

## Article

# The Cup of God's Wrath: Libation and Early Christian Meal Practice in Revelation

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**Abstract:** This article examines how the use of libation imagery, such as bowls (*phiai*) and wine, in the Book of Revelation to showcase the ways in which early Christians negotiated the language of sacrifice into their own praxis. As opposed to embracing libation imagery, as occurs in other New Testament texts (e.g., Luke's cup in 22:20; Philippians 2:17), Revelation uses such imagery to point to wrong religious practice. Libation practice is used as a metaphor for God's wrath (e.g., "wine poured . . . unmixed into the cup of [God's] anger" in Revelation 14:10); the libations that are poured out in the vision of the Bowls of Wrath, in chapter 16, pour out plagues. The implications of this judgmental imagery for early Christian hearers of this text in Asia Minor, and for their own meal practices, are significant. I argue that the edicts against the Thyatirans and the Pergamians in the letters of Revelation refer to their use of wine in Eucharistic practice—a practice which John condemns.

**Keywords:** Revelation; libation; wine; ritual; Apocalypse; Eucharist; Asia Minor

## 1. Introduction

Revelation uses wine and libation imagery to condemn its enemies in a way that is surprising given the dominance of wine in early Christian meal ritual. This paper examines how the Book of Revelation repurposes libation imagery as a means to critique what its author perceives as wrong ritual practice. Throughout the Book of Revelation<sup>1</sup>, the complex negotiations of identities taking place around the ancient Mediterranean are apparent. The letters and the visions, alike, reveal anxieties about what kinds of activities and rituals are appropriate for those whose allegiance is to John's God. At its core, the book is the product of a community<sup>2</sup> struggling to find its place among the overlapping Jewish and Greco-Roman social, religious, and political realms. In particular, the impact of imperial worship in the context of Asia Minor makes the libation imagery a focal point for what is at stake in participating or withdrawing from the broader ritual life of Roman Asia Minor. For Jews living in Asia Minor, isolated from the Jewish temple in Jerusalem, the dominant example of ritual wine pouring would have been in honour of "pagan" deities and the emperor. Regardless if Revelation was composed during the reign of Domitian,<sup>3</sup> who was honoured with veneration as

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the ongoing debate about the dating of Revelation, see (Koester 2014, pp. 71–79). See (Collins 1998, p. 5) for a definition of apocalypse, and (Collins 1998, pp. 269–78) for Revelation's participation in that genre. For a discussion of the text's Jewishness vis-à-vis nascent Christianity, see (Marshall 2007, pp. 233–56).

<sup>2</sup> By community, I do not necessarily refer to an established group with clearly demarcated boundaries.

<sup>3</sup> This remains the dominant view (Caird 1966, p. 6; Giesen 1997, pp. 41–42; Harrington 1993, p. 9; Mounce 1998, p. 21; Reddish 2001, pp. 16–17; Collins 1984, pp. 55–56), although scholars are correct to point out issues with assuming this date and with assuming a generalized persecution under Domitian (c. 81–96 CE). See (Friesen 2001, p. 351; Collins 1984, pp. 84–110).

‘lord and god’,<sup>4</sup> the use of wine in imperial veneration in Asia Minor makes Revelation’s focus on libation a focusing lens through which to view early Christian meal practice as a way of constructing social identity.<sup>5</sup> Despite the apparent importance of wine in early Christian ritual practice and meal practice, libation bowls (φιάλαι), pouring out wine (ἐκχέω), and wine itself are used in Revelation to paint a vivid picture of what the author of Revelation finds abhorrent, suggesting that the author views ritual wine use in a different way to other communities of Jesus followers. In each instance where wine, cups, or pouring out occur in the Apocalypse, the imagery serves to point to the wrath of God against those who have worshipped incorrectly. Revelation’s use of wine imagery literarily can shed socio-historical light on how some early Christian communities in Asia Minor seem to have constructed their communities vis-à-vis the wider ancient Mediterranean and its widespread libation practices. In light of the prevalence of water-only Eucharistic practices in Asia Minor, I suggest that condemnations of wrong behaviour among early Christian associations in the epistolary portion of Revelation refers specifically to the author’s disapproval of wine use by Christians.

Although libation as a rite is understudied, it is clear that people living in first-century Greco-Roman locales (Jews and non-Jews alike<sup>6</sup>) would have poured out liquid from bowls or cups, either at formal sacrificial events at temples or in more intimate dining settings. All gatherings where wine would be drunk would include a libation, hence the association between libation and consuming wine in ancient texts (Klinghardt 2012a, pp. 11–12; Patton 2009, p. 34). The liquid poured out depended on circumstances, but common libations were made with wine, honey, milk, oil, and even water (Burkert 1985, p. 71). Multiple sources attest to the performance of this ritual. In the Hebrew Bible and the Septuagint, we have several examples of libations being offered as part of regular cult practice, usually with wine.<sup>7</sup> Such references are often vague as to the performative aspects of libation, simply mentioning it as part of the ritual of sacrifice (e.g., Exodus 29:40; cf. Lev 23:13; Num 15:5–10; Num 29; 1 Kings 18:34). In Greek and Roman ritual practice, this is likewise the case, with wine generally being offered as a sacrifice or as part of a sacrifice for a god or gods (Detienne and Vernant 1989). Libations were normally conducted in a spirit of peace rather than as atonement; indeed, the Greek term for libation, σπονδή, become synonymous with “peace treaty” (Burkert 1985, p. 71).

