



Whom do the Ephesians love: Christ or Caesar?

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Abstract

Jesus' remonstrance to the Ephesian church in Revelation 2:4 not to leave their first love is one of the most vivid and familiar metaphors in the Bible. This article begins with a discussion of two lexical issues in Johannine literature. John's use of several binary metaphors in the Apocalypse, is explored. Twelve interpretations about what leaving one's first love means are examined next. The question is then posed: Who or what is the second love of the Ephesian Christians? Inscriptions from the latter half of the first century CE show that Ephesian elites were beginning to identify themselves as φιλοσέβαστοι (*philosebastoi*), that is, 'emperor-lovers'. Given John's vivid denunciation of the imperial cult throughout Revelation, is it possible that some believers were accommodating their faith by trying to express love both to Jesus and to Caesar? Since the Nicolaitans are mentioned in the Ephesian and Pergamene letters – both centers of imperial cult worship – might emperor-loving be the negative behavior being exposed? The article closes with a discussion of John 19:12 wherein the Jewish leaders blackmail the governor Pontius Pilate. They charge that if he is a friend of Caesar, he cannot release Jesus. It is questioned whether this exchange might also have had resonance with some believers in Ephesus desiring to follow both Christ and Caesar.

Key words: *philosebastos*, Revelation, first love, binary, emperor worship

Introduction

The well-known blues musician from Mississippi, Bo Diddley, famously put the question in his 1956 hit song: "Who do you love?" Despite his grammatical infelicity, Bo was making the same point as Jesus in Revelation 2:4 when he stated: 'You have left your first love'¹ (τὴν ἀγάπην σου τὴν πρώτην ἀφῆκες). The metaphorical images in the prophetic messages to the Seven Churches in Revelation chapters 2–3 are undoubtedly the most familiar passages in the book. These are found primarily in exhortations in the Praise, Blame, and Victor sections of each letter.² Pastors have used these images to motivate their congregations toward increased spiritual commitment. And commentators have attempted to understand their socio-historical significance for the first audience situated in these seven cities in the Roman province of Asia. Although this poignant remonstrance has been preached and commented on many times, this article will suggest a fresh line of interpretation for 'first love' and its incumbent 'second love' for believers who sought to practice their faith in later first-century Ephesus.

¹ All English translations are drawn from the translation of the Greek text in Wilson (2014, ad loc.).

² For a chart showing the structure of the letters with these sections, see Wilson (2007, 63).



Lexical issues

Two lexical issues must be addressed initially. First, how should ἀφῆκες be translated in Revelation 2:4? The NIV has ‘forsaken’; the ESV and NRSV ‘abandoned’; the NASB and NKJV ‘left’; and the CJB ‘lost’. The verb ἀφίημι has a broad semantic range depending on context (BDAG s.v. ἀφίημι). In redemptive language it is the verb most commonly translated ‘forgive’ or ‘pardon’, yet this is not the sense here. ‘Forsaken’ or ‘abandoned’ are possible, but these are the usual translations of ἐγκαταλείπω, not of ἀφίημι in its 197 uses in the Septuagint and New Testament (cf. Gen 24:27; Heb 13:5). So these translations are lexically and contextually inappropriate here.

Since ἀπόλλυμι is usually translated ‘lost’, as in Revelation 18:14, this translation likewise is inappropriate. While Jesus does suggest that a rupture has occurred in his relationship with the Ephesian believers, yet this breach is not so great that they are abandoned and forsaken or that their bond was unintentionally lost along the way. And this rupture is not as irrevocable as divorce; for example, in 1 Corinthians 7:11 Paul uses ἀφίημι as a technical term for marital dissolution. The preferred translation resulting from this lexical survey is: ‘you have left your first love’. In modern English ‘left’ is commonly used to speak of fractured marital relationships for which reconciliation may still occur. If the Ephesians repent, Jesus holds out the possibility of a restoration of their relationship.

There is a second lexical issue to anticipate for modern readers before it arises later. This is the distinction perceived by some interpreters between the word groups ἀγαπ- and φιλ-. This view maintains that there is a semantic difference between divine and human love. This is most frequently reflected in teachings and sermons on John 21:15–17. In this conversation between Jesus and Peter the Greek text uses the two lexemes interchangeably. But is a difference in meaning intended wherein Peter supposedly misunderstands which kind of love Jesus is speaking about? Although Carson (1984, 52-53, 60; cf. 1991, 676-677) dealt with this exegetical fallacy back in 1984, this misinterpretation continues to circulate years later. The words are used interchangeably not only here in the Fourth Gospel but also in Revelation – ἀγάπη in 2:4 and 2:19 and φιλέω in 3:19.³ The synonymous use of these words groups is found not only in the Johannine corpus but throughout the Old and New Testaments. The most telling examples disabusing the idea that a distinction exists between a God-kind of love and a human-kind of love is the account of Shechem’s rape of Dinah because he loved her (ἠγάπησεν; Gen 34:2–3) or Amnon’s rape of his half-sister Tamar because he loved her too (ἠγάπησεν; 2 Sam 13:14–15; cf. Exod 21:5). When later an argument is based on a φιλ- lexeme, it is argued that the Asian audience would not have perceived any semantic difference between these two word groups.

