analogous to Roman domination of the Mediterranean basin. Thus divine justice may require the violent end of American hegemony. "Are we then to entertain the terrible possibility that the salvation of humanity depends somehow on the decline, destruction or transformation of the United States as a sign of God's sovereignty over the nations? Rome, yes, but — America? Never! The very suggestion of such a thing will strike many Americans as subversive. And that reaction itself is an index to our idolatry. A godly people would react to the threat of God's judgment with fear, awe, consternation. They would know that no person and no nation is righteous before God. They would say, with Jefferson, 'I tremble for my country when I remember that God is just.' But Americans do not, on the whole, think that way." (Unmasking the Powers [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984] 102).
attention in the modern study of the book." Only the consistent neglect of the economic exploitation condemned in the text is more remarkable than the condemnation itself. Modern interpreters in the main have been tone deaf to the notes of political economy sounded so loudly in Revelation 18. In a brief space I will amplify some exegetical observations on this apocalyptic critique of political economy so seldom sounded in modern commentary.

Critique of Political Economy

Revelation 18 treats of historical realities of power and the problem of justice in the arcane language of ancient Israel. The figure of Babylon is summoned to signify Rome as the center of a tributary world empire. A tributary or redistributive world empire, as political economist Immanuel Wallerstein has described it, consists of "one economy (as single division

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3Some exegetes cite pointers to the political economy of the text but then dismiss them. They come very close to the critique only to avoid it at the last moment of analysis. A few outstanding examples must suffice. Jürgen Roloff rejects the economic critique in Revelation 18 on the basis of source criticism. After calling attention to the lament of the merchant marine in Rev 18:17-19, Roloff attributes the concern with maritime trade to the oracle that John has taken over from Ezekiel. "Now Rome was doubtless neither a port city nor a center of maritime navigation. But here John hardly wanted to reproduce exact real conditions: rather, all he wants to do is round out the dirge with a third group, and to that end he availed himself of the material that Ezek 27:29-33 provided" (Die Offenbarung des Johannes [ZBNT 18; Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1984] 177). Pierre Prigent provides the condemnation of luxury in Rev 18:3 with a theological gloss. "One may note that we have here (and especially in the subsequent verses 11-13) the only allusion in the entire NT to the significant commercial activity conducted in the empire. Properly speaking, only the capital is treated. But our author certainly wanted to stigmatize all economic activity permitted by the Roman order and conducted, according to him, solely for the accumulation of ostentatious luxury, a manifest sign of arrogant idolatry. In fact, the word we have translated here as 'luxury' seems precisely to signify arrogance, insolent luxury. This is not a judgment of social ethics (the luxury that demeans the poor); the arrogance is that of man who takes pride in his power and forgets his estate as a creature of God Almighty, sole master of people and things" (L'Apocalisse di Giuseppe il Divine [CNT 14; Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1988] 267-68). Recognizing John's critique in Revelation 18 requires that we entertain the possibility, indeed the likelihood, that the seer possessed "real conditions" of the political economy in which he lived, and that he returned "a judgment of social ethics" against it.