The New Testament includes other references to libations, for instance in Luke 22:20. As Matthias Klinghardt has persuasively argued, this phrasing in Luke refers to the act of libation as the new covenant, rather than (as some translations render it) to the blood of Jesus to be poured out in death (Klinghardt 2012b). Therefore, libations were common rituals that were not universally formulated to refer to wrong religious practice or to God’s judgement in antiquity in general, either specifically in the Hebrew Bible or in the New Testament. The cup and wine imagery used by the seer John is borrowed from Scripture, but it also references worship offered to Roman deities—combining in Revelation both the association of libation with Imperial Roman worship and with God’s divine judgement against those who worship false gods, as part of its overall critique of the Roman Empire.

<sup>4</sup> Despite the prevalence of the view that Domitian demanded and enforced such honours, the imperial cult in Asia Minor was long-established by Domitian’s time, and seems to have been the initiative of the elites in the region; the title ‘lord and god’ does not appear on coins or inscriptions under Domitian’s reign, which one would expect if Domitian had required and enforced such veneration (Price 1984; Friesen 2001, pp. 23–121; Koester 2014, pp. 76–77).

<sup>5</sup> There is also ample evidence to discredit the notion of widespread persecution of Christians under Domitian. However, as Harland notes, “To suggest that the author of the Apocalypse was not addressing Christians facing imperial persecution or enforced worship of the emperor does not mean that he was completely distanced from the realities of life in the cities or churches; he was responding to realities concerning imperial dimensions of civic and group life in Asia [ . . . ] but he perceived such things in a very different way than other inhabitants, including many Christians” (Harland 2000, pp. 103–4).

<sup>6</sup> The rabbinic assumption that pagans were compulsive in offering wine libations, which justified the halakhic prohibition on non-Jewish wine, is probably not grounded in historical reality, but rather indicates how similar Jewish and pagan libations were (Stern 2013, pp. 19–44). See *mAvodah Zarah* 5:4, 8; *Tosefta Avodah Zarah* 3(4):11; 7(8):3, 6; *bAZ* 57b–58a, 59b; etc.

<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting that red wine was not necessarily the norm in antiquity; the most prized Roman wines were white (*Oxford Classical Dictionary*, “wine [Greek and Roman]”).

I suggest that the text's critique of libations is not only a metaphoric reference to other issues or divisions among John's readers, but has implications for the actual use of wine in early Christian community rituals. I therefore identify several key terms for this study of wine and libations in Revelation. Wine is an obvious starting point, but associated ritual objects, such as cups and bowls, along with references to pouring out and to drinking or being drunk, are also important. The table below (Table 1) demonstrates all instances of wine-related language in the Apocalypse, as well as the immediate context of the term's use. What stands out is that wine is never used to celebrate or honour God, but rather is associated with inappropriate ritual behaviour on the one hand, or God's divine wrath on the other.<sup>9</sup>

**Table 1.** This table lists all the uses of wine terminology in Revelation.

Citation	Keywords/Context
6:5–6	Wine (οἶνος); economic shortage
14	Cup (ποτήριον), wine (οἶνος), pour (κεράννυμι); unmixed (ἀκράτος), drink (πίνω, ποτίζω), winepress (ληνός); the passionate immorality of Babylon
15:7	Bowls (φιάλη); preparation for vision of the bowls
16	Bowls (φιάλη), pouring out (ἐκχέω); pouring plagues out
17:1–6	Intoxication (μεθύω), wine (οἶνος); the passion of the πόρνη
18:3, 6–7	Mixed wine (οἶνος; κεράννυμι), cup (ποτήριον); corruption of the nations through Babylon
18:13	Wine (οἶνος); cargo list
19:15	Wine press (ληνός, οἶνος)

With this in mind, there are two major vision clusters in Revelation that are integral to this analysis of libation language: The vision of the bowls in Chapter 16; and a few verses in Chapter 14, during an interlude, where followers of the Lamb are reassured through visions of doom for those who follow Babylon and the beast.

After the examination of the literary evidence, I will briefly outline how libation is depicted in the Bible and in Jewish literature from the Second Temple Period, and libation's role in the rites of the Roman Imperial cult. I will then turn my focus to what we know of early Christian meal practice in Asia Minor, pointing out the prevalence of water and bread Eucharistic practice. Finally, I will return to the letters of Revelation in order to point out how this negative libation imagery has implications for early Christian hearers of this text and their own meal practices in Asia Minor (since wine and libations were an integral part of Greek and Roman dining culture), and of what later became mainstream Christian dining culture.