John’s use of binaries

‘First love’ is an example of a concept in structural linguistics called binary opposites.⁴ The English language is replete with examples: black/white, fast/slow, true/false. The concept, according to Cuddon (2013, s.v.), implies ‘a centring or imposition of order...stable and systematic...’. Revelation offers other examples of binary opposites: first death (implied 2:10), second death (stated 2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8); first resurrection (stated 20:5, 6), second resurrection (implied 20:13); first heaven and earth, new heaven and earth (21:1); and old Jerusalem (implied), New

³ Words with the Φιλ- stem are used twice (Rev 3:19; 22:15). The name of the sixth city, Philadelphia, is not included in this count. There are six usages with the ἀγαπ- stem (Rev 1:5; 2:4, 19; 3:9; 12:11; 20:9).

⁴ However, deconstructionists and poststructuralists, e.g., Derrida in his lecture ‘Structure, sign, and play in the discourses of the human sciences’ delivered in 1966, believe that no true opposition can exist in a pair of conceptions so the notion of binary opposites is unsatisfactory.



Jerusalem (3:12; 21:2, 10).⁵ Degramont (1990, 155) states that the effect of their usage is ‘that in juxtaposing any two items, the observer is forced to explore qualitative similarities and differences so as to derive some meaning from their disjunction’. Barclay (2016, 210) notes that in Christian writings binary opposites are importantly used to categorize the world. Speaking of Paul’s use of *pneumatikoi/psychikoi* in 1 Corinthians, he writes that ‘this Christian network has developed an important linguistic tool by which to interpret social reality, a tool which is fully comprehensible only within its own patterns of discourse’.

The use of ‘first love’ suggests that there is an implied ‘second love’. The inhabitants of the earth who love and practice falsehood (πᾶς φιλῶν καὶ ποιῶν ψεῦδος; Rev 22:15) are the same as those who practice abomination and falsehood (ποιῶν βδέλυγμα καὶ ψεῦδος; Rev 21:27). Abomination is epitomized in Revelation by the great whore, usually interpreted as Dea Roma, who has on her forehead the title, ‘Babylon the Great, Mother of Whores and of the Earth’s Abominations (βδέλυγμάτων)’. A virtue of the 144,000 around the throne is that no falsehood (ψεῦδος; Rev 14:5) was found in their mouths. Loyalty oaths uttered to Caesar with an accompanying declaration that they ‘loved’ him as a friend were being pressed on residents of Asia by the imperial cult, its high priests, and provincial officials.⁶ This dilemma is being mirrored in Revelation by Jesus’ remonstrance to his followers not to leave their first love.

Interpretations of ‘first love’

A review of Revelation commentaries on this text reveals that most commentators focus on the first of these binary opposites: what or who was the ‘first love’.⁷ Osborne (2002, 115) frames the issue: ‘The major question is the referent for ἀγάπην’ and adds: ‘Many scholars assume that it is horizontal or brotherly love’. While this explanation may be the majority view, a survey of commentaries reveals at least twelve interpretations, which will be briefly presented below.

1. Love for God

Most commentators concede that in a general sense Jesus’ charge against the Ephesians reflects their loss of love for God as well. However, Boxall (2006, 49-50) suggests that it is probably a false dichotomy to distinguish between the love of God and the love for others. Osborne (2002, 116) similarly notes that a growing number of commentators ‘recognize the difficulty of separating love for humans from love for God and Christ’. While this observation is true, its lack of specificity is not helpful in describing the spiritual situation of the Ephesians.

2. Love for others expressed in acts of love

Beasley-Murray (1978, 75) writes: ‘The context suggests that the love which had abated was primarily love for fellow men’. Mounce (1977, 88) adds: ‘The love that John requires is not an “undiscriminating amiability” (Kiddle, p. 24), but an attitude toward the brethren that expresses

⁵ Clines (1998,17) notes the significance of this for interpreting the nursery rhyme Little Bo Peep: ‘for her, “leaving alone” must imply its opposite, viz. not leaving alone, going and looking for, searching for. If this binary structure were not presupposed, Bo Peep would not be troubled, the Evil Shepherdess would have nothing to suggest, Bo Peep could not adopt her advice, and there would be no narrative’.

⁶ For an example of such a loyalty oath see Sørensen (2015, 17). Pliny the Younger (10.96) likewise discusses loyalty oaths in relation to Christians in his letter to Trajan written around AD 110.

