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The received view and Revelation: A social-scientific reading of Revelation 2–3

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Authors:
Robert J. van Niekerk[1]
Ernest van Eck[1]

Affiliations:
[1]Department of New Testament and Related Literature, Faculty of Theology and Religion, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Robert van Niekerk, robertniekerk@gmail.com

This article aims to present a culturally plausible reading of Revelation 2–3. This will be done through the use of a social-scientific model focussing on the core values of honour and shame in the ancient Mediterranean world. Before describing this model, the article will present a cursory discussion on the currently received view of Revelation's genre and Revelation 2–3. It is argued that while the received view provides valuable historical descriptions of the ancient Mediterranean world, this approach is inadequate to bring to the fore the underlying norms and values found in Revelation 2–3. Using the model of honour and shame as a lens through which to read Revelation 2–3, it becomes apparent that these seven letters are filled with honour claims that are either confirmed, challenged or denied. In addition, honour is also ascribed to specific communities, and in some cases, honour is redefined.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: Reading Revelation 2–3 through social-scientific models engages critically with the traditional approach to these texts, and provides a culturally sensitive and responsible reading thereof. This reading further promotes a constructive engagement with cross-cultural anthropology.

Keywords: Revelation 2–3; honour; shame; social-scientific; genre; historical criticism; received view.

Introduction

The social-scientific works of Malina (1986, 2001) have influenced multiple aspects of biblical interpretation. For the New Testament, these include, among others, interpretations of the gospels, including historical Jesus research (Malina 1999, 2011; eds. Stegemann, Malina & Theissen 2002), the parables of Jesus (Van Eck 2016), various topics in Luke-Acts (ed. Neyrey 1991; Pilch 2004), and of Paul (Malina & Neyrey 1996). Revelation has also received its share of social-scientific readings (Esler 1994:127–142; Malina 1995; Malina & Pilch 2000; Neyrey 2019; Pilch 1992, 2011:216–230), but with primarily negative receptions (Bauckham 2000; DeSilva 1996, 1997; Skemp 2001).

This article will firstly discuss the dominant hermeneutical lens (i.e., the received view) used to understand Revelation's genre and Revelation 2–3. Secondly, the model of honour and shame will be discussed as a test case. This will be followed by a cursory reading of Revelation 1–3 through this model. A complete and detailed analysis of all the cultural elements found in Revelation 1–3 will not be possible. Still, this reading scenario aims to contribute to the ongoing dialogue of social-scientific interpretation of Revelation and the usefulness of this approach (Neyrey 2019:3). The article will conclude by noting some of the advantages of reading Revelation through social-scientific models. While Revelation 2–3 introduces topics and motives that are developed in the rest of the text (Rv 4–22), the focus in this article will only be on the seven letters (cf. Koester 2014:112–115, 255–349).

The received view
What is the received view

The 'received view' of any discipline refers to the 'prescribed way of asking and answering questions'. It is the standard model 'in vogue among a large number of practitioners and in the popular mind' to make sense of data and to understand things of the given discipline (Malina 1996:217; Lutz 2012). The received view is further the gatekeeper and judges, whose interpretation would be seen as 'convincing' and 'unconvincing.' The application of historical criticism, an umbrella label that 'covered a range of methods (source criticism, form criticism, sociological criticism, etc.)' (Collins 2005:4), for reading Revelation can justifiably be labelled as such. Malina (1996) summarises the characteristic features of the received view of biblical studies as follows:

Some characteristic features of the Received view include a passion for full bibliography…; for non-statistical word counts; for definitions and excursus of supposedly 'theological' words; the confusion of theology (doctrine of God) with ideology; the identification of meanings in ancient texts that turn out to be suspiciously the same as those held by the Received View on other grounds; the endless reference to other biblical passages in such a way as to imply, for example, that New Testament authors knew each other's works well. (p. 217)

The received view aims to interpret biblical texts historically, and the assumption is that such historical interpretations would lead to a fuller understanding of these texts (cf., Aune 2010:105–108; Collins 2005:5–11). Malina (1996:217, 218) judges that this goal has not been attained, and because of this, many are 'unsatisfied with the methods and outcomes of the received view. Too much study time yielding too little' payoff. Two areas of study in Revelation can be looked at to illustrate this point: the study of the *genre* of Revelation as a literary apocalypse and interpretations of Revelation 2–3.

