# SHOUTING IN THE APOCALYPSE:
# THE INFLUENCE OF FIRST-CENTURY ACCLAMATIONS
# ON THE PRAISE UTTERANCES IN REVELATION 4:8 AND 11

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Several arguments have been submitted as to the origin of, or the influence on, the praise sections in the Apocalypse of John. One position states that John was simply conveying exactly what he heard without engaging in any editorial activity. However, Beale states that "the unique correspondence of the language [of Revelation] at different points to different Greek versions, the MT, and early Jewish traditions points to the probability that he [John] depicts what he has seen with interpretive glosses from his learned biblical tradition."[1] If Beale's position is correct, it may be assumed that John made editorial adjustments when writing about what he heard as well as what he saw.

A second possibility as to the origin of the songs in Revelation is that John has inserted existing hymns into his visions that were used in early church liturgy. Carnegie convincingly argues against this position, stating that the praise units must be compositions of the author because of their close relationship with their immediate context.[2] Had they been imported from existing material, this connection would have been unlikely. Further, John O'Rourke notes that it is highly improbable that the hymn of Rev 5:9 was used in early church worship. O'Rourke's position is based on the grounds that the acclamation, which proclaims that the lamb is "worthy to take the book," would have been unusual and it would not have had any significance to the worshippers.[3]

A third option for influences on the praise utterances is that John edited what he heard, influenced by Jewish or Christian apocalyptic traditions.[4] Closely related to these possible sources of influence is Jewish mysticism.

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[1] Gregory K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 368.

[2] David R. Carnegie, "Worthy is the Lamb: The Hymns in Revelation," in *Christ the Lord: Studies in Christology Presented to Donald Guthrie* (ed. Harold H. Rowdon; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1982) 246.

[3] John J. O'Rourke, "Hymns of the Apocalypse," *CBQ* 30 (1968) 402.

[4] Josephine Massyngberde Ford, "The Christological Function of the Hymns in the Apocalypse of John," *AUSS* 36 (1998) 209; Richard J. Bauckham, "The Worship of Jesus in Apocalyptic Christianity," *NTS* 27 (1981) 327–31.

One branch of ancient Jewish mysticism called *merkabah* is based on Ezekiel 1, where the focus of the tradition was on the throne chariot of God. Some commentators argue that *merkabah* mysticism shaped John in his composition of Revelation, especially the hymnic portions of chapters 4 and 5.[5] The writers of *merkabah* mysticism speak of ascending to the *merkabah* (throne of God) in a mystical trance. Singing was part of the ritual of the mystic who wished to enter into the trance and begin the ascent.[6] However, rather than a private mystical experience of the *merkabah* mystics, Revelation details John entering the throne room to learn the divine plan for the consummation of redemptive history.[7]

Many commentators correctly recognize the author's dependence on the OT in shaping his composition.[8] Swete mentions that of the 404 verses in Revelation, 278 contain references to the Hebrew Scriptures.[9] However, Jon Paulien notes that in all these connections, there is not one direct quotation. John has indeed borrowed from his sacred tradition but with modification.[10] Another assertion argues that John has added his own interpretive stylistic glosses to the praises, influenced by pagan or imperial cult hymns or acclamations. While some commentators have slightly developed the possible link to hymns sung to emperors in the first century, most only briefly mention the possible influence of acclamations chanted to the emperor on John's composition of his praise units.[11]

None of these approaches needs to be exclusionary. John may have drawn from a variety of genres and sources. However, this article will assert that the author of Revelation shaped his praise utterances, in part, based on the form of acclamations shouted to dignitaries during the early Roman Empire. Initially, this article will define acclamations and discuss their form and function in the first-century Roman world. Furthermore, it will demonstrate that the praise sayings in Rev 4:8 and 4:11 display many of the characteristics of acclamations, which were a popular form of communication during John's day. The author of the Apocalypse indeed was not limited to one influence on his composition but evaluated the empire's message from the perspective

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[5] Christopher Rowland, "Revelation," in vol. 12 of *NIB* (ed. Leander E. Keck; Nashville: Abingdon, 1998) 596–99; W. Hulitt Gloer, "Worship God! Liturgical Elements in the Apocalypse of John," *RevExp* 98 (2001) 50.

[6] Robert H. Smith, "'Worthy is the Lamb' and Other Songs of the Revelation," *CurTM* 25 (1998) 504.

[7] Richard J. Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993) 136.

[8] Beale, *Book of Revelation* 366; Ben Witherington, *Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 13–14; Jon Paulien, "Criteria and the Assessment of Allusions to the Old Testament in the Book of Revelation," in *Studies in the Book of Revelation*. (ed. Steve Moyise; New York: T & T Clark, 2001) 113–29.