## 2. Analysis

The wine references in Revelation 14 come in the context of descriptions of the faithful, compared with those who worship the beast. In verses 1–5 we read about the one hundred and forty-four thousand who had been redeemed from earth, those who had not defiled themselves with women. These are described as chaste, and also as the “first fruits” purchased from among humanity and offered to God and to the Lamb. Although the identity of the 144,000 is contested (Koester 2014,

<sup>9</sup> Each of the terms in Greek for pouring out (i.e., κεράννυμι and ἐκχέω) have connotations with wine use. I will examine ἐκχέω as a term for pouring out libation more closely below. κεράννυμι is better translated “mixing” and refers specifically to mixing wine with water. However, given that the adjective ἀκράτος follows, most translators avoid the awkwardness of “mixing unmixed” by rendering κεράννυμι as pour ((Koester 2014, p. 613) translates the phrase as “poured full strength”). Therefore, although the term does not strictly refer to libation pouring, as a specialised term for behaviour related to wine, it is still significant for this study.

pp. 609–10), it is clear that they are to be contrasted with those described in verses 8–11. In verse 8, we read that Babylon is fallen, “she who made all nations drink the wine of her passionate immorality”.<sup>11</sup> The good are likened to appropriate sacrifice, while the bad to inappropriate sacrifice. Later, in verse 10, we also see that those who worship the beast and its image will “also drink the wine of God’s passionate anger, poured unmixed into the cup of his wrath”. A key term here is the descriptor, unmixed (ἀκράτος). Normally, wine in antiquity would be blended with water, the ratio determined by the person responsible for the wine at a given dinner party. Undiluted wine was not normally consumed by banqueters, but was used in libation practice (Smith 2003, p. 32; Wilkins and Hill 2006, pp. 176–78; Plato, Leg. 1.637; Ael. Var. hist. 2.37; Plut. Quaest. Conv. 678B; Plut. Conj. Praec. 140F);<sup>12</sup> mortals reasonably mixed their wine with water. Here, the idea of drinking unmixed wine combines the idea of drunkenness with wrong ritual practice.

Later in chapter 14:14–20, we are also shown the image of the wine press of God’s wrath. There, agents of the divine realm<sup>13</sup> use sickles to harvest humanity, likened to grapes. This imagery echoes Joel 3:13 (LXX 4:13) in its judgemental harvest language,<sup>14</sup> although normally sickles are used to harvest grain and frequently symbolize peace rather than wrath (Koester 2014, p. 624). In both cases, what is indicated is God’s judgement against the earth. The trampling of the grapes in the winepress yields enormous quantities of liquid (now blood), up to the height of a horse’s bridle. White wine, being highly prized (Pliny, Nat. hist. 14), was equally, if not more prevalent in sacrificial practice; the identification of wine with blood is not automatic and is thus deliberate. Revelation 14 demonstrates how the author uses wine imagery to indicate those who are not in God’s favour and those who practice wrong ritual acts. Those who drink the wine of Babylon are likewise liable to drink the wine of God’s passionate anger, and to be harvested with violence, crushed beneath God’s judgement until their blood flows out like wine.

Chapter 16, the cycle of the seven bowls, is where libation imagery is used most explicitly, since the bowls in question are indeed libation bowls, which come from the sanctuary of the temple; these are, therefore, ritual implements associated with worship. The cycle actually commences a little earlier, in Chapter 15, with a preamble that details where the seven bowls originate. The seven angels emerge from the sanctuary carrying the plagues, and then in 15:7, we read that one of the four living creatures hands the seven angels seven golden bowls full of the anger of God (ἐπτὰ φιάλας χρυσῶς γεμούσας τοῦ θυμοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ . . . ). The term φιάλη here indicates a flat dish with no handles and an indentation in the centre to facilitate holding the implement. It is equivalent to the Latin *patera*. In both cases, the vessel is used for drinking (especially by elites), and for pouring libations (Figure 1) (Patton 2009, p. 37).<sup>15</sup> The anger or wrath of God, in Greek θυμός, connects the contents of the bowls in chapter 16 with the wine, also described with θυμός, in Chapter 14, strengthening the supposition that the φιάλαι are libation bowls.

<sup>11</sup> We can hear in this utterance the echoes of Jeremiah 51:7, where wine is likewise used negatively and in judgement: “Babylon was a golden cup in the Lord’s hand, making all the earth drunken; the nations drank of her wine, therefore the nations went mad”.

<sup>12</sup> Foreigners, too, might consume unmixed wine, and (perhaps notably for Revelation) women were satirically depicted as drinking wine neat.

<sup>13</sup> On the identity of the “one like a human being”, seated on the cloud, see (Koester 2014, pp. 622–24). Cf. Dan. 7:13–14.

<sup>14</sup> “Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Go in, tread, for the wine press is full. The vats overflow, for their wickedness is great”.

<sup>15</sup> LSJ sc. Φιάλη. Patton writes, “it is first a libation bowl, a drinking bowl for gods, and only secondarily a vessel for humans” (Patton 2009, p. 37; see also p. 39).



**Figure 1.** Gold φιάλη (libation bowl), 4th–3rd century B.C.E. Dimensions: H. 3.6 cm; diameter 23.5 cm. Image in the public domain; courtesy of [www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org).

A voice calls out from the temple instructing the angels to pour out their bowls, full of the wrath of God. When the bowls are emptied during the course of the chapter, plagues, rather than wine, flow out, described as the wrath of God (16:1)—just like the wine of God’s wrath in Chapter 14. One by one, throughout Chapter 16, the bowls are poured out with profound ramifications for the inhabitants of earth. The afflictions poured out (ἐκχέω) range from sores to the turning of various waters into blood, to the burning of people by the sun, to darkness and pain.

The verb “pour out”, ἐκχέω, is not the most common term for a libation poured out, which is σπένδω, but does agree with other New Testament texts that discuss the sacrificial pouring out, for instance Luke 22:20 and Matthew 26:28.<sup>16</sup> ἐκχέω is also used in texts outside the New Testament, with wine and other libation liquids. For instance, in the *Iliad* 3.296: “Then they drew wine from the bowl into the cups, and poured it forth [ἐκχεον], and made prayer to the gods that are for ever”.<sup>17</sup> In this context, admittedly much earlier than Revelation, it is clear that the verb can be used in ritual contexts to imply a wine offering poured out. The fact that these libation bowls emerge *from* the temple is an example of what Patton calls “divine reflexivity”, in which gods are depicted as practising and reinforcing their own cultic rituals; in this way, God demonstrates John’s view of correct libation practice (Patton 2009, pp. 171–78).