Demarcating and defining the genre of apocalyptic

Friedrich Lücke's study on Revelation in 1832 introduces *apokalyptische Litteratur* [apocalyptic literature] and the corresponding label *Apokalyptik* [apocalyptic] into scholarly discussions. Lücke did not just provide terminology but also established a methodology for investigating Revelation as an apocalyptic writing. Revelation's content and form were compared with other texts assumed to belong to the same *genre; these* included the *Ascension of Isaiah* (published in 1819), *1 Enoch* (published in 1821), *4 Ezra*, the *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*, and the *Sibylline Oracles*. In light of these comparisons, Lücke (1852:347–418) provided a commentary on Revelation focussing on the '*Litterarhistorische Characteristic*' of Revelation as an apocalypse. As Barr (2006:74) notes, this is the first instance when a scholar showed that 'the Apocalypse is not like other prophetic works and that it is like a body of other writings from antiquity'.

After Lücke's publications, other approaches were taken to defining and clarifying the meaning of the label apocalyptic literature, usually by providing a list of characteristics and how these were related to one another (cf. Koch 1972). However, the next pivotal moment in the area came about with the publication of *Semeia* 14 and the definition provided therein for apocalyptic literature.

Semeia 14 was the culmination point of the work done by a *genre* group in the Forms and *Genre* project of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL). This group focussed primarily on 'Jewish and Christian texts composed between 250 B.C.E. and 250 C.E.' as well as some Greco-Roman, gnostic, rabbinic and Persian material (Collins 2016:22). From these texts, the *genre* group created a grid with all the elements regarding form and content to see which of these occurs in most of the texts. From these core elements, a master paradigm of shared characteristics and a definition were created. Collins (1979) gives this definition as an apocalypse:

… [*I*]s a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world. (p. 9)

Critical reactions to this definition have been varied and numerous (cf. Barr 2006:75–76; Linton 2006:32; Newsom 2007; Osborne 2004:473–476). The criticised part of the definition is the absence of any reference to the function of an apocalypse. But this omission was by design. As Collins (2016) notes, our:

[*C*]onviction was that function was best discussed at the level of individual texts, in their specific contexts, and the commonly accepted idea that apocalypses were intended to comfort and exhort a group in crisis did not necessarily hold in all cases. (p. 33)

In the following volume of *Semeia*, the issue of function was addressed. Herein, Yarbro Collins (1986:7) synthesises the results of this volume and adds to the definition of *Semeia* 14 that an apocalypse is:

[*I*]ntended to interpret present, earthly circumstances in light of the supernatural world of the future, and to influence both the understanding and the behaviour of the audience by means of divine authority. (p. 7)

A great deal of work has been done since the appearance of these pivotal works (see i.e., ed. Collins 2016), and when turning to Revelation, the influence of Collins' (1979) and Yarbro Collins' (1986) work is apparent.

Revelation as an apocalypse

There is general agreement among scholars that Revelation belongs to the literary *genre* apocalypse and that the definition of *Semeia* 14 is a good starting point for studying this topic (Witherington 2007:33; cf. also, Barr 2006:75–76, 2010:642–643; Baynes 2021:313–314; Koester 2014:104–105; Reddish 2001:3–4). The focus on the function provided by Yarbro Collins (1986) is not quoted directly but underlies many views of the function of Revelation. It can be stated that the functional part of the definition from the *genre*-decade focusses not so much on apocalypse as a *genre* but instead on a view of reality (i.e., a worldview) and how this view influences the recipient's actions. Barr (2010:643) notes that 'an apocalyptic worldview presumes that there is much going on behind the scenes; things are not as they appear'. Witherington (2007:34) writes that the 'very heart of apocalyptic is the unveiling of secrets and truths about God's perspective on a variety of subjects, including justice and the problem of evil, and what God proposes to do about such matters' (cf. also, Baynes 2021:318–319; Koester 2014:1006; Reddish 2001:4–5).