[9] As cited by Alan F. Johnson, "Revelation," n.p., *EBC on CD-ROM*, Version 5.0. 2001.

[10] Paulien, "Criteria and the Assessment" 115.

[11] Davie Aune, "The Influence of Roman Imperial Court Ceremonial on the Apocalypse of John," *BR* 28 (1983) 5–26; Lucetta Mowry, "Revelation 4–5 and Early Christian Liturgical Usage," *JBL* 71 (1952) 75–84.

of the Hebrew Scriptures and adopted his counter communiqué borrowing from the form of these common group chants.[12]

## II. ACCLAMATIONS DEFINED

*Acclamatio* is the Latin word from which the English word "acclamation" is derived. It is defined as any shouted comment of praise, approval, or protest.[13] On occasion, the acclamations were sung.[14] Roman soldiers on the battlefield recited a popular acclamation when they hailed their commander as Imperator.[15] In Roman culture, acclamations played a role in both private life (e.g. at weddings) and in public (e.g. at *adventus* ceremonies).[16] During the lifetime of Cicero, acclamations were heard at the theater, games, *contiones*, trials, funerals, and just about any other public event.

## III. THE HISTORY OF ACCLAMATIONS

The earliest acclamations found expression in the ancient Near Eastern religious rituals where worshippers shouted to honor the deities.[17] It was a means of expressing piety toward the gods. An inscription of Darius at Persepolis, "Great is Ahura Mazda, Greatest of the Gods," bears testimony to the usage of acclamations in connection with ancient cults.[18] Ramsey MacMullen traces the origins of acclamations to Hellenistic audiences who would cheer on their favorite performers or jockeys in a rhythmic fashion.[19] He cites an example of a performance chant, *"Felicior Augusto, melior Traino."*

Acclamations also found expression in the political realm. In the Persian Empire, evidence for shouting is attested in the Achaemenid royal ritual where "O King, live forever" seems to have been a stock phrase used for a monarch.[20] Shouting was a basic form of validation employed by the Macedonian army when it was acting as the representative of the people, although the evidence is debated.[21]

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[12] For purposes of this article, I will assume the date of composition of Revelation was during the reign of Domitian (AD 81–96) and will draw most of my evidence from the first century and early second century AD.

[13] Gregory S. Aldrete, *Gestures and Acclamations in Ancient Rome* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999) 101.

[14] Cf. Suet. *Aug*. 57.

[15] Aldrete, *Gestures and Acclamations* 102.

[16] Ernst Badian, "Acclamation," in *OCD*, 3d ed.

[17] Charlotte Roueche, "Acclamations in the Later Roman Empire: New Evidence from Aphrodisias," *JRS* 74 (1984) 181.

[18] David Potter, "Performance, Power and Justice in the High Empire," in *Roman Theater and Society* (E. Togo Salmon Papers I; ed. William J. Slater; Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1996) 133.

[19] Ramsey MacMullen, *Changes in the Roman Empire: Essays in the Ordinary* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) 81; M. P. Charlesworth, "Pietas and Victoria: The Emperor and the Citizen," *JRS* 33 (1943) 5.

[20] Neh 2:3; Dan 2:4, 4:34.

[21] Potter, "Performance, Power" 133.

Few written acclamations exist. Pliny states that acclamations were largely used by the Senate to communicate its views. Unlike the speeches of the emperors, however, acclamations were never kept in official records.[22] David Potter states that actual inscription of acclamations does not begin until the second century AD, with much of the evidence from the fourth to the sixth century AD.[23] The limited written records of acclamations may be due to their wide usage which would have made it unnecessary to record them for recall.[24]

## IV. ACCLAMATIONS IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

The bestowing of a simple epithet, such as the formula honoring the gods, was an important part of the ceremonies surrounding the Roman emperor.[25] On election day, the Senate proclaimed regarding Trajan, *"Tanto maior, tanto augustior"* ("so great, so revered").[26] Supporting the contention that this form of media could be bought and was not entirely genuine, Nero hired cheerleaders from Alexandria to shout acclamations in public for his benefit in Rome.[27] He paid his claques a salary of 400,000 sesterces.[28] Another example of acclamations associated with a Roman ruler is the chant to Nero stating, "Glorious Caesar! Our Apollo, our Augustus, another Pythian! By thyself we swear O Caesar, none surpasses thee."[29] Upon returning from Greece, he was also greeted by the crowds with the honorific title "O Divine Voice."[30] Celebrations of victorious military campaigns by generals and emperors provided another venue for the shouting of acclamations. Domitian went out on military campaigns in person four times and received twenty-three acclamations for victory won by him or by a general fighting under his authority.[31] Clearly, acclamations were common in many events connected to the ruling emperor.