These two major libation scenarios represent, on a large scale, Revelation’s use of wine and cup imagery, associated with the ritual of libation. Scattered throughout, there are also minor references to wine in 6:5–6; 17:2–6; 18:3, 6–7, 13; and 19:15; these references contribute to the overall impression that

<sup>16</sup> Luke 22:20: Καὶ τὸ ποτήριον ὡσαύτως μετὰ τὸ δειπνῆσαι, λέγων, τοῦτο τὸ ποτήριον ἡ καινὴ διαθήκη ἐν τῷ αἵματί μου τὸ ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν ἐκχυννόμενον. Matthew: 26:28: Τοῦτο γὰρ ἐστὶν τὸ αἶμά μου τῆς διαθήκης τὸ περὶ πολλῶν ἐκχυννόμενον εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν.

<sup>17</sup> οἶνον δ’ ἐκ κρητῆρος ἀφυσσόμενοι δεπάεσσιν ἐκχεον, ἥδ’ εὐχοντο θεοῖς αἰειγενέτησιν.



libations and wine are employed negatively in Revelation. A few of these warrant brief treatment here. The wine reference in 17 is again used to describe what is abhorrent:

The woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet, and bedecked with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication; and on her forehead was written a name of mystery: 'Babylon the great, mother of harlots and of earth's abominations'. And I saw the woman, drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the martyrs of Jesus. (Rev 17:2–6)

These verses, appearing just after the episode with the seven bowls, strongly connect wine with fornication, with becoming drunk, and with the Whore—Revelation's symbolic Rome. The term for the cup is here ποτήριον rather than φιάλη, but ποτήριον can still imply, as it does in Matthew and in Luke, a vessel containing liquid to be poured out as libation.<sup>18</sup> In Chapter 18, this connection is continued, and nations are drunk with the wine of the Whore's passion. The Whore herself will be repaid with "a double draught . . . in the cup she mixed" (18:6); again, judgement against wrongdoers is imaged in terms of wine and drunkenness, in this case a mixed cup. Mixed wine, as well as neat wine, was also used for libations, especially those in which the offerand would consume a portion of the liquid herself (Bruit Zaidman and Pantel 1992, p. 40). Finally, 19:15 the wine included is the product of "the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty", which clearly has dire implications of judgement and suffering, and which echoes the earlier function of the wine press in Chapter 14. In sum, God's wrath comes from libation cups and wine is almost exclusively used to indicate wrong ritual practice.<sup>19</sup>

### 3. The Religious Context of Libation Imagery

The libation and wine imagery in Revelation is significant when examined in light of cultic practices in the ancient Mediterranean. Revelation's habit of subverting familiar religious and cultural elements plays a role here; John frequently takes familiar imagery from the Roman world and repurposes it, giving symbols with imperial associations a new interpretation that supports his own aims (Koester 2014, p. 96).<sup>20</sup> Price's discussion of the cultic worship of the emperors notes that libations were a common element of this kind of sacrifice, but that in public festivals incense and animal sacrifice were more prevalent (Price 1984, pp. 208–9). Libations, then, may have been more common at private incidents of worship toward the imperial cult, perhaps in associations, as the regulations of the choir of Rome and Augustus at Pergamum suggest. Revelation's concern with libation may then reflect concerns about private behaviour among members of his communities rather than with their participation at public festivals. In the context of Revelation, where imperial worship is implied throughout the surrounding chapters, these libations evoke the wine offerings expected in Roman worship, as well as those made in the Jerusalem temple. Libations were a prominent part of daily life for most in the ancient world, and libation imagery from scriptures is employed to highlight Revelation's distaste for what its author views as wrong religious practice. In other words, Revelation makes use of libation imagery from scripture in order to point to familiar private libation practices in Asia Minor as wrong, in keeping with the text's overarching critique of Rome.

Revelation directly evokes the language of cult throughout the text (Friesen 2005). The recitation of cultic elements in 13:4, such as "Who is like . . . ?", and the use of the verb προσκυνέω evoke

<sup>18</sup> This is likewise the implication in the *Tebtunis Papyri* 6.27 (2nd century BCE) (LSJ s.v. "ποτήριον").

<sup>19</sup> The wine in 6:5–6 is not used in a way that connotes with the wrath of God except in that it is mentioned in the context of a grain shortage that would have been the result of wartime destruction or because of armies commandeering grain for their own consumption; likewise, the wine in 18:13 is merely included among a list of merchandise and is not explicitly negative. Neither of these examples signal that the author supports wine use. There is no indication that the text encourages the offering or drinking of wine.