⁷ Interestingly, Aune (1997, 146) never even addresses the subject in his discussion of Revelation 2:4.



itself in loving acts'. The loss of the first love is thus manifested by the cessation of acts of love to others, especially other believers.

3. Neglect of the poor

Related to this is a specific problem – the neglect of the poor. Swete (1909, 26), following early Greek commentators, suggests that the loss of love is characterized 'by a comparative indifference to the necessities of the poorer brethren'. This indifference would have surely manifested itself in a failure to care for any of the needy in Ephesus.

4. Loss of brotherly love amidst divided leadership

Charles (1920,1:50) sees the love referred to here as brotherly love lost due to 'ensoriousness, factiousness, and divisions'. To illustrate his point, he refers to Paul's speech to the Ephesian elders at Miletus where they embrace and kiss Paul in farewell at his departure (Acts 20:29–30, 37). Charles observes further that 'the Church had lost the enthusiastic love it had shown in the days of Paul'. Therefore, an outcome of Paul's prophecy about savage wolves arising from their number to distort the truth (Acts 20:29–30) exemplifies leaving their first love.

5. Eschatological sign

Boxall (2006, 49–50) quotes Jesus' words in Matthew 24:12, 'Because lawlessness has increased, the love of many will grow cold', and suggests that this is an expected sign of the end times.⁸ He notes that this warning 'is another indication of Revelation's rhetoric of eschatological crisis'. According to him, the Ephesian failure 'is probably especially manifested in lack of love for fellow Christians'. Kiddle (1940, 24), pointing to the same verse in Matthew, observes: 'It was for that very reason that love had "grown cold" at Ephesus'.

6. Concern for orthodoxy

Alford (1875, 563) observed almost two centuries ago that 'the loss of first conversion had waxed cold, and given place to a formal and lifeless orthodoxy'. This view has become popular among many commentators. For example, Caird (1966, 31) observes that the Ephesians' 'intolerance of imposture, their unflagging loyalty, and their hatred of heresy had bred an inquisitorial spirit which left no room for love'. His application for believers today is that 'zeal for Christian truth may obliterate the one truth that matters, that God is love'. Osborne (2002, 116) similarly observes: 'It is clear that the Ephesians loved truth more than more than they loved God or one another'. Finally, Blount (2009, 51) comments: 'Once known as a loving community, they had suddenly become a policing one. Ephesian faith had become a matter of Ephesus quality control. Assessment became more important than love'.

7. Preference for charismatic gifts

One of the issues Paul dealt with in his letters to the Corinthians written from Ephesus was their preoccupation with spiritual gifts over love, especially tongues and prophecy (1 Cor 12:1–14:40). Boring (1987, 97) believes that a similar problem had developed in Ephesus: 'Other, more spectacular manifestations of what they supposed was the Christian life had become more

⁸ Jesus' words in Matthew 24:12 are a likely intertext: *καὶ διὰ τὸ πληθυνθῆναι τὴν ἀνομίαν ψυχῆσεται ἡ ἀγάπη τῶν πολλῶν*. Note that the semantically related *ψυχρός* is used in the letter to Laodicea (Rev 3:15).



important than the commonplace, selfless care for others represented by love in its Christian meaning’.

8. Seduction by the spirit of the city

Kiddle (1940, 23) observes that by leaving their love for one another the Ephesians ‘had lapsed into a fault to which the ordinary life of a city in Asia Minor was subject to an extraordinary degree. Ephesus itself was a city home to trade guilds, clubs, and the home (sic) all suffered from the diseases of fractiousness and rancor’. Just as Apollonius of Tyana had charged the Ephesians with a similar fault, Jesus needed ‘to stress the importance of a spirit of amity’.

9. Sociological pattern of spiritual diminishment

Some commentators have taken a sociological approach by observing that the enthusiasm of religious movements typically declines after the first generation. Roloff (1993, 45) recognized such an abatement of the Ephesians’ initial enthusiasm, ‘which typically occurs in the second and third generation’.⁹ Walvoord (1966, 56) believes John’s addressees are part of a second generation of Ephesian believers whose love had waned. This ‘cooling of heart’ is part of a pattern of spiritual apathy that has characterized believers. By way of application Walvoord concludes: ‘Thus it has ever been in the history of the church: first a cooling of spiritual love, then the love of God replaced by a love of things of the world, with resulting compromise and spiritual corruption. This is followed by departure from the faith and loss of effective spiritual testimony’.

10. Failure at public testimony

Stevens (2014, 292) believes that love as a word or deed should be tied to service and patient endurance. He writes, ‘For all believers, love is a measure of the depth of their commitment to their word of witness (12:11)’. Since Jesus was the faithful witness who died (1:5), believers are likewise called to follow his example. The problem, according to Stevens, is: ‘John prophetically is charging that Ephesus internally might be expert at exposing false doctrine in her midst, but externally she is faltering by failing to give priority to public testimony’.