## V. THE FORM OF ACCLAMATIONS DURING THE ROMAN EMPIRE

Acclamations could consist of a simple praise, various titles, rhythmic sentences, rhythmic formulas, or phrases that could be shouted or sung.[32] Their rhythmic nature provided appeal and quick recall.[33] Consequently, they could be easily learned and chanted in unison by large groups of people. The

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[22] Plin. *Pan*. 75.2.
[23] Potter, "Performance, Power" 144.
[24] Aldrete, *Gestures and Acclamations* 110.
[25] Roueche, "Acclamations" 182.
[26] *Pan*. 71.4.
[27] Suet. *Ner*. 20.3; 25.
[28] Suet. *Ner*. 20.
[29] Cass. Dio *Epit*. LXII 20, 5.
[30] Ibid.
[31] As cited by Betty Rose Nagle, *The Silvae of Statius* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004) 20.
[32] Aldrete, *Gestures and Acclamations* 103.
[33] Ibid. 134.

repetition of certain sounds in a discernable pattern is apparent in the reiteration of peoples' praise of Domitian and his wife, "*Domino et Dominae feliciter*" ("Good fortune to our Lord and Lady").[34]

Acclamations were frequently repeated over and over.[35] Cassius Dio records that the whole population and the senators would spend an entire afternoon offering continuous shouting in chorus to the ruler.[36] Repetition also occurred in words and phrases within the chant. Anaphora, where words at the beginning of clauses are repeated, is exemplified in this cheer to Trajan, "*Crede nobis, crede tibi*" ("Trust us, trust yourself").[37] Repetition is also present in the crowd's laudations to Germanicus when they proclaimed, "*Salva Roma, Salva Patria, Salvus est Germnanicus*" ("Safe is Rome, safe is the country, because Germanicus is safe").[38]

The chant to Germanicus exemplifies another aspect of acclamations, namely, that they often contained similar grammatical endings (-a, -us), which aided in recall. "*Tanto maior, tanto augustior*" ("so great, so revered") illustrates the use of repetition, the use of an equal number of syllables, and the use of similar grammatical endings.[39] Repetition and similar-sounding endings were both characteristics of acclamations and the resulting cadence lent to its attractiveness.

Gregory Alredete identifies another form of the acclamation employed during the Roman era, which he calls the cause-and-effect or equation acclamation.[40] In the equation acclamation, two objects or actions were related in a cause-and-effect relationship. For example, on one occasion, the Senate shouted, "You have wished what was lawful; we have done what was appropriate."[41]

## VI. THE FUNCTION OF ACCLAMATIONS IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

One purpose of acclamations during the Roman Empire was that it gave the emperor a way to measure public opinion. During the Roman Empire, no standardized procedure was in place for the selection of a new ruler.[42] It was the army who often selected the emperor.[43] The support of the army was of utmost importance for the potential new ruler as well as the reigning emperor, because imperial power rested on force and the threat of force.[44] Tacitus expresses the reality of non-democratic elections when he states that the emperor could be selected outside of Rome, meaning that the power

[34] Suet. *Dom*. 13.
[35] MacMullen, *Changes*, 81.
[36] Cass. Dio *Epit*. LXII 20.5.
[37] Plin. *Pan*. 74.2.
[38] Suet. *Calig*. 6.
[39] Plin. *Pan*. 71.4.
[40] Aldrete, *Gestures and Acclamations* 139.
[41] SHA *Avid. Cass.* 13.
[42] Aldrete, *Gestures and Acclamations* 148.
[43] Sabine G. MacCormack, *Art and Ceremony in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981) 161.
[44] Aldrete, *Gestures and Acclamations* 149.

of the Roman people expressed by the Senate had little or nothing to do with the selection of the ruler.[45] After the reign of Augustus, the Senate's role was more symbolic. Even so, the potential emperor had to have the support of the masses, the army, and the Roman Senate in order to be a successful replacement to the throne.[46] The media of acclamation determined the affirmation of each of these people groups.[47] Acclamations were most significant at the accession of the emperor for the creation and recognition of his legitimacy.[48] It was the ritual through which the awkward period between the death of one emperor and his replacement could be bridged and secured, thereby legitimizing the new ruler.