<sup>20</sup> E.g., subverting the meaning of the laurel wreath, a symbol of imperial victory, into an image of eschatological victory in the face of Roman violence.

biblical descriptions of cult, but inverted. Whereas in the biblical texts, the phrase “who is like” is used to positively reinforce the sole worship of God (e.g., Ex. 51:11; Ps. 113:4–6; Isa. 44:6–7), Revelation puts the words in the mouths of those who incorrectly worship the beast, highlighting their cosmically inappropriate acts. Revelation also alludes to the imperial cult, with its call to “ecumenical” or world-wide worship of the beast—i.e., Babylon, that is Rome (13:3) (Frey 2006, pp. 238–39). Like the use of incense to wreak havoc on the inhabitants of earth in 8:3–5,<sup>21</sup> the libations are a specific reference to the worship of the goddess Roma in the imperial cult. Rather surprisingly, elements of cultic mimesis have been largely overlooked in scholarly discussion of the bowl plagues of Revelation Chapter 16 (cf. Frey 2006; Naylor 2010, pp. 215–18; Koester 2014, pp. 652–53). It seems clear that the libation bowl plagues, of Chapter 16, represents a concentrated and intentional example of this pervasive allusion to cult, in which Revelation both critiques and subverts normative ritual behaviour in its struggle to articulate what right worship entails for John’s community of Jesus worshippers: True worship reveres the Lamb and the one who truly sits on the imperial throne (Rev. 4:9–10; 22:3–4).

If it is clear that wine and libation imagery is used in Revelation in such a way as to imply God’s judgement—that is, to unleash suffering upon those who worship incorrectly and thereby participate fully in the sinful excess of the empire—in what context should we interpret the use of libations in Revelation? Preliminarily, it is worth identifying any scriptural antecedents, since Revelation frequently relies on biblical sources for its imagery. Despite the public sacrificial context of the biblical descriptions of libation, they remain part of the literary toolbox used by Revelation to imagine the role of private libations in John’s apocalyptic visions. Exodus 25:29 describes various sacrificial items for the worship of God: “You shall make its plates and dishes for incense, and its flagons (LXX = τὰ σπονδεῖα) and bowls (=τοὺς κιᾶθους) with which to pour drink-offering; and you shall make them pure gold”. Several other examples describe either the specialized ritual equipment necessary to offer liquids to God, or the offering of libations in general.<sup>22</sup> While the instructions in biblical texts are vague about how precisely one went about making a liquid offering, it is clear from the number of references that libations were a normal part of ordinary sacrificial worship of the Israelite God and therefore not automatically associated with wrong practice.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, it is likely that libations at the Jerusalem temple persisted into the Greco-Roman period. There is no convincing evidence that worship at the Jerusalem temple declined during the period in the lead up the temple’s destruction in 70 CE (Petropoulou 2008, pp. 127–28), even if, for those in Asia Minor, such as the implied audience of John the Seer’s letters, a more prominent example of libations might be those offered at banquets or in the public imperial cult. Nevertheless, the examples from the Greco-Roman era sources we do have strongly imply the continued practice of wine offerings. Philo is one such witness to sacrificial procedures in place in the Second Temple Period. However, writing from an Alexandrian vantage point, Philo describes only vaguely the practice of libation. Here Philo describes diaspora Jews journeying to Jerusalem:

Countless multitudes from countless cities come, some over land, others over sea, from east and west and north and south at every feast [ . . . ] to enjoy a brief breathing-space in

<sup>21</sup> See (Price 1984, p. 208) for incense as a standard of imperial worship.

<sup>22</sup> Texts that use φιάλη: Num 7:84, 85; 1 Kings 7:40 (LXX = 3 Reg 7:26); 7:45 (LXX 3 Reg. 7:31); 1 Kings 7:50 (LXX = 3 Reg. 7:36); 2 Kings 12:13 (LXX = 4 Reg. 12:14); 1 Chron. 28:17; 2 Chron 4:8; Zech. 14:20; texts that use ποτήριον: 2 Chr 4:5; 1 Kings 7:26 (LXX = 3 Reg. 7:12); 2 Sam 12:3 (LXX = 2 Reg); texts that use σπονδεῖον: Ex 25:29; 37:16; Num 4:7; texts that refer to libation in general: Num 28:7, 14. This list is not exhaustive.

<sup>23</sup> That the mechanism by which wine is offered is not clear is typical of ancient texts describing ritual; it is simply assumed that practitioners were familiar with the rite. Pernille Carstens makes a distinction in her work between a drink offering, that is, an offering of liquid that is placed in a vessel on the altar, and a libation, an offering of liquid that is poured out (Carstens 2003, p. 112). She suggests that offerings of wine, placed on the altar within the temple, were considered “kosher”, but those to be poured on the ground were the hallmark of “foreign” religions. Her argument is not convincing to me; relying on rhetorical use of libations in prophetic texts does not support the absence of pouring out wine by Jews at the Temple, given the other evidence, particularly from Second Temple and later sources.

scenes of genial cheerfulness [ . . . ] Friendships are formed between those who hitherto knew not each other, and the sacrifices and libations (θυσιῶν καὶ σπονδῶν) are the occasion of reciprocity of feeling and constitute the surest pledge that all are of one mind. (Philo, *Special Laws* 1.69–70)

Philo is clear in another passage that “corn, oil and wine are things most possessing qualities most profitable to life and most necessary to human use and therefore are naturally consecrated with all the sacrifices” (*De Spec. Leg.* 1.179).