11. Emulation of Israel’s pattern

Swete believes that Jesus’s words here have an intertextual connection with those of Jeremiah 2:2 and Ezekiel 16:8ff. In these texts the prophets charge Israel with abandoning her initial love relationship with God and prostituting herself with other lovers. Hosea likewise viewed Israel’s idolatrous worship of Baal as breaking God’s covenant. Israel has left her husband to follow other lovers just as Gomer left Hosea to fornicate with others. In Hosea 2:7 promiscuous Israel declares, ‘I will return to my former husband’. Since Israel had never divorced Yahweh, remarriage – a violation of the covenant – is not implied here (Deut 24:1-3). Stuart (1987, 50) observes that ‘she is to be reconciled to her “original husband” after being denied access to those with whom she had her affairs’. Swete (1909, 26) concludes: ‘The new Israel had begun too soon to follow the example of the ancient people of Israel’.

⁹ Coupled with this, Roloff (1993, 45) believes there ‘was a breakdown of the love commandment, which is to be the central norm defining the association of Christians with each other in the church’.



12. Proneness to idolatry and apostasy

Related to this is the suggestion of Wall (1991, 71) that any tolerance of the false teaching of the Nicolaitans¹⁰ 'constitutes opposition to the essential conviction of apostolic teaching: God is love'. Therefore, to forsake one's first love should be considered apostasy. The use of Balaam typology in the letter to Pergamum further suggests that the two churches shared the same threat. Wall writes that to 'forsake love refers to an accommodation of pagan idolatry—an act of hatred against immature believers. Idolatry confuses divine love and its obligations'. The result of the accommodation by the Ephesians was 'to cause the immature to stumble in their Christian discipleship...'

Identifying the 'second love'

Wall's suggestion about idolatry does point in a useful direction and provides a segue into our discussion of the implied 'second love' of this binary opposite. Who or what was the new, second love of the Ephesians, or at least for some of them? Within the Ephesian church there were believers coming both from Jewish and pagan backgrounds. Each group had its own challenge regarding the keeping of its first love. These will be examined next.

The challenge of Jewish believers in the Seven Churches is explicitly expressed in terms of opposition from the 'synagogue of Satan'. The meaning of this expression has been variously interpreted.¹¹ Mayo (2006, 123) states in his summary regarding the churches in Smyrna and Philadelphia: 'It is possible that John's primary concern in Philadelphia is with a synagogue ban. Of course, it is also possible that a synagogue ban was part of the Jewish opposition in Smyrna'.¹² The interpretation favored here is that Jewish believers in the Asian churches were being forced to choose which community they would be a part of. These texts are localized examples of the so-called parting of the ways between Jews and Christians that occurred at different times in various places across the eastern Mediterranean in the late first and early second centuries CE.¹³ This tension is also seen in three pericopae in John's Gospel (cf. 9:18-23; 16:1-2),¹⁴ which is generally believed to have its audience in Ephesus and Asia.¹⁵ The pericope most applicable to our discussion is found in the summary section of the first half of the Fourth Gospel (12:42-43). The narrator states that, despite Isaiah's prophecies of Jewish unbelief, even many Jewish

¹⁰ For an excellent discussion of the Nicolaitans, see Koester (2014, 262-264).

¹¹ See Mayo (2006, 94-136) for a discussion of the various perspectives, especially chapter 2 dealing with the conflict in Smyrna and Philadelphia.

¹² Trebilco (2018, 112) concurs writing that 'the most likely interpretation of these verses...is that they concern people who are non-Christian Jews but whom John considers to have now forfeited the right to call themselves Jews because they reject Christ and attack his followers'.

¹³ The subject is explored from various perspectives by the contributors in Shanks (2013). The idea of a 'parting' is helpful only for the first centuries of the Common Era, even as Reed & Becker (2007, 18-19) admit. For they correctly point out that there was no final, absolute split between the two communities since they continued to interact throughout Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages.

¹⁴ Mayo (2006, 136 n. 81) is less willing to draw this conclusion: 'Hirschberg is correctly cautious in not seeing either in the Apocalypse or the Fourth Gospel an indication of the *birkath haminim*'. Yet as Cohen (2013, 231) observes, 'If the Gospel was composed in Asia Minor or Syria, as is usually believed, it is most unlikely that anyone in either place would have heard of *Birkat ha-Minim* c. 100 CE'. However, the rhetorical situations of 'partings' described in these two texts occurred decades before the rabbinic benediction.