Seeing Revelation as belonging to this *genre* has a classificatory and hermeneutic purpose (Linton 2006:10–11; Osborne 2004:474–475). A fundamental assumption in establishing the *genre* of writing is that readers can classify it as one type of writing and not another and, in so doing, learn the rules and conventions of the *genre* for interpreting it. As Baynes

(2021:313) notes, readers 'who hope to interpret a text responsibly must consider its literary genre'. After this classification, 'the text's intertextual relations with other texts' in the same *genre* can be discerned (Linton 2006:9). And even though Revelation's *genre* is seen as a type of hybrid or mixed *genre* (Linton 2006; Witherington 2007:33), Linton (2006:21) notes that 'readers must relate texts to similar texts so that they can use similar interpretative strategies on them'. Linton (2006:21–38) continues to show that even hybrid *genres* like Revelation exhibit literary conventions that assist in interpreting the work. Two of these are worth noting. Mixed *genres* offer a high degree of 'intertextuality' with all the different *genres* incorporated therein. This leads to the convention of mixed *genre* identified by Linton (2006:22), namely, 'syntagmatic foregrounding'. This means mixed *genre* writing resists the classification thereof into a single *genre*. Writings with a hybrid nature can start conventionally, as a particular type of *genre* should, but then switch to another. This uncertainty of the *genre* classification is interpreted by Linton (2006:22) in terms of information theory, which states that 'the higher the uncertainty, the greater the information content' of the work. Aune (2006) emphasises intertextuality's importance for understanding Revelation, which agrees with Linton's view. For Aune (2006:44), each early Christian reader of Revelation would have perceived it differently because of the different intertextual references, but 'it is also likely that particular congregations of readers would have a relatively homologous understanding of the Apocalypse because of their shared knowledge of antecedent texts'.

A complete and detailed discussion of Revelation as an apocalypse falls outside the focus of this article. Still, the following can be concluded from the foregoing. In the received view, Revelation is read as a literary text and classified according to literary genre theories. From these theories, it follows that to classify Revelation correctly, it is necessary to read it in light of similar literary works. Even though Revelation displays unique *genre* conventions (i.e., hybridity), it is not wholly unique. If it were wholly unique, the readers would not have had *genre* rules to aid them in their understanding thereof. After identifying Revelation's *genre*, it can be compared with similar writings to clarify the worldview, symbols, visions and ideas therein. This will enable readers to see Revelation written in the apocalyptic idiom and interpret the typical apocalyptic tropes through intertextual references.

But is this enough to explain the meanings found in Revelation? Is it possible to fully understand the words of this text by finding all the intertextual references and describing the genre conventions of apocalyptic and other mixed genres? These questions will be returned after the discussion on Revelation 2–3.

Revelation 2–3

Ramsay's (1906) and Hemer's (1989) studies on Revelation 2–3 are typical of the received view's approach to these texts. Both these works aim to describe the *Sitz im Leben* of the seven communities. By reading Revelation 2–3 in light of the detailed historical information, the assumption is that the meaning of the texts will become clear. Ramsey (1906:vii–ix) notes that all the 'illustrations' and 'figures' presented in his work are meant to clarify the 'history' and 'current situations' of the communities of Revelation. Hemer (1989:2) again notes that he will discuss 'the racial, religious and social composition of the cities, their problems and ways of thought', providing a better understanding of the 'church in the period between AD 70 and 100.' Aune (1997) follows suit in his commentary on Revelation. Each 'proclamation' is preceded by a lengthy bibliography, and the 'historical-geographical' history of each city of the different communities is given. After these social and historical descriptions, a verse-by-verse discussion of the texts with multiple intertextual references is provided. Throughout, there are excursions on 'important issues', also preceded by an extensive bibliography. These discussions all conclude with a summative 'explanation' of the theological message of each proclamation.

