Tyndale Bulletin 76 (2025): 1-29
https://doi.org/10.53751/001c.132253
ISSN 2752-7042 (Online)
ISSN 0082-7118 (Print)
www.tyndalebulletin.org

Neither Cold nor Hot but Lukewarm: Rethinking the Temperature Metaphor in Revelation 3:15-16

Mark Wilson
Professor Extraordinary of New Testament – Stellenbosch University
Director – Asia Minor Research Center, Antalya, Turkey
markwilson@sevenchurches.org

Abstract

The temperature metaphor in Revelation chapter 3 is used by Jesus to admonish the Laodiceans regarding their spiritual condition. The prevailing understanding of the metaphor centres around the city's deficient water system, an interpretation no longer tenable because of recent archaeological discoveries. A subsequent interpretation of the metaphor was proposed, but this too is not persuasive. After briefly reviewing the archaeological finds related to Laodicea's hydrological situation and critiquing the alternate proposal, a fresh hypothesis is introduced for interpreting the temperature metaphor by setting it amidst the material culture of Laodicea and the other six cities in Asia, specifically bathing in a Roman bathhouse.

1. Introduction

One of the most vivid metaphors in the book of Revelation, preached countless times every Sunday, relates to Jesus's admonition to the Laodiceans: 'I know your deeds; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either cold or hot. Because you are lukewarm and neither hot nor cold, I am about to vomit you out of my mouth' (3:15-16).[1] This article will discuss the temperature metaphor that uses three adjectives – cold, hot, and lukewarm (ψυχρός, ζεστός, χλιαρός) – to describe their spiritual condition. It begins by briefly reviewing the archaeological finds regarding Laodicea's hydrological situation and then

1. All translations are the author's, unless otherwise noted. I wish to thank the anonymous reviewers whose comments helped me to refine the article; any remaining infelicities are my own.

comparing them to earlier interpretative presumptions about Laodicea's water system. An alternative proposal advanced by Craig Koester will be evaluated as well. The article will then introduce a fresh hypothesis for interpreting the temperature metaphor in its prophetic message by situating it amidst the material culture of Laodicea and the other six cities in Asia, specifically bathing in a Roman bathhouse.

2. Laodicea's water as an interpretation of the temperature metaphor

2.1 Ramsay

When William M. Ramsay wrote about Laodicea's water system, his primary concern was its vulnerability to enemy attack, which 'must have prevented the people from ever feeling secure when threated with attack.'[2] Despite Ramsay's predilection for identifying local references, he concluded his discussion of Laodicea: 'It is the only one of the seven cities in which no relation is discernible between the natural features that surround it and its part and place in history.'[3] Ramsay's failure to mention the temperature metaphor was later noticed by Rudwick and Green, who wrote that 'curiously enough, Ramsay offers no interpretation.'[4] Wood similarly observed that 'one is only surprised that so great a traveller as Sir William Ramsay should apparently have missed the significance of the double row of stone pipes leading across the hill towards the city.'[5] Perhaps Ramsay never missed anything, a point to be explored forthwith.

2.2 Rudwick and Green, and Wood

Rudwick and Green were apparently the first modern commentators to connect the temperature metaphor to Laodicea's water system. This was based on observations made during their visit to Laodicea in 1957. Seeking to apply Ramsay's approach of identifying local references in Revelation's prophetic messages, their autopsy suggested that Laodicea's water system shed light on interpreting the temperature metaphor. They observed that Laodicea procured its water from hot springs, which would have cooled as it reached the city. Thus,

2. William M. Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1904), 415.

3. Ramsay, *Letters to the Seven Churches*, 423.

4. M. J. S. Rudwick and E. M. B. Green, 'The Laodicean Lukewarmness', *ExpTim* 69.6 (1957–1958): 176, https://doi.org/10.1177/001452465806900605.

5. Peter Wood, 'Local Knowledge in the Letters of the Apocalypse', *ExpTim* 73.9 (1962): 263, https://doi.org/10.1177/001452466207300903. Colin J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in their Local Setting* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1986), 186, similarly calls this a 'remarkable omission'.

'the "lukewarmness" of the Laodicean Church is an allusion to the unusual quality of the city's water supply.'[6] Despite Laodicea's prosperity, they claimed that the city could not provide refreshing cold water like Colossae or healing hot water like Hierapolis. Wood made three visits to Laodicea in 1958, 1959, and 1961 and concluded about Rudwick and Green in his follow-up article: 'Their thesis is convincing.'[7]

2.3 Hemer, Porter, and Blomberg

Subsequent interpreters of the temperature metaphor have adopted this understanding. Chief among these are Colin Hemer and Stanley Porter, who, in an article dedicated to Hemer, purported to address the question anew. Nevertheless, Porter affirmed Hemer's perspective:

> Since the Laodiceans had no natural springs for fresh water or at least not enough for their growing population, they likely were forced to pipe in whatever water they could. And this water was probably transported to them lukewarm from the outset.[8]

Although Porter acknowledged that his reconstruction was speculative, he nevertheless concluded:

> The fact that the Laodiceans went to the trouble and expense of building an aqueduct to bring in water of inferior quality on account of its unusable temperature probably attests to their being in a worse position than surrounding cities in at least this one respect.[9]

In a later *Festschrift* for Porter, Blomberg contributed an article to 'illustrate the value of archaeology, inscriptional, and ancient non-canonical literary evidence, and other external evidence for the correct understanding of well-known or oft-abused New Testament texts.'[10] He cites Porter's article

---

6. Rudwick and Green, 'The Laodicean Lukewarmness', 177.

7. Wood, 'Local Knowledge', 263.

8. Stanley E. Porter, 'Why the Laodiceans Received Lukewarm Water (Revelation 3:15-18)', *TynBul* 38 (1987): 147, https://doi.org/10.53751/001c.30560.