Multiple other sources from Jewish antiquity confirm the continued practice of pouring out wine offerings, not all of which need to be examined in depth here. Josephus, in his *Antiquities*, likewise refers to libation of wine being poured out around the altar (3.9.4). We also find reference to libations among the Dead Sea Scrolls. *11QTemple* XXI.9–10 (Yadin, *Temple Scroll*, 2.95) reads: “And they shall rejoice on this day, for they began to pour out a strong drink offering, a new wine on the altar of the Lord, year by year” (Vermes 2004). The Book of Jubilees likewise depicts Noah as sprinkling wine as libation on the sacrificial fire in 2.68–69. And, although later, a description in Mishnah *Sukkah* refers to an offering of wine and water at the festival of Sukkot (Rubenstein 1999).<sup>24</sup> Therefore, it seems prudent to conclude that Jews in the Second Temple period were accustomed to include some form of libation with wine in their cult worship.

However, in many texts both prior to and within the Second Temple period, libation is used as a trope to paint a vivid picture of divine condemnation of wrong religious practice, specifically of non-Israelites or non-Jews. It is this tendency that is more salient to the use of libation imagery in Revelation. It is clear that the author of the Book of Revelation is indebted to the prophets of the Hebrew Bible, who railed against the Babylonian oppressors using similar language of sacrifice and libation, for instance as found in Jeremiah (Jer. 19:13; 32:29; 44:17–19). The Hebrew Bible certainly shows some discomfort, or at least ambivalence, with regard to libations and drink offerings. Frequently libations are spoken of as wrong and foreign. Jeremiah’s provocative use of libation terminology is used to refer specifically to offerings made to the Queen of Heaven, a Babylonian goddess in opposition to the God of Israel, in Chapter 44; in Chapter 32 it is Ba’al and other unnamed gods who are the recipients of inappropriate worship including libations. Jeremiah 51:7 is most strongly echoed in Revelation: “Babylon was a golden cup in the LORD’s hand, making all the earth drunken; the nations drank of her wine, therefore the nations went mad”. The juxtaposition of libation imagery with foreignness and drunkenness is likewise found in Revelation 14:8: “she who made all nations drink the wine of her passionate immorality”. Other sources, such as Deuteronomy and the Additions to Esther, use libation similarly, as a trope to point to wrong religious practice, particularly that associated with foreign oppressors. Deuteronomy 32:37–38 sarcastically asks why the gods to which libations had been poured are not coming to save the Israelites from God’s wrath; Esther reports to God in her prayer, in the addition to Esther, that she has “not honored [*sic*] the king’s feast or drunk the wine of the libations” (14.17). The biblical use of libations is reinterpreted in Revelation in keeping with its use of Babylon as a metaphor for Rome, another foreign oppressor, and is a focal point for its wine and libation imagery.

The other source for the type of imagery that Revelation’s author repurposes is Ezekiel, who uses pouring out language—and indeed the verb ἐκχέω (LXX)—consistently to point out the wrong behaviour of those who have deviated from the will of God. Of the many prophetic books in the

<sup>24</sup> M. *Sukkah* 4:9: “‘The Water-libation, seven days’—what was the manner of this? They used to fill a golden flagon holding three logs with water from Siloam. When they reach the Water Gate they blew [on the shofar] a sustained, a quavering and another sustained blast. [The priest whose turn of duty it was] went up the [Altar-] Ramp and turned to the right where were two silver bowls. R. Judah says: They were of plaster, but their appearance was darkened because of the wine. They had each a hole like to a narrow snout, one wide and the other narrow, so that both bowls emptied themselves together. The bowl to the west was for water and that to the east was for wine. But if the flagon of water was emptied into the bowl for wine, or the flagon of wine into the bowl for water, that sufficed. R. Judah says: With one log they could perform the libations throughout eight days. To the priest who performed the libation they used to say, ‘Lift up thine hand!’ for once a certain one poured the libation over his feet, and all the people threw their citrons at him.”



Hebrew Bible that describe God's wrath, Ezekiel most consistently uses imagery of pouring out—eleven times throughout the text (Ezek. 7:8; 8:8; 14:19; 20:8; 20:13; 20:21; 20:33; 20:34; 22:22; 22:31; 36:18). In each case, the wrath of God is described as being poured out (though no vessels are mentioned in Ezekiel) against the Israelites, who have angered God by worshipping other deities (e.g., 9:8; 20:8), or neglecting God's rules (e.g., 20:13, 21; 20:33–34). In no instance in Ezekiel is the wrath poured out against foreign peoples in favour of the Israelites; rather, God's wrath is reserved for situations where God's own people have intermingled their ritual practices with those of other nations. Curiously, in none of the instances in Ezekiel, where the terminology is so close to Revelation's, does the author refer specifically to wine; no cup imagery is included, and when the wrath is described more exactly, it bears resemblance to fire (e.g., 22:22, 31). Therefore, while Revelation's reliance on much of the imagery of Ezekiel is clear in this and other instances (Warren 2017), it is likewise the case that certain important distinctions can be identified between the two texts. Firstly, Revelation connects God's wrath with a specific liquid—wine; and secondly, the cups used for pouring out God's wrath are directly connected to ritual practice since they come out of marked ritual space (Rev 15:5–8).

It is in this context that we observe first how Revelation's liquid offerings highlight the cosmically inappropriate ritual actions of the Whore of Babylon, Rome herself, whose libations the author simultaneously evokes and criticizes. Furthermore, in light of Ezekiel's use of the terminology, it becomes clear how connected the Whore's actions are to insider religious practice within the Seer's own communities. Just as the pouring out of God's wrath in Ezekiel is connected to the Israelites' participation in foreign worship, so too in Revelation it is not the actions of outsiders that is at stake, but the infiltration of those practices into his own congregations.