¹⁵ Trebilco (2018, 109) writes, 'In my view strong arguments can be mounted that John's Gospel was written in Ephesus...'



leaders believed in Jesus. Nevertheless, because of pressure from the Pharisees, they refused to confess their faith publicly because they feared being put out of the synagogue (ἀποσυνάγωγοι). The narrator next provides the reason: they loved (ἠγάπησαν) human glory/praise rather than the glory/praise (δόξαν) of God. This could well be the motivation of some Jewish believers then who were forsaking their first love. They decided that the price of being a follower of Jesus – familial, social, and religious ostracism – was too great and they loved human approbation over that of God. Carson (1991, 451) writes, ‘Almost certainly the Evangelist knew of Jews and proselytes in his day who were happy enough to believe in Jesus in some sense, but who displayed similar hesitations. He wants them to know such secret faith will not do’.

Regarding believers from a pagan background, the latter half of the first century CE held some interesting socio-religious challenges to their allegiance. Heller (2017, 1) observes that during and after the Roman civil wars in the first century BCE new words and phrases began in use as titles that enriched the honorific vocabulary of Asia. She writes, ‘In the reign of Augustus the word *philosebastos* appears directly in a civic context, whereas its older forms, *philoromaïos* and *philokaisar* were first used by the client-kings of Rome. This title is of special interest in studies of the impact of empire on civic religious identities, as it expresses loyalty to the emperor and the imperial regime’. Rogers (2012, 158-162) observes in a section called ‘The Philosebastoi Kouretes’ that between 54–59 CE during Nero’s reign the *kouretes* of Ephesus began to identify themselves as *philosebastoi*, that is, ‘emperor-lovers’.¹⁶ These inscriptions were first recorded on columns in the Prytaneum situated on the north side of the civic agora near the sanctuary for Divus Julius and Dea Roma. Up to this point epigraphic evidence shows they identified themselves only as *eusebeis*, or devoted to Artemis.¹⁷ Rogers (2012, 159) comments on the significance of this change: ‘the epithet *philosebastos* implies a specifically religious devotion to the emperor rather than, say, just a feeling of friendship or loyalty. The expression of religious devotion implies that the emperor was conceived of as possessing some kind of divine quality’. Rogers (2012, 159) continues by observing that the epithet *philosebastos* is often paired with the additional epithet *hagnos* in these inscriptions and its use ‘perhaps implies primarily an attitude of religious devotion’.

In the period between Nero and Domitian the epithet cannot be connected to specific acts of piety or euergetism of an individual *kouretes* on behalf of the emperor. Rather it signified a more general attitude of religious devotion to the emperors. During and after the time of Domitian the epithet also came to be applied to whole boards of civic officials, such as the *strategoï* (nominal military leaders of the city), and even to the *demos* and *boule*. (Heller 2017, 2 n. 4) also notes that *philosebastos* can be used to describe civic institutions. In these examples the application of the epithet had a direct connection with a public act that honored the emperor and his family.¹⁸ Burrell (2004, 6) notes that in a few inscriptions of Ephesus ‘the council or boule is “philosebastos”’. This practice continued into the second century CE with the building of the second imperial cult temple

¹⁶ Burrell (2004, 6, 69) offers two different translations for φιλοσέβαστος on these pages: ‘friend of the Augusti’ and ‘Augustus-loving’. The use of such *philo*-language was not restricted to Ephesus. Cooley, (2012, 177) also mentions *philosebastos* inscriptions to Augustus found at Apollonia in Galatia. The Stadiasmus Patarensis, dating from 46 CE in Patara, declares that the Lycians (Λύκιοι) are φιλορώμαιοι καὶ φιλοκαίσαρες (‘Rome-loving’ and ‘Caesar-loving’); see Onur (2016, 570).

¹⁷ Similarly Bitner (2018, 147). Rogers (2012, 159) also notes that the frequency of use of the term *philosebastos* increased with the reign of Domitian and the dedication of the provincial temple of the Sebastoi in Ephesus in 89-90 CE. This increase appears to have little bearing on the dating of Revelation.

¹⁸ In the seven-volume *Inscripfen von Ephesos*, *philosebastos* is indexed almost two hundred times (192) over a time span of four centuries in the imperial period. It is found in various public contexts from monuments, dedicatory inscriptions, statue bases, sarcophagi, and tombs.



for Hadrian (Burrell 2004, 69). The word is found on numerous inscriptions around Ephesus today, particularly at the Gate of Mazeus and Mithridates (Fig. 1). This led into the commercial agora, where Paul plied his trade during his time in Ephesus (Acts 19:8-10).¹⁹ Two there mention *agoranomoi* named Pu(blius) Stalienus Petronianus (*IEph* 3010) and M(arcus) Aur(elius) Hephastian (*IEph* 3011), who are also *philoseb(astoi)*. Another inscription (*IEph* 816), now standing near the entrance of the latrine, mentions a *boularch* named Lucius Cornelius Philoserapis who is a *hippikos/eques* and a *philosebastos* (Fig. 3).