Friesen (1995:307, 308), in reaction to the works of Ramsay (1906) and Hemer (1989), calls for a 'more systematic' treatment of 'literary texts like Revelation as social productions related to their historical, political, and religious contexts.' This call is addressed in his monograph on Revelation (Friesen 2001). Although Friesen (2001), like his predecessors, focusses on different archaeological 'texts' (i.e., inscriptions, frescos, statues, pottery and architectural structures), he treats them differently. There is no assumption that each archaeological text will be paralleled or expressed symbolically in Revelation. Instead, he wants to bring the 'numismatic, sculptural, architectural, epigraphic, pictorial, and literary texts' to light to fully describe the world of John and his communities (Friesen 1995:307, 308). Although a detailed discussion on the works of Friesen cannot be given here, the growing realisation that detailed historical descriptions of the world of the seven communities will not be enough to give plausible interpretations of Revelation is seen here. It is needed to work from the realisation that Revelation, like all texts, is a product not only reacting but also formed by the 'historical, political, and religious contexts' in which it came into being (cf. also, Friesen 2004, 2005).

A last illustrative work worth noting is the recent commentary by Koester (2014). Initially, it seems as if this commentary falls back on the typical 'give a detailed description of each city to illustrate the message' method. However, Koester (2014:233) wants to illustrate in his descriptions not how these cities are unique but 'how the institutions and social fabric of each city resembled those in other cities.' He continues to note what 'differed was not the character of the cities, but the way the congregations responded to their social contexts' (Koester 2014:233). In this way, Koester also emphasises that the formative and guiding 'social fabric' behind the text must be noted if a fuller interpretation of Revelation is to be had.

Evaluation: The received view

On the one hand, the received view of Revelation made and continues to make essential contributions to a more responsible reading of the text. With the continued work and refinement of apocalypse as a *genre*, it is clear that Lücke's (1932) dichotomy between apocalyptic and prophetic texts cannot be sustained. Instead, Revelation should be read not just in light of texts that, according to a scholarly definition, are apocalypse, but also in light of other 'revelatory dreams, visions, and oracles' (Witherington 2007:35; cf. also, Barr 2006; Van Niekerk 2018). This, in turn, brings about a plausible acid test for discussing Revelation's visions and symbolic language. Although the symbols can be classified as polyvalent (Koester 2014:73, 76; Linton 2006:40–41, cf. also, Friesen 2001:140–141), they cannot just mean anything. The received view provides a first step to establishing a plausibility interpretation. The same holds for the received view on Revelation 2–3. Friesen's (1995) comment on Revelation is just as valid for these seven communities. They were real communities living in historical, political and religious contexts that shaped their view of the world. Through the historical descriptions provided by the received view, it is clear that these contexts were vastly different from modern Christian communities.

On the other hand, the received view also has its limits. Even after comparing the images of Revelation with other revelatory texts, interpreters are still left with a collection of images that come out of a vastly different culture. The received view on Revelation provides adequate 'social descriptions' (Malina 2008:6) of the cities where the seven communities found themselves (cf. Friesen 2001, 2004, 2005). Still, the unspoken norms and values that determined meaningful actions are not discussed. Neyrey's (2019) recent criticism of the received view of Revelation 1–3 also applies to studies of Revelation in general. He notes that readings of Revelation study the text 'piece by piece' with the result being a rarefication of 'myriads of individual items', and in so doing 'the historical-critical approach privileges literary archaeology over the actual hearing of the document as a continuous reading' (Neyrey 2019:3). Such readings are exemplified in the verse-by-verse commentaries, or the focus on intertextuality, and the use of literary *genre* theories. These approaches are not unimportant and should not be abandoned. However, considering the nature of words and language and how these symbols derive meaning from the social systems in which they are used, more than literary archaeology is needed. What is required are models of interpretation that can make modern readers attentive to the cultural norms, values and institutions that were common knowledge in the ancient Mediterranean world. This is where social-scientific models come in.

Social-scientific models
Models and the nature of texts

While received view and social-scientific readings both aim to present culturally sensitive readings of Revelation, the explicit emphasis on models is central to social-scientific readings (Neyrey 2010:108). Methodological clarity 'regarding theories, models, and methods is a characteristic concern' of social-scientific criticism (Elliott 1993:36). However, these models are not meant to provide another social description of the past. They are needed because of the nature of the biblical texts.