In describing the Whore's liquid offerings, Revelation cleverly parodies the highly structured ritual behaviours required by the imperial court and its cult. Virtually all meals in Greco-Roman antiquity would have likely included libations at some point of the dinner, honouring various gods (Smith 2003, p. 180; Sanders 1990, p. 178). Libations during meals reinforced social relationships among diners, but also between gods and diners; as such, they were important in a very real economic way, bound up, as was just about everything else, in the honour-shame economy of the ancient world. Honour could be bestowed on a god by making an offering, and likewise on the person making the offering. Participating in a meal, including its libations, fostered and maintained business relationships, and non-participation could have financial and social ramifications. This is important when understanding how Revelation uses libation imagery, since the divine *genius* of the emperor was one such recipient of wine offerings. Moreover, since the Emperor Augustus' defeat of Egypt, all meals were technically obliged to include a libation to the *genius* of the emperor (Taussig 2009, p. 78). The choice to offer a libation to the *genius* is thus a choice made about one's association with the emperor, and therefore with the empire. This could have produced some anxiety for early Christian groups, given that early Christian gatherings followed a similar pattern to other group meetings in antiquity, which generally met for a meal, drink, and discussion. The use of such marked imagery (the pouring out of bowls) in Chapter 16 is, therefore, more fully understood in Revelation's imperial context.

Revelation's use of this imagery is also distinct from other Christian adaptations of libations. I have not found much evidence to suggest that Christians regularly *poured out* libations at their *agape* meals, although it is more than possible this occurred given the frequent presence of wine; rather, we find more evidence that the *raising of a cup* in Jesus' honour took place as a form of libation (Taussig 2009, p. 146). However, as Taussig has pointed out, private meals allowed early Christians to use libations as a test case in their relationship to the wider world:

At the meal, one had a chance to see how making a libation to the emperor felt, even when one had suffered at the hands of the occupation. Or conversely, one could have a sense of how wise it seemed to resist the libation to the emperor, even when one knew that in the larger world resistance to the emperor entailed more risks. Such acts of protected resistance and collaboration would have been available in multiple forms at the moment of libation. (Taussig 2009, pp. 123–24)

Libations within the home could therefore operate as a litmus test of allegiance to the emperor and all that it entailed; participating in libation could be seen to signify participation in the empire while altering or declining a libation could symbolise its rejection. This is especially important if one takes seriously the orality of the Apocalypse, in that it was intended to be read aloud (1:3), and the likelihood that readings of the book took place at regular gatherings of the community, where meals would have been part of the communal experience (Collins 1984, p. 144; Taussig 2009, pp. 126–27; Shepherd 1960, p. 78).

At the same time, early Christian texts tend to use sacrificial imagery metaphorically at the same time as they rejected the cultic practices of their “pagan” neighbours (e.g., 1 Corinthians 8; 10:14–3). Other early Christian texts use libation and wine motifs positively to refer to Jesus’ bodily sacrifice as a libation of blood. Luke, in the context of the Last Supper, emphasizes the common cup, which he describes as “poured out” (ἐκχέω) as a covenant made in Jesus’ blood (Luke 22:20). Similarly, Paul employs the metaphor to affirm the value of his potential death in the service of Christ, here using σπένδω, a common verb used for the pouring out of libations (Philippians 2:17). These examples use the libation metaphor to reinforce right religious practice in early Christian reflections on Jesus and community, a use that is challenged by Revelation. In contrast to the Gospels and the Pauline epistles, I have shown how Revelation uses libation and wine imagery overwhelmingly to point out abhorrent rites. Wine is used as a metaphor for God’s wrath (e.g., the followers of Babylon were made to “drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger” (14:10)), and also used synecdochally to symbolize the grotesque, luxurious excess associated with Babylon (e.g. the wine associated with the finery of the Whore in 17:2, 4; 18:13). Those who are in Babylon’s thrall are likewise associated with her because they have drunk “the wine of her impure passion” (14:8).

#### 4. Conclusions: Wine Use among Early Christians

The use of wine by God in Revelation is likely imbued with meaning for earthly wine-users as well. Patton writes, “every symposium on earth replicates a divine symposium held by the gods” (Patton 2009, p. 37). Thus, there are implications of this view of wine and wine ritual for the early communities that might have made up Revelation’s earliest hearers. Conveniently, Andrew McGowan has done the work of collecting and analysing groups in Asia Minor whose meal practices potentially avoided wine. For example, Epiphanius and Tertullian both give us information about Marcionite meal practices (McGowan 1999, pp. 164–65). Epiphanius is clear in his report that “Marcionite supposed mysteries are celebrated in front of the catechumens. He uses water in the mysteries” (Epiphanius, *Panerion*, 42.3.3). Tertullian is more circumspect about Marcionite practices, saying only, “He certainly has not even yet rejected the Creator’s water, for in it he washes his own: [n]or the oil with which he anoints them, nor the compound of milk and honey on which he weans them, nor the Creator’s bread by which he makes manifest his own body” (Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 1.14.3). Tertullian, in listing what Marcion shares in common with other Christians, does not mention wine, but this is an omission, as opposed to Epiphanius’s explicit declaration that Marcionites use water in their Eucharistic practice. McGowan concludes that “it seems probable that such sacramental practice [ . . . ] was traditional to this Asian Christian [i.e., Marcion] rather than innovative. Further, [Marcion’s] refusal of wine and meat may have had less to do with their origins from the Creator God than with their use in worship of the pagan gods” (McGowan 1999, p. 166). McGowan concludes that the bread

and water Eucharistic pattern is indeed prevalent in the east, and in Asia Minor in particular.<sup>25</sup> He is explicit in connecting the rejection of wine in these communities to a discomfort with sacrificial foods (McGowan 1999, pp. 173–74).