Among the religious office-holders, the priests and high priests of Asia Minor, the title *philosebastos* placed fourth in popularity after *philopatris*, *huios* (usually of the city or people), and *eusebes* with 7% of inscriptions linking the two (Heller 2017, 12 tab. 1.4a). Regarding the widely cited view that *philosebastos* can be linked to the imperial cult, Heller (2017, 15) writes, 'However, the quantitative study of the occurrences of this title shows it was more commonplace among priests of the traditional gods than among priests or high-priests of the emperors' (cf. Rogers 1999, 125-130).²⁰ Heller (2017, 16) further notes an interesting statistical anomaly: 80% of all of the occurrences of *philosebastos* in Asia Minor for federal office-holders come from Ephesus while 80% of all occurrences of *asiarch* with titles also come from Ephesus. Heller notes that this overrepresentation of *philosebastos* among Asiarchs appears as a result of a specific local tradition and that the link is between title and city rather than title and office. She (2017, 18, 19) concludes that Asiarchs 'were both involved in the imperial cult and frequently styled as *philosebastoi*, but this is an Ephesian peculiarity'.

Regarding the island of Kos, then part of Roman Asia, Buraseli (2000, 103) notes: '*Kaisar* remained for a long time in the Greek East the standard way of referring to the emperor, rivaled only by *autokrator* and later by *basileus*, while *Sebastos* remained always the term for referring either to the founder of the principate, Augustus himself, or an actual title of the emperor(s) as a *living institution*'.²¹ Magnesia on the Maeander was the sister city of Ephesus to the southeast and home to another Artemis temple. There the 'sons of the city' or 'sons of the fatherland' directed their attention to the imperial cult and the local religious life. Euphemus was a neocoros of Artemis in charge of the erection of a statue of Drusilla and also styled as *eusebes*, *philokaisar*, *philosebastos* and *philopatris* (*I.Magnesia* 156). Giannakopoulos (2008, 262 n. 47) observes, 'Naturally, the connection with the imperial cult was more strongly expressed by the titles *philokaisar* and *philosebastos* usually combined with *hyioi poleos* and *patridos*'. Speaking of the significance of the proliferation of these titles, Buraseli (2000, 109) observes that 'love of the fatherland and filial care of one's home city could be now only guaranteed if, and to the degree, a civic statesman could demonstrate firm loyalty to Rome and receive corresponding Roman (in the best case: imperial) favor'.

The Jews and Caesar

The Jews had a very complicated relationship with the Romans who established hegemony over Palestine beginning with Pompey in 63 BCE. Herod the Great was installed as a client king in 37 BCE, and his family continued their rule in the region until the death of Agrippa II in 92 CE.

¹⁹ For the importance of the 'messaging' provided by this gate, see Burrell (2009, 74-75).

²⁰ A search for φιλοσέβαστος on the Packard Humanities epigraphy website produces 307 matches in 262 texts. If the search is narrowed to Ionia only, there are 246 matches in 204 texts. Thus 80% of the usages in 78% of the texts come from the region of Ephesus (<https://epigraphy.packhum.org/>; accessed 21/2/2020). The full Greek text of the three inscriptions can be found here as well.

²¹ A similar search on the Packard Humanities site for the Aegean islands yields 32 matches in 30 texts. Of these occurrences 16 are from Kos and 10 are from Samos, islands close to Ephesus.



Inscriptional evidence notes that Herod is called *philokaisar* (*SEG* 45, 1933).²² Two lead weights, one from Jerusalem (*IEJ* 20; *phil[kairsaros]*) dating to 9/8 BCE and the other from Ashdod, mention Herod as ‘friend of Caesar’ (Richardson 1999, 204). Coins of Herod Agrippa (37-44 CE) often are inscribed with PHILOKAISAR, a designation that Philo (*Flac* 6.40) also gives him. Antipater is called ‘friend of Caesar’ (Josephus *Ant* 16.86). His grandson Agrippa I²³ (*OGIS* 419, 420) and great-grandson Agrippa II are called both *philokaisar* and *philoromaïos* (*SEG* 33, 1306).²⁴ At the temple in Jerusalem a *modus vivendi* had been reached wherein prayers would be offered for the emperor but not to him. This status quo was upset when Gaius Caligula came to power in 27 CE and demanded that a statue of himself be erected in the temple and that prayers be offered to him as a divine being. A delegation of Jews including Philo was sent to Rome to petition Gaius to rescind his order lest the Jews rebel in Judea because of this perceived blasphemy and abomination. Whereas the Jews would identify themselves as φίλοκαίσαρες (Philo *Legat* 280), they would reject divine terms of fealty such as φιλοσέβαστος.²⁵ Writing around 40 CE, Philo (*Gaius* 37) has the praetorian prefect Macro asserting, ‘I am in a special sense a friend of Caesar, a friend of Tiberius’ (φιλόκαισαρ ἰδίως και φιλοτιβέριος εἶναι;).