Biblical texts are meaningful configurations of 'language intended to communicate' (Malina 1986:1). However, for meaningful communication to occur, these texts cannot just be translated into the interpreter's language. This is because the meaning in the texts derives not from the characters on a page but rather from how these characters are filled with cultural meaning. A translation of ancient texts can be presented as grammatically correct sentences that 'yield complete thoughts but not complete meanings' (Malina 1986:3). For meaning, more is needed. A clear understanding of the cultural systems that provide meaning to the words is also required. As Malina (2001:1) notes, the words we use 'embody meaning, but the meaning does not come from the worlds. Meaning inevitably derives from the general social system of the speakers of a language'. Consequently, even if Revelation is given in fluent and clearly understood English translations, as long as the 'social system' is not made explicit, Revelation will stay a '*terra incognita*' (Witherington 2007:xi).

Using intertextuality to try and clarify Revelation would be an inadequate approach to bring forth the 'social system' of meaning. This judgement is not because intertextual studies are unimportant (cf., Aune 2006). Instead, intertextuality alone is insufficient because Revelation and all the texts found in such studies are products of a so-called high-context society. Texts produced in such a society are 'sketchy and impressionistic' and leave 'much to the reader's and hearer's imagination' (Malina 1996:24). The recipients of high-context texts have a shared cultural system of meaning with the author. Applying this to Revelation, much that seems strange to modern readers would not be so for the seven communities John wrote to. They were 'socialized into shared ways of perceiving and acting' (Malina 1996:25). It is this shared 'cultural system of meaning' that the models of social-scientific criticism aim to clarify for modern low-context readers where 'detailed texts' are the norm (Malina 1996:24; cf. also, Elliott 1993:10–11).

When working with social-scientific models, it is essential to remember that they are not exact representations of reality. They are heuristic tools meant to explain the available data. They are 'abstract, simplified representations of more complex, real-world objects and interactions. Like abstract thought, the purpose of models is to enable and facilitate understanding' (Malina 2001:18). As Crook (ed. 2020:1) notes, models 'are not meant to be perfect or to reveal everything. Far from it; models are intended to filter out some data, some that might be interesting and enriching, in order to highlight the date pertinent to the model'.

Thus, using models can provide culturally sensitive and plausible reading scenarios of texts. This means that the 'intellectual sins of anachronism and ethnocentrism' will be

avoided when we 'insert our own words and meanings into the mouths of biblical authors' (Malina 1996:29; cf. also Neyrey 2010:179–180).

Because of the pivotal role that honour and shame played in the ancient Mediterranean world, this model will be described and then applied to Revelation 2–3.

Pivotal values: Honour and shame pivotal values

Values are more than laws and commandments (Collins 2019:1). Laws and commandments are usually stated explicitly. Values are an implicit 'cultural matrix or cultural script' that influences actions and their evaluation (Malina 2001:13, 27–28). There is agreement among scholars that the values of honour and shame are pivotal for understanding actions in the ancient Mediterranean world (Malina 2001:27–32; Malina & Neyrey 1991; Neyrey 2008; Rohrbauch 2020), and this also holds for Revelation (Neyrey 2019; Pilch 1992).

The reaching and striving for honour (τῷ τιμῆς ὀρέγεσθαι) is what separates humans from animals, according to Xenophon (ca. 430–354 BCE, *Hier*. 7.3). Aristotle (ca. 384–322 BCE, *Eth. nic.* 1123b) describes honour as something acceptable to 'offer to the gods' (θείημεν ὃ τοῖς θεοῖς ἀπονέμομεν) and sought after by 'those of dignity' (οἱ ἐν ἀξιώματι). Seneca (ca. 4 BCE–65 AD, *Ben.* 4.16.2) notes that honour is honourable for its own sake. In the tradition of Israel, children are called to 'honour their father and mother' (כַּבֵּד / τίμα, Ex 20:12; Dt 5:16). And in Ephesians 6:2, the author describes this commandment as 'an important commandment in the announcement' (ἥτις ἐστὶν ἐντολὴ πρώτη ἐν ἐπαγγελίᾳ).