The fact that the emperors employed individuals to chant acclamations suggests that another function of these utterances was to serve as a means of communicating imperial propaganda. As noted, the consent of the governed in the seating of emperors was important. To legitimize that power by emperors, the argument by consensus (*argument consensu omium*) was communicated through imperial propaganda shouted by hired cheerleaders.[49]

Acclamations were not only beneficial for assisting the emperor in determining public opinion and disseminating imperial media but also profitable for the Senate and the plebes because it gave them a sense of influence and voice in the selection of the emperor. Through acclamation, the plebes who had lost political clout in the transition from republic to empire were able to make the will of the people known.[50] By the shouting of imperial titles and by bestowing honorary phrases toward the ruler, they were in effect "electing" or nominating the empire's new leader. When widespread, these acclamations expressed the consensus of the population. In acclamations, expressing consensus was a means for separating the *princeps* from the *tyrannus*.[51]

Even after an emperor had been in power for some time, when the people gathered at the gates of the city for the *adventus* of their ruler, their shouts reaffirmed his accession.[52] In addition to recognizing the legitimacy of officials or showing their dissatisfaction with people or policies through the use of acclamations, the people of Rome and her provinces showed gratitude for imperial benefactions.[53] Philo notes that Caligula was hailed as "savior" and "benefactor" of his people with the understanding that he would bring

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[45] Tac. *Hist*. 1.4.

[46] Aldrete, *Gestures and Acclamations* 149.

[47] Aldrete notes from Tacitus' *Histories* 1.17 that when Piso was selected to replace Galbo, the partisans discussed the best location to make the announcement. The three locations considered were the senate, the rostra, and the praetorian camp. The three locations represented each important group whose voice legitimized the selection, namely the Senate, the army (Praetorian Guard), and the people (ibid. 156).

[48] Ibid. 147.

[49] Aune, "Influence" 18.

[50] Aldrete, *Gestures and Acclamations* 150.

[51] Clifford Ando, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Royalty in the Roman Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) 200.

[52] Aldrete, *Gestures and Acclamations* 151.

[53] Ando, *Imperial Ideology* 200.

material blessings to the Roman Empire.[54] The chanting of praises was the people's act of reciprocity for the inducement of food, money, entertainment, and protection provided by their emperor-benefactor.[55] Acclamations were the emperor's reward for the benefactions given to his subjects.

## VII. THE ACCLAMATION IN REVELATION 4:8B

At least seventeen instances of spoken or sung chants appear in the book of Revelation.[56] The fourth chapter contains two of these praise units. In Revelation 4, John is taken into the heavenly throne room where the central image is the one who occupies the throne. God is the recipient of the worship. John witnesses a divine council of twenty-four elders and four living creatures performing various acts of homage to the one sitting on the throne.[57]

This is the atmosphere in which the reader is introduced to the four living creatures incessantly λέγοντες ("speaking") a praise to God.[58] The praise is spoken rather than sung, suggesting it did not have a hymnic influence or background. Revelation 4:8b has many similarities with the acclamations offered to emperors in first-century Rome.

Similar to chants to the emperor, Rev 4:8b contains several exalted designations. The trisagion is the initial august designation, and the author most likely borrowed it from Isaiah 6, making some modifications. There is evidence that emperors were considered to posses the attribute of holiness or sacredness. In Statius' *Silvae*, Domitian is referred to as "*sacer . . . Germanicus*."[59] In a second-century oath, the reigning emperor was specified as "the most holy (*sacratissimi*) emperor."[60] However, in John's acclamation, the most sacred is the one seated on the heavenly throne.

The holiness designation is repeated three times, satisfying another property of acclamations, namely that words and phrases are often repeated within the laudation. In Hebrew, the double repetition of a word implies

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[54] Philo *Leg*. 4.1.

[55] *Tac. Ann.* 4.64.

[56] The initial praise to Christ (Rev 1:4–7); the praise of the four living creatures (Rev 4:8); the praises of the twenty-four elders (Rev 4:11; 11:17–18); the praises of the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders (Rev 5:9–10); the praises of the many angels (Rev 5:12, 13; 7:12); the praises of the great multitude of saints (Rev 7:10; 19:1–3); the praises of the loud voice(s) in heaven (Rev 11:15; 12:10–12; 19:5); and the praises of the seven angels (including the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb; Rev 15:3–4, 6–8).

[57] David Aune has shown several similarities between the activities described in Revelation 4 and the rituals customary in Roman court ceremonies of the first century ("The Influence of Roman Imperial Court Ceremonial on the Apocalypse of John," *BR* 28 [1983] 5–26).

[58] John may have drawn from Ezekiel 1 as his source for the four creatures. Many scholars claim that they are "celestial doubles" of God's animate creation (Robert W. Wall, *Revelation* [NIBC; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991] 94; Josephine Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* [AB 38; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975] 80).