Pilate as a ‘friend of Caesar’: verisimilitude or historical anachronism

At Jesus’ trial the Jews (i.e., chief priests and officials; John 19:6) threatened Pontius Pilate, who wanted to release Jesus, with these words: ‘If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar (οὐκ εἶ φίλος τοῦ Καίσαρος). Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar’ (*ἀντιλέγει τῷ Καίσαρι*; John 19:12). A binary is presented regarding Caesar: you are either his friend or his enemy. There is no middle ground. Pilate, after his appointment as prefect of Roman Judea in 26 CE, began to have issues with the Jews. When he installed Roman shields in Herod’s palace in Jerusalem and refused to remove them despite pleas to do so, the Jews wrote a letter to Tiberius explaining the situation. Tiberius in return rebuked Pilate for his intransigence and ordered him to move the shields to the temple of Augustus in Caesarea (Philo *Leg* 299–305; cf. Josephus *JW* 2.169-174). Since Pilate had already sorely tried the patience of Tiberius, he was not eager to offend him again.²⁶

²² The *phil-* prefix was also used in Jewish epithets: *philosynagogōs/philolaos*, *philonomos*, *philentolos*—‘lover of the synagogue/community’, ‘lover of the Torah’, and ‘lover of the commandments’ respectively. Van der Horst (1991, 66) notes that these “were favourite epithets in Jewish epigraphy”.

²³ An incomplete Latin inscription found at Syrian Apamea could honor either king as either *regi magno philo[caesari]* or *philo[romaeo]* (Balty 2000 472–473, 474 fig. 9); similarly, for a Greek inscription found at Canatha in Auranitis (*OGIS* 424 = *IGRR* III, 1223).

²⁴ Other client kings adopted similar language. For example, an inscription recently found at Elauissa Sebaste in Rough Cilicia names Antiochus IV of Commagene (r. 41–72 CE) as *philokaisar* and *philoromaïos*. The latter epithet began to be used by the Commagenian dynasty beginning with Antiochus I (r. 69–38 BCE). However, Antiochus IV was the first dynastic member to receive Roman citizenship as well as the epithet *amicus Caesaris* (cf. Borgia 2013, 87, 92-94; 88 figs. 8.1-8.2). Borgia (2013, 93) notes that such language was ‘commonly ascribed to important client kings...’. Inscriptions with similar imperial language related to Antiochus IV have been found on the island of Chios.

²⁵ For an excellent discussion of this, see Barclay (2016, 378 n. 54).

²⁶ Interestingly Carter (2008, 290-298) fails to mention this incident in his discussion of Pilate as a background to this text. Pilate may have recalled that C. Cornelius Gallus, while governor of Egypt, had his friendship with Augustus withdrawn. To save face, Gallus later committed suicide in 26 BCE (Suetonius *Aug* 2.66).



Johannine scholars have debated whether φίλος τοῦ Καίσαρος is a *terminus technicus*, as the New Living Translation suggests by placing ‘friend of Caesar’ in quotation marks.²⁷ Since Pilate was of equestrian status, he was eligible to be an *amicus Caesaris* and may have been called such.²⁸ Brown (1970, 879), weighing the issues regarding the date of the gospel, concludes ‘Thus the objection that the title was not used in Pilate’s time is rather weak’. Barrett (1978, 542) in his discussion of the technical view, writes, ‘Haenchen (202) is right in claiming that John would not have been aware of these political entanglements, and that the words should be understood in a simple way as the counterpart of ἀντιλέγει τῷ Καίσαρι’. But given that Jewish embassies like Philo’s visited Rome, it is likely that Jews in the eastern Mediterranean would have known something of the political machinations of Roman officials sent to govern them. So ignorance would not qualify as a reason for determining the sense of the word. Morris (1995, 706) also notes that “‘Caesar’s friend’ may be used in a technical sense but this seems unlikely. Here it is a general term for a loyal supporter of Rome’.²⁹ Tolmie (2013, 594-595 n.79), considering whether the term is a formal title or more general one, decides that ‘the second option is more feasible’. While the original historical context in the early 30s argues more for a general sense, John’s Asian audience decades later would be very familiar with the growing technical sense of *philosebastos*.