These texts, all referring to individuals, should not be misconstrued as meaning that honour is strived for as an individualistic goal. Because of the dyadic or collectivistic nature of the ancient Mediterranean person, private individual honour without the approval and recognition of the in-group would not be accepted (Malina 2001:58–60). As Rohrbauch (2020:63) notes, 'honor was the status one claimed in the community, together with the all-important public recognition of that claim' (cf. also, Malina 2001:28–30; Malina & Neyrey 1991:25–27). Consequently, to 'claim honor that is not publicly recognised is to play the fool. To grasp more honour that the public will allow us to be a greedy thief' (Rohrbauch 2007:32). The importance of the group cannot be overstated. The group did not only function as the verifying body for a person's honour, but what was seen as honourable differed from group to group. What one group would judge as dishonourable and shameful, another would see as 'worthy of moral affirmation' and honourable (Malina & Neyrey 1991:27; cf. also Neyrey 2008). In his preface in *On Eminent Foreign Leaders*, the Roman author Cornelius Nepos (ca. 110–25 BCE) notes that 'not all peoples look upon the same acts as honourable or shameful.' Instead, what is considered worthy of honour depends on the 'customs' of each group. Pilch (1992), in his study on lying in Revelation 2–3, also highlights this important group-bounded definition of honour. Lying to protect the group's honour in an honour-shame society usually is acceptable. But according to Pilch (1992:134), for John, when 'the honor of Jesus is at stake, defensive strategy of lying and deception to avoid suffering for his sake is condemned' (cf. also, Neyrey 2008).

Although each group would define what is honourable differently, how honour was gained or lost was the same. Honour was either ascribed or acquired (Malina 2001:32–33; Malina & Neyrey 1991:27–29). Ascribed honour would be 'honor that you get simply for being you, not because of anything you do to acquire it' (Malina 2001:32). An example would be honour through birth. The mother's honour is that of the daughter (Ezk 16:44), and the father's honour is that of the son (Mt 11:27; Jn 1:14). The second is acquired honour. This type of honour is 'the socially recognized claim to worth that a person acquires by excelling over others in' the socially stereotypical game of '*challenge and response*' (Malina 2001:33). A detailed discussion of this game is unnecessary, and the following will suffice. Every public encounter, even greeting someone in public (Aristotle, *Eth. nic.* 1163b.13–19; Seneca, *Ira.* 2.34.1), would be perceived as an honour challenge that needed a response. The judgement of how well a person performed in this game would not be determined by themselves, for honour defended but not publicly acknowledged is no honour (cf. Neyrey 1995:124–125). The public verdict of the in-group is what counts in these interactions (Malina 2001:33–36; Malina & Neyrey 1991:29–32; Rohrbauch 2007:52, 79).

Shame is inextricably related to honour but should not be perceived as the opposite of honour. Instead, shame can either be positive or negative. To 'have shame' is positive because such a person displays 'through sensitivity to the court of public opinion, appropriate deference to social superiors' as well as 'a sense of propriety' (Roberts 2020:79). Being shameful and to be shameless 'is the negative experience of shame that results in dishonor' (Roberts 2020:79). Ben Sirach (2nd century BCE) comments that shame (αἰσχύνη) can either 'lead to sin' (ἁμαρτίαν) or be a 'good reputation and favour' (δόξα καὶ χάρις, *Sir.* 4:21). Just like honour, what would be judged as dishonourable or shameful differs from group to group (Neyrey 1995; Malina 2001:51–52). As Roberts (2020:) notes, when:

> … [A] person is shamed, public opinion determines that the person or someone intimately connected with that person, especially a family member, has acted dishonorably or has been acted upon dishonorably. Thus, the same activities and arenas that present opportunities for gaining honor also present opportunities for being shamed. A favorable outcome in public engagement provides honor, and an unfavorable outcome results in dishonor. (pp. 79–80)

A culturally sensitive reading of Revelation should take these pivotal values seriously. The reading of Revelation 2–3 as a test case will now be presented.