[59] Stat. *Silv*. 5.2.177.

[60] Keith Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves* (Sociological Studies in Roman History Volume 1; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978) 225.

emphasis, and a rare threefold petition designates the superlative.[61] The threefold holiness phrase in Rev 4:8b is an exalted honorary epithet. It attributes absolute holiness to God and communicates that he will not tolerate evil in the anti-holy empire, which presently rules over it.[62]

The second line of the praise includes the epithet "Lord God Almighty." It is taken from the LXX (e.g. Amos 3:13; 4:13; 5:14–16; 9:5–6, 15; Hos 12:6 [5]; Nah 3:5; Zech 10:3; Mal 2:16). According to Suetonius, Domitian had procurators send out letters with the phrase "our Lord and God," and he wanted to be addressed in the same manner.[63] From the heavenly perspective, Lord God is the address offered to glorify the Supreme Being seated on the heavenly throne.

The designation ὁ παντοκράτωρ signifies "almighty" or "all sovereign" or "controlling all things" and is used as both an adjective and a noun.[64] The designation is rarely found in the pagan sphere, but in the LXX the term is used approximately 180 times of God as an expression of his divine might.[65] The living creatures' emphasis on the Lord God's utter sovereignty is aimed against the claim for power by Roman emperors.

The appellation "was, is, and is to come" stems from Jewish exegetical tradition found in Exod 3:14 and Deut 32:39, where the title expresses the idea of divine infinity and sovereignty over history. The theme of God's eternality is a noteworthy claim in light of the Roman ideology of *aeterna* (and the Greek equivalent αἰών).[66] The connotation of the term communicated a state of durability.[67] In the first century, this ideology was applied to emperors, cities (*urbs aeterna*), the Roman people (*Aeternitas Populi Romani*), and the empire itself (*pax aeterna*). Roman rulers presented themselves as guarantors of all that was good about Rome.[68] Nero, when returning to Rome in AD 68 after his travels, was hailed as "the only one from the beginning of time."[69] Domitian also claimed to embody the ability to maintain this eternal condition.[70] In the third line of the creatures' praise, the title of God is "conceived in terms of time."[71] God is described as the one who lives forever and

[61] As cited by Alan F. Johnson, "Revelation," n.p., *EBC on CD-ROM*; Version 5.0. 2001; Grant R. Osborne refers to the repetition of a word as an epizeuxis or an epanadiplosis. It occurs when a crucial word is repeated for stress (*The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991] 106).

[62] Wall, *Revelation* 96.

[63] Suet. *Dom*. 13.2; Cass. Dio 67.4.7.

[64] R. Feldmeier, "Almighty," in *DDD* (ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Peter W. van der Horst; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 20.

[65] Ibid. 20.

[66] Wes Howard-Brook, *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999) 233–34.

[67] Ibid. 233.

[68] Ibid.

[69] Cass. Dio LXII 20.5.

[70] Howard-Brook, *Unveiling Empire* 233.

[71] R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1950) 10.

ever and as the one who possesses the reign that is the most durable in nature.

The four living creatures' praise in Rev 4:8b is also similar to Roman acclamations in its rhythmic character. James L. Bailey and Lyle D. Vander Broek note that rhythm can be expressed in numerous fashions. It can be expressed "through patterns of repetition in syllable stress (meter), through the repetition of vowel or consonant sounds and through the arrangement of clauses or thoughts."[72] This particular passage has the form of Semitic and OT literary tradition.[73] The rhythm of Semitic poetry does not result from the alternation of long and short syllables but is best described as a rhythm of words and thoughts, "short clauses around a central notion, repeated in corresponding clauses."[74] This is also referred to as thought rhythm. Revelation 4:8b is poetical. It does have music in its sound. It contains a steady succession of rhythmic pulses. This rhythm can be detected by arranging the text's structure. While it is not certain how Revelation would have been read in the churches in Asia Minor, G. P. Luttikhuizen believes that the reader would have made a short pause after each clause (each colon) at the point that modern translations add punctuation marks.[75] Luttikhuizen's reading results in three lines, with each line proclaiming three titles or attributes of the one sitting on the throne.

The pattern is as follows:

ἅγιος ἅγιος ἅγιος
κύριος ὁ θεὸς ὁ παντοκράτωρ
ὁ ἦν καὶ ὁ ὢν καὶ ὁ ἐρχόμενος.