Another matter relates to Pilate’s possible relationship with Aelius Sejanus, of whom it was said: ‘Whoever was close to Sejanus had a claim on the friendship of Caesar’ (*ad Caesaris amicitiam*; Tacitus *An* 6.8). On 18 October 31 CE Sejanus was executed by Tiberius along with many of his supporters. Bammel (1952, 205-210) argued that this circumstance lies behind Caiaphas’ threat to Pilate.³⁰ However, the Roman historian Butcher (2014, 279) notes that ‘there is no certain connection between Sejanus and Pilate’. Because of the difficulty of dating Jesus’s death, Beasley-Murray (1987, 341) has concluded that the relationship between the high priest’s threat and Sejanus is possible but unprovable. He writes: ‘But the importance of the threat remains, even without this particular strengthening of it, in light of the severity of Tiberius’ punishment of “lèse majeste” crimes’. The scene closes with the chief priests, not Pilate, having the final word: ‘We have no king except Caesar’ (οὐκ ἔχομεν βασιλέα εἰ μὴ Καίσαρα). Concerning this pericope, Tolmie (2013, 583) notes tellingly: ‘Pilate is introduced into the narrative world without any detailed description, which indicates that the implied author assumes that the implied reader already knows who this character is’. The passage is also filled with political irony: the governor whom the Jewish leaders had continually complained about to Rome regarding his injustice and malfeasance, now at Jesus’ trial attempts, at least initially, to follow Roman law and adjudicate justly.

Is there a possible link between this text and Revelation? Amplifying Tolmie’s comment, the implied readers not only know who Pilate is, but are aware of the social pressures in the Asian cities, especially among the elite, to be a *philosebastos*, as elaborated earlier in this study. Acknowledging John’s likely provenance in Ephesus, Brickle (2015, 221-222) suggests that ‘any number of well-known public structures located in that ancient metropolis could have served in

²⁷ Philo (*Flacc* 40) uses ‘friend of Caesar’ (φίλον Καίσαρος) similarly to describe King Agrippa, grandson of Herod; see Sherwin-White 1978, 47, esp. n. 1 who notes that this appellation in the Republication period originally had a political rather than a personal connotation.

²⁸ See Bond (1999, 190). Other examples include Claudius (46 CE) calling Julius Planta my friend and companion (*amicum et comitem meum*; *CIL* 5.5050) and Vespasian (77 CE) calling Otacilius Sagitta my friend and procurator (*amicum et procuratorem meum*; *CIL* 10.8038).

²⁹ Bruce (1983, 363) concurs with this assessment and takes the untenable view that ‘Caesar’s friend’ as an official title came into use only later under Vespasian. Nor does he see any reference to Sejanus. However, he does believe that the term has a ‘clear political flavour’.

³⁰ Burge (2000, 306 n. 52) notes: ‘The argument of Bammel has never been overturned’. The rebuttal by Messner (2008) has now done that.



antiquity as an effective *locus* for arranging and charting the gospel on the imagination'.³¹ Given the prevalence of inscriptions on public monuments in Ephesus declaring *philosebastos* relationships, a counter theology pressing for love of Jesus may well be emphasized here. In this regard Wall (1991, 71) notes: 'The catchphrase, **first love**, is best understood in theological terms and according to the Johannine tradition" (Wall's emphasis). Thus John 19:12 is a likely co-text within the Johannine tradition related to Jesus' words in Revelation 2:4.

Conclusion

In his novella about life in late first-century Ephesus, New Testament scholar D.A. deSilva (2020, 41) introduces a character named Nicolaus who is both a priest of Augustus and a Christian. Nicolaus rationalizes these dual loyalties, saying,

We can all acknowledge our dependence upon the gods and the divine emperors for the preservation of the state and our common well-being. But what about our individual fates in this world and, even more pressing, on the other side of death? The Christos died and returned to life to bring assurance that death is not the end and that fear of death need not tyrannize us throughout our lives. For this gift I honor him, even as I honor our emperors for their great benefactions toward humankind.

In the story Nicolaus has introduced division among Ephesian believers by advocating syncretistic emperor worship. Some have sided with the Pergamene while others have rejected his compromise as inappropriate for a follower of Jesus. This imagined conflict well illustrates the conundrum faced by upper-class believers who also wanted to follow Jesus. The fact that *philosebatos* language was increasing when the book of Revelation and the Fourth Gospel were composed is noteworthy. The false teachers in the churches – the Nicolaitans, the Balaamites, the Jezebelites – were all arguing for accommodation as a survival tactic in the seven cities of Asia. One tactic, hypothesized in this article, is that elite Christians had begun to identify themselves as *philosebastos* to maintain their social status. However, Jesus saw them as spiritual adulterers (cf. Rev 2:22; 17:2; 18:3, 9) who had 'left their first love'. Implicit in Revelation's binary is the challenge to the Ephesians who are being asked to choose whom they will love.

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³¹ Brickle's section, 'Mapping John on Ephesus', is most relevant. After presenting his mapping theory, Brickles does note two potential drawbacks to this approach.



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Fig. 1 Gate of Mazeus and Mithridates, Ephesus (author's photo)



Fig. 2 *Agoranomoi* and *philoseb(astoi)*, Ephesus (author's photo)





Fig. 3 *Boularch* and *philosebastos*, Ephesus (author's photo)