Reading scenario: Revelation 2–3 as a test case

Revelation 1: A needed introduction

These seven communities hear that this is an 'apocalypse of Jesus Christ' (Ἀποκάλυψις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ) given by 'God' (ὁ θεὸς) to John of Patmos 'through an angel' (διὰ τοῦ ἀγγέλου, Rv 1:1). This would not have informed the audience of a conscious individual decision made by John to write in a particular literary *genre* (Aune 2006; Linton 2006). The choice would not have been to establish and confirm the authority of John to expound an interpretation of reality (Carey 1999:45–76; DeSilva 2020:70–75; Pagels 2012:30–32). In this preliterary society, this introduction would have been heard as structured in 'culturally specific wording patterns that derive from the social system' (Pilch 2011:45). The social system that modern readers should take seriously in this instance is the view that revelations of this type are purported to come from the divine realm. On this, the emphasis of *Semeia* 14 on the otherworldly elements of apocalypses is correct. The cultural reports from the ancient Mediterranean world confirm this. Achilles notes the importance of listening to 'some seer, or priest, or even a reader of dreams, for dreams also come from Zeus' (Homer, *Il* 1.63–64). For John's Judean communities, with the Hebrew Bible as a foundational sacred text determining their view of reality and how they act therein, the divine agent would be different, but the origins (i.e., the heavenly world) would be the same. In Numbers 12:6, the Lord says that if a 'prophet' is among the people, God will speak to the prophet 'in a dream or visions' (cf. also, Am 3:7; Dn 2:27–28). Even Aristotle, who takes a critical stance, notes that from personal experience, the most plausible explanation for specific dreams is that they come from the gods (*Div. somn.* 462b; cf. also, Gl 1:12, 15; see also, Pilch 2011:194). This shows that John did not need to convince his audience of the authenticity of his experience; they would have accepted it. The content of these visions was also not some intertextual exercise by a scribe looking for proof text to bolster his view of reality. Instead, any 'intertextuality' flowed out of the 'latent discourse' into which John was enculturated (Pilch 2011:41). What John and his communities believed in is what they would have expected to 'see' and 'hear' in the divine realm (Pilch 2011:45, 67, 127). Expectations formed and grounded on their knowledge of Hebrew Scriptures (cf. esp. Koester 2014:123–125). These expected culturally determined patterns lead to these texts' so-called stylistic *genre* patterns (Pilch 2011:135).

So what knowledge was imparted to John from 'Jesus the faithful witness' (ὁ μάρτυς, ὁ πιστός, Rv 1:5), that is a true, honourable and trustworthy witness, who can evaluate the communities?[1]

Revelation 2–3: Honour claims challenged and confirmed

In each of the seven letters, an honour claim is either confirmed, challenged and/or denied, or a reaction to it is

commended or challenged. In Ephesus, there are 'those who call themselves apostles' (τοὺς λέγοντας ἑαυτοὺς ἀποστόλους, Rv 2:3), also so in Sardis (Rv 3:9). Jezebel, in Thyatira, is labelled a one 'who calls herself a prophetess' (ἡ λέγουσα ἑαυτὴν προφῆτιν, Rv 2:20). In Sardis again, it is not only individuals who claim honour for themself, but the community has the honourable 'name of being alive' (ὄνομα ἔχεις ὅτι ζῇς, Rv 3:1). The community of Laodicea makes a similar claim of honour, Christ says of them, 'for you say I am rich and prosperous, and I need nothing' (λέγεις ὅτι πλούσιός εἰμι καὶ πεπλούτηκα καὶ οὐδὲν χρείαν ἔχω, Rv 3:17). In each of these cases, a group or individual makes a claim of honour, but such claims are useless unless legitimised by the group or Jesus who is the mediator between God the Patron, and the client-communities (Neyrey 2019:51–52).