Consequently, Rev 4:8b does not achieve its cadence through similar grammatical endings in words (though there are some) or by the use of an equal number of syllables in successive lines. The praise utterance derives its cadence and its rhythmic nature from its structure of three three-part utterances.

This particular chant does not contain a cause-and-effect relationship. It is, however, similar to acclamations in one final respect. The laudation was repeated. The text says, καὶ ἀνάπαυσιν οὐκ ἔχουσιν ἡμέρας καὶ νυκτὸς λέγοντες ("without rest, day or night they would be speaking"). The participle λέγοντες is a customary present indicating that the chanting occurs either regularly or that it is ongoing.[76] Tacitus claimed that "[d]ay and night the applause

[72] James L. Bailey and Lyle D. Vander Broek, *Literary Forms in the New Testament: A Handbook* (Louisville: John Knox, 1992) 77.

[73] G. P. Luttikhuizen, "The Poetic Character of Revelation 4 and 5," in *Early Christian Poetry* (ed. J. Den Boeft, R. Van Den Broek, A. F. J. Klijn, G. Quispel, and J .C. M. Van Winden; New York: Brill, 1993) 16.

[74] Ibid.

[75] Ibid. 18.

[76] Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 521.

and acclamations of the Augustiani echoed around the palace, using such extravagant terms while describing the beauty and voice of the emperor, that they could have been applied to the gods."[77] If the four living creatures represent all creation and "the Divine immanence in nature," what might be depicted here is the ceaseless acclamation of creation offering a ceaseless tribute of praise to God.[78]

Not only does John compose his acclamation in the style of first-century acclamations, he also challenges the prevailing ideologies of the Roman Empire. In language drawn from the Hebrew Bible, John describes God in a manner that supersedes the rulers of his day. Revelation worships those who have authority. According to the four living creatures, God's authority flows from his status as the thrice-holy Lord and God, the Almighty, the eternal one.

## VIII. THE ACCLAMATION IN REVELATION 4:11

Subsequent to the honorary gesture of laying their crowns before the one seated on the throne, the twenty-four elders offer their praise utterance in Rev 4:11. Like the chant by the four living creatures, the saying in Rev 4:11 displays characteristics of first-century acclamations. The first property of acclamations that Rev 4:11 demonstrates is the existence of rhythm and cadence. R. H. Charles arranges this chant into a four-line praise to God. The four-line arrangement results in the following structure:

ἄξιος εἶ, ὁ κύριος καὶ ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν,
  λαβεῖν τὴν δόξαν καὶ τὴν τιμὴν καὶ τὴν δύναμιν,
ὅτι σὺ ἔκτισας τὰ πάντα
  καὶ διὰ τὸ θέλημά σου ἦσαν καὶ ἐκτίσθησαν.

The first and second cola contain words with similar ending sounds (-ος, -ν), creating a cadence that heightens the power of this utterance. As noted earlier, the use of similar grammatical endings is found in first-century chants. The final two lines are parallel clauses characteristic of Semitic poetry, creating a thought pattern or thought rhythm about the creative nature of God. The two lines are related to one another by synonymous parallelism and introduced by a ὅτι clause, substantiating the reason God is worthy to be honored. The parallelism of the two lines can be translated as follows:

"For you created all things,
and by your will they were created."

In a different arrangement, Horst proposes "three cola each consisting of three emphases: (1) the ἄξιος εἶ prediction followed by two divine names, (2)

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[77] As cited by Dominique Cuss, *Imperial Cult and Honorary Terms in the New Testament* (Fribourg: University Press, 1974) 78.
[78] Charles, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary* 126.

three substantives dependent on λαβεῖν, and (3) three creation sayings."[79]
Horst's arrangement also exhibits a rhythmic pattern.

ἄξιος εἶ, ὁ κύριος καὶ ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν,
   λαβεῖν τὴν δόξαν καὶ τὴν τιμὴν καὶ τὴν δύναμιν,
ὅτι σὺ ἔκτισας τὰ πάντα καὶ διὰ τὸ θέλημά σου ἦσαν καὶ ἐκτίσθησαν.

This structure results in three three-part chants giving the acclamation its
beat. The rhythm, rhyming, and poetic nature of these texts is required if
they were to be chanted or sung in unison by a group.