The predilection in Asia Minor to avoid wine among Christians may be related to Revelation's distaste for the drink. This association is made even more explicit in the several examples that come from communities specifically listed in Revelation's letters to the various assemblies. Take, for example, a later (ca. 250 CE) "orthodox" account of a bread and water Eucharist: "After they had prayed and taken holy bread and water (ἄρτον ἅγιον καὶ ὕδωρ) on the Sabbath, Polemon the temple officer and those with him arrived to seek the Christians and force them to sacrifice and eat abominated meat" (Martyrdom of Pionius 3.1). What is remarkable about this account for our current study is the location of Pionius's church, which is Smyrna, one of the seven named churches to which John addresses his revelation. Laodicea is also implicated: Laodicean Christians apparently used "wine-drinkers" (οἰνοπόται) as an insult against orthodox Christians (McGowan 1999, p. 215; Lebeau 1966, p. 147n6). Indeed, McGowan does briefly posit a connection between Revelation and the Asian tendency to ascetic Eucharists ((McGowan 1999, p. 237). The present discussion provides more robust support for McGowan's conclusions about Christian meal practice in Asia Minor—however, in terms Revelation, there is a further significant implication emerging from the above findings.

The implication I propose is that the admonitions against certain assemblies in the letters in Revelation 2–3 may refer to wine use specifically rather than sacrificial foods generally. Revelation seeks to articulate a restriction on wine use among assemblies because sectarianism among Jesus-following groups was not automatic; the synagogue at Sardis, for example, was inside of a bath-gymnasium complex and neighbored an entrance to an imperial cult hall (Harland 2000, p. 109). Analysts of ancient Christian and Jewish banqueting practices warn against assuming any distinctions between practices of pagan associations and those of Jewish or Christian organisations (Klinghardt 1996, pp. 24–25). The letters to Thyatira, Pergamum, and Thyatira include praise and blame, and seem to focus on internal divisions within the congregations: Some members follow teachings that go against John's. Many scholars have posited that the Nicolaitans (Fox 1994), mentioned in these letters, are singled out by John because he disagrees with their lax policy on eating food from sacrifices. The Ephesian group sides with John against the Nicolaitans: "You hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate" (2:6). But the Pergamum group, in contrast, is mixed: There are some in the community "who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans" (2:15); specifically, the letter states that some Pergamians "hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice immorality." The reference to Balaam could refer to an actual named individual in Pergamum promoting these literal practices, or (more likely) it could refer to the biblical Balaam (Num 24; 25:1–6 and 31:16) or it could refer to both (Van Henten 2008). Numbers certainly alludes to the eating of food offered to other gods (25:2). But, given the complete lack of critique of meat sacrifice in John's visions, perhaps John uses hyperbole to criticize the Pergamians for some of them finding the use of wine acceptable. Thyatira, we read, also has some members who follow Jezebel; John claims that she "is teaching and beguiling my servants to practice immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols (φάγεῖν εἰδωλόθυτα)" (2:20).<sup>26</sup> The biblical Jezebel does not seem to have explicit ties to eating food offered in sacrifice to other gods (1 Kings 16:31; 18:4–19; 19:1, 2; 21:5–25; 2 Kings 9), suggesting that John again uses this term to refer to wrong religious practice generally rather than food or eating specifically. Again, immorality and wrong religious observance are paired, just as the wine of Babylon is associated with immorality and fornication. There is no

<sup>25</sup> McGowan notes in particular the Eustathians (and later the Messalians) in Asia Minor, whose fractious interactions with other Christian groups in Asia Minor are attested in the mid- to late fourth century (McGowan 1999, p. 214).

<sup>26</sup> That is, consume things sacrificed to idols; ἐσθίω can also include a more generalized meaning that includes taking a substance into one's mouth, perhaps including wine (LSJ sc. ἐσθίω).

question that Revelation 2–3 speaks of *eating* rather than drinking; however, given that the first use of the accusation, in 2:14, is a potentially metaphorical comparator, it is possible that the subsequent references assume the same veiled reading.

The letters critique the use of wine in the communities' meal practice, which would fit with the libation imagery use in the vision portion of the text, and with the visions' complete lack of any critique of food sacrifice. While wine and libation imagery permeate Revelation entirely, there are no further references to eating sacrificial foods other than in these letters. It would not be unlike the author to use coded language in addressing these communities, as indeed is his particular habit both in the letters and the visions. This reading would certainly explain the focus that Revelation has on wine and libation imagery, when we do not see a prolonged emphasis on meat sacrifice in the vision accounts. Paired with what we know of later meal practice in early Christian communities in Asia Minor, which is that at least some groups opted to avoid wine during their Eucharistic meals, the anxiety expressed in Revelation about wine and libation practices and their explicit connection to pagan worship is not surprising. Therefore, the struggle within communities mentioned in Revelation may not be one of *eating* at non-Christian rituals, but of an internal debate about *drinking* within their *own* rituals.

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