The community has tested the ones claiming to be apostles in Ephesus, and the claim was found to be false (Rv 2:2; cf. also Rv 3:9's evaluation). That this concurs with Christ's assessment can plausibly be seen in the commendation that the community 'hate the works of the Nicolaitans' which Christ 'also hates' (Rv 2:6). Here μισέω [hate] 'has to do with group attachments it means formal rejection and denial of loyalty' (Neyrey 2008:92). Following this then, those in Pergamum who are loyal to the Nicolaitans by 'holding the teaching' of them do not display the needed group loyalty (Rv 2:15). In Thyatira, some in the community acknowledged the honour claim of Jezebel, but now this claim is countered by Christ's judgement. This judgement is true because Christ is a true broker and/or client of God (Son of God) and has the potential to see reality for what it is (eyes like flame, Rv 2:18; cf. also Rv 2:23; Neyrey 2019). Christ challenges this honour claim by noting the actions of Jezebel and those who follow her. They 'practice sexual immorality' and eat 'food sacrificed to idols' (Rv 2:20). The issue here for John is not so much doctrinal; rather, it comes down to the external actions and commitment to God. Drawing on the latent discourse of Israel, those acknowledging Jezebel's honour claim are described as unfaithful to the 'group' (Koester 2014:288–290). Christ also challenges Sardis' honour claim of being alive. If they were alive, their works would have been 'complete in the sight of my God' (Rv 3:1), but now they are not. Like with Jezebel's followers, this is not about some internal personal faith but how they enact their honour claims in public. Laodicea's claim is also shown to be shameful and not a claim to honour. They are 'wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked' (Rv 3:17). This judgement should not be read from an economic standpoint. Instead, being judged this way shows that this group cannot defend their honour claims and maintain their social ranking (Malina 2001:99–100). Stated differently, what was seen as honourable in the sight of the city of Laodicea is judged by Christ to be shameful.

In Revelation 2–3, there are also confirmations of honour and ascribing of honour. In Ephesus, some did what was suitable for the 'sake of the name' of Christ (Rv 2:3). In Pergamum, they 'hold fast' to the 'name' of Christ and in so doing stayed loyal to the group (Rv 2:13). In Sardis, where they have a false 'name of being alive, there are a few names' in the community

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[1]. For a full discussion on how the hearers would have heard Revelation 1 as a presentation of Jesus Christ being a true and honourable witness, whose judgements could be trusted, see the recent work of Neyrey (2019).

'who have not soiled their garment' (Rv 3:4). In this way, their honour is displayed by the clothes they wear (Neyrey 2008:88–89). For the community in Philadelphia, their works and refusal to deny the name of Christ are not only praised, but are also shown that public 'shame on earth is honour in God's sight' (Neyrey 2019:140; Rv 3:8). Christ tells them that he knows they have 'little power' (μικρὰν ἔχεις δύναμιν) according to the judgement of the surrounding communities. That is, they are judges who are unable to defend their honour. But Christ defines honour differently. Their endurance and keeping Christ's name show they are honourable (Neyrey 2019:167).

This preliminary reading of Revelation 2–3 shows that honour and shame, although not mentioned explicitly, played a pivotal role in these communities. The challenge-respond interactions played out in these seven letters had to happen publicly. Otherwise, any claims or denials of honour would 'remain unclear' (Neyrey 1995:125, 2019:140). Thus, it is made clear that although each letter is addressed 'to the community of' a specific city (τῆς ἐκκλησίας, Rv 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14), 'those with an ear' will hear 'what the spirit says to the communities' (Rv 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22; cf. also, Rv 1:3).

Conclusion

A social-scientific reading of Revelation is not meant to replace the received view. Scholarship in the tradition of the received view has produced and continues to make essential contributions to reading Revelation contextually. Instead, social-scientific criticism aims to augment and refine the result of these studies (Neyrey 2019:10). It can help to filter out 'ethnocentric results' that 'are frequently the result of questions which are themselves rooted in ethnocentric bias' (Rohrbauch 2007:61). Models such as, among others, honour and shame, limited goods, and 1st-century personality types, will provide additional culturally sensitive and plausible readings of Revelation. In addition, this will 'improve the plausibility and value' of 'pastoral applications' drawn 'from the Bible' (Pilch 2011:27). Revelation, like the rest of the Bible, was not written for a post-industrial, modern Western individualistic society. It was written for 1st-century Mediterranean communities and was influenced by the cultural-laden discourses of their time. That is, the wording and the cultural systems provide the meaning of the text. This was a world that can rightfully be described as a '*terra incognita*.' But the world underlying Revelation can become less strange by adding the critical and careful use of social-scientific models to the hermeneutical toolbox of contextual readings thereof.

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