The whole utterance also exhibits the cause-effect relationship typical
of some acclamations during the empire. The phrase "You are worthy . . .
because of . . . [what you accomplished]" suggests a pattern for a victory
song that was used in the empire to praise a ruler, conqueror, god, or hero
who by his actions altered the condition of life for the masses.[80]

Repetition was another attribute of first-century acclamations. The fre-
quency with which this saying was spoken depends on how the conjunction
ὅταν in Rev 4:9 is understood. R. H. Charles notes that many commentators
are in agreement that ὅταν δώσουσιν is to be rendered so that the action in
verses 10–11 is represented as occurring as often as that which happens in
verse 8.[81] Hence it is translated "whenever the living creatures give . . . ."
This rendering communicates that whenever the living creatures praise the
Creator, the response of the elders is to relinquish their crowns at the feet
of the occupant of the throne and utter their exalted chant. Consequently, in
the same manner as acclamations in first-century Rome, the elders' utterance
is repeated at each praise gesture of the four creatures.

The first line of the acclamation in Rev 4:11 consists of a short honorary
declaration similar to Roman acclamations. The adjective and verb ἄξιος εἶ,
("worthy are you"), followed by the nouns ὁ κύριος καὶ ὁ θεός. "Lord" and
"God" (*dominus et deus noster*), are designations that were noted earlier
as being titles Domitian insisted on having applied to him.[82] According to
J. Daryl Charles, the Latin *vere dignus*, "worthy are you," was a common
accolade paid to an emperor in the celebration of his arrival.[83] W. Hulitt
Gloer states that the "worthy" acclamation has no parallel in the Hebrew
Bible or in Judaism and believes its origins are to be from the political
arena.[84] Flavius Josephus uses the term to refer to a person being fit or
appropriate for a position to be held by a figure such as the emperor's body-
guard, an admiral, or commander of the Roman army.[85] It is also used for

[79] David E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5* (WBC 52A; Dallas: Word, 1997) 309.
[80] James L. Bailey, "Genre Analysis," in *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpreta-
tion* (ed. Joel B. Green; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 219.
[81] Charles, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary* 127.
[82] Suet. *Dom*. 13.4.
[83] J. Daryl Charles, "Imperial Pretensions and the Throne-Vision of the Lamb: Observations on
the Function of Revelation 5," *CTR* 7 (1993) 96.
[84] Gloer, "Worship God!" 42.
[85] Jos. *JW* 5.46; *AJ* 11.32.

the suitability of specific words or deeds spoken or performed on behalf of an individual.[86] In *De Bello Judaico*, Josephus describes the triumphal reception of Vespasian in Rome after the siege of Jerusalem.[87] Significant for this study is the specific acclamations heaped on the dignitary.

The text reads,

> those that enjoyed any remarkable dignities could not have patience enough to stay in Rome, but made haste to meet him at a very distance from it: nay indeed, none of the rest could endure the delay of seeing him, but did all pour out of the city in such crowds, and were so universally possessed with the opinion that it was easier and better for them to go out than to stay there, that this was the very first time that the city perceived itself almost empty of its citizens; for those that stayed within were fewer that those that went out. But as soon as the news was come that he was hard by, and those that had met him first related with what courtesy he received everyone that came to him, then it was that the whole multitude that had remained in the city, with their wives and children, came into the road and waited for him there; and for those whom he passed by, they made all sorts of acclamations on account of the joy they had to see him, and the pleasantness of his countenance, and styled him their *benefactor* and *savior*, and the only person who was *worthy* to be ruler of the city of Rome.[88]

The terms in the second line of the saying in Rev 4:11 are associated with Greco-Roman benefactor language and express values that were important in the Mediterranean world. The terms δόξαν, τιμὴν, and δύναμιν were commonly used by clients to honor emperors in response to benefactions received from them.[89] Martial declared Domitian's glory by referring to him as the *terrarum gloria*—"glory of the earth."[90] Martial also refers to the good character of Domitian's imperial staff resulting from his powerful—"*potentis*" rule.[91] Statius claimed that Domitian's "power" extends to the wonders of nature.[92] However, John understood that these were appropriate designations for God alone, the patron *par excellence*.

The act of creation is the supreme manifestation of power. Like the terms "glory," "honor," and "power," the expression "creator" also was a term expressive of benefaction in the ancient system of patronage and clientelism. Many benefactors bestowed their largess and were rewarded with public honor.[93] Augustus was commonly portrayed as a deified emperor who founded

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[86] Jos. *AJ* 8.53; Luke 7:4.

[87] Jos. *BJ* 7.71ff.

[88] Flavius Josephus, *The Great Roman-Jewish War A.D. 66–70 (De Bello Judaico)* 7 (trans. William Whiston; rev. D. S. Margoliouth; ed. William R. Farmer; Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1970) 255. Emphasis added.

[89] David DeSilva, "Honor Discourse and Rhetorical Strategy of the Apocalypse of John," *JSNT* 71 (1998) 87.

[90] Mart. 2.92.1.

[91] Mart. 9.79.7.

[92] Stat. *Silv*. 4.3.128–135.

[93] Jerome Neyrey, "God, Benefactor, and Patron: The Major Cultural Model for Interpreting the Deity in Greco-Roman Antiquity," *JSNT* 27 n.p. [cited 9 October 2006]; online: http://www.nd.edu/~jneyrey1/God-benefactor.htm.

the new world and ushered in the present structures of society.[94] However, "God has indebted all living beings by virtue of being the creator and sustainer of all of life."[95] The entire acclamation of Rev 4:11 honors God as Creator and Sustainer, bestowing appropriate epithets to that end.

## IX. THE SETTING OF REVELATION AND JOHN'S MESSAGE

A close reading of the first three chapters of Revelation, which contain the letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor, reveals that most Christians in Asia were functioning well in society. The text relates that John and a few others did come into conflict with fellow provincials and Roman authorities and they were commended for their faithfulness. However, others in the churches were rebuked for their behavior and seemed to have enjoyed a more comfortable status. The fact is that many Christians had been enjoying too much comfort and therefore were in danger of allying too closely with Rome and her values.[96] These values ran counter to God and his principles. Consequently, John's message was multi-directed, namely to comfort those in danger of Rome's abuse and to persuade others to take evasive action because they had embraced Rome's values and ideology.

John's counter-imperial message to the congregations was competing with a tremendous media blitz propagated by Rome. Several venues were used to communicate the values and ideology of the empire to her subjects. Coins, inscribed monuments, imperial choirs, hired chanters, and literature were all vehicles used for the distribution of the imperial message to the masses. For example, Domitian used the poets Martial and Statius for propaganda purposes to project him as a strong leader of a united and devoted state—especially after the revolt of Saturninus.[97] The emperor Domitian also erected an Aswan granite obelisk that now sits in the center of the Piazza Navona.[98] The inscription on the structure praises the emperor as a ruler with divine origin.

To counter Rome's media offensive, John took a familiar mode of communication, fabricated his own chants, and crafted a message shaped by divine truth. John was aware that acclamations address their rhythm and speech

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[94] Steven J. Friesen, Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 198.

[95] David DeSilva, *Honor, Patronage, and Kinship: Unlocking the New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000) 126. Numerous references to God as creator are found in the Psalms (Ps 8:3; 33:6–9; 95:5; 102:25; 136:5–9).

[96] Idolatry was taught within the church. Balaam and Balak put a stumbling block before the Israelites so they would eat food sacrificed to idols (Rev 2:14; see Num 31:16; 25:1–3). Jezebel was teaching the church to practice fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols (Rev 2:14; 2:20). Her influence resulted in the erection of an altar in Israel to a foreign god and in King Ahab's worship of Baal (1 Kgs 18:19).

[97] Alex Hardie, *Statius and the Silvae: Poets, Patrons and Epideixis in the Greco-Roman World* (Trowbridge: Redwood Burn, 1983) 46.

[98] Carole Newlands, *Statius' Silvae and the Poetics of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 11.

to portions of the mind, which are not accessible to argument.[99] John understood that praises spoken together with fellow Christ-followers had the power to console and build community solidarity. He believed that Christians should remain loyal to their confession of faith because those acclamations uttered in heaven were truthful and exemplified the acclamations that should be uttered on earth. The acclamations invited participation in the heavenly chants in order to comfort those suffering and correct those succumbing to Rome's idolatrous attractions.

## X. CONCLUSION

This article has discussed the form, characteristics, and function of acclamations used during the early Roman Empire. Furthermore, it has shown that many of the attributes of these acclamations are also characteristic of the praise utterances in Rev 4:8 and 4:11. The chants in these passages contain honorary titles. Some terms are spoken repeatedly within the chants, as are the sayings themselves. The praises have a musical cadence, often because of the use of words with similar grammatical endings. At other times, the cadence is achieved by parallel thought patterns.

Finally, like some types of first-century chants, Rev 4:11 exhibits a cause-effect relationship. More study is needed on the other praise sections of the Apocalypse in order to determine if they also bear resemblance to first-century acclamations. Clearly, in Rev 4:8 and 4:11 John has chosen to use a popular form of media to communicate his counter-imperial message, namely that God reigns and that his ideology prevails. John believes that gratitude is due the ultimate patron, the Creator and Sustainer of the world. John has chosen to challenge popular ideologies of Rome and to evaluate them based on divine truth. The outcome of this approach is that John records two acclamations directing and redirecting the praises of the churches.

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[99] As cited by Smith, "Worthy is the Lamb" 506.