9. Porter, 'Why the Laodiceans Received Lukewarm Water', 148; cf. Hemer, *Letters to the Seven Churches*, 186–191; Charles H. H. Scobie, 'Local References in the Letters to the Seven Churches', *NTS* 39 (1993): 623–624, https://doi.org/10.1017/S002868850001198X. With the proliferation of commentaries and monographs on Revelation beginning in the late 1990s, treatments of this pericope have largely summarised the discussions in these earlier publications, for example, my commentary in Mark Wilson, *Revelation*, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Zondervan, 2002), 34.

10. Craig Blomberg, 'Common Exegetical Fallacies', in *The Language and Literature of the New Testament: Essays in Honour of Stanley Porter's 60th Birthday*,

on Laodicea's water supply as one that 'has helped set the record straight' about an 'old urban legend'.[11] If this 'record' was the relationship between the temperature metaphor and Laodicea's hydrological situation, it is curious that interpreters before Rudwick and Green – even ones who had visited the site, like they did – never made that connection.[12]

2.4 Koester

Koester raised a dissenting voice in 2003, criticising this *communis opinio* regarding the temperature metaphor. Noting that all the cities in Asia had a similar water system, he wrote: 'If Laodicea's water was lukewarm, the same would have been true at Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, and Sardis.'[13] Koester's observations about Laodicea's hydrological situation were prescient and subsequently sustained. However, in a critique of Koester, Blomberg stated that he 'does not interact with the clearly antecedent evidence Porter points to'.[14]

This 'antecedent evidence' has become simply dated speculation after archaeological excavations began at Laodicea in 2003. However, publications about the water system, albeit mostly in Turkish, have failed to reach scholars of Revelation. Proven erroneous are such claims as: 1) thermal water from Hierapolis was transported via an aqueduct and arrived lukewarm; 2) Laodicea derived its drinking water from hot mineral springs that arrived lukewarm; and 3) calcium carbonate in the pipes testifies to the poor quality of its water. As Koester rightly observed, Laodicea's hydrological situation was little different from that in the other cities in Asia.[15] Recent survey work at Hierapolis and Colossae has confirmed that their water systems were similar to Laodicea's. Each utilised terracotta pipes, aqueducts, and siphons to provide quality spring

---

ed. Lois K. Fuller Dow, Craig A. Evans, and Andrew W. Pitts (Brill, 2017), 722, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004335936_033.

11. Craig Blomberg, 'Common Exegetical Fallacies', 723.

12. Rudwick, Green, and Wood are to be commended for actually visiting the Seven Churches in the 1950s and 1960s, when travel in western Turkey was challenging. Despite the conveniences of modern travel, many commentators on Revelation never visit the Seven Churches even today. However, even personal autopsy used in interpretation may yield incorrect conclusions that require modification.

13. Craig R. Koester, 'The Message to Laodicea and the Problem of Its Local Context: A Study of the Imagery in Rev 3.14-22', *NTS* 49.3 (2003): 411, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688503000201.

14. Blomberg, 'Common Exegetical Fallacies', 724.

15. An edict dated to the second century CE suggests that Laodicea's water system was already functioning during the Hellenistic period; see Francesco Guizzi and Michela Nocita, *Laodikeia (Laodicea on the Lycus): Greek and Latin Inscriptions Found in the Excavation 2003–2021* (Ege, 2022), 9–11.

water for drinking, cleaning, hygiene, and aesthetic embellishment.[16] Therefore, any interpretation that relates the temperature metaphor to Laodicea's water system should be abandoned,[17] and the New Living Translation needs to revise its translation of 3:16: 'since you are like lukewarm water …'

3. Dining as the material culture background

3.1 Koester's hypothesis

Koester rightly called this interpretation 'untenable', concluding: 'All this attests to Revelation's imagery not being connected to the quality of local water supplies.'[18] Consequently, he offered another interpretation that placed Jesus's reproof in the context of a banquet wherein a host might serve diners either hot or cold water or wine to drink. To support his argument, he suggested the archaeological realia of a strainer used to chill wine with snow and a metal water heater called a *miliarion* to heat the water. He writes: 'To cater to the wishes of guests, a good host might make both hot and cold water available so that people could choose which they wanted mixed with their wine.' Drinking a lukewarm liquid to induce vomiting was familiar to ancient Greeks and Romans. For the Laodiceans, however, Koester concludes that 'the picture is of someone spitting out the wine that does not meet his taste'.[19] Thus, the metaphor deals with dining practice at a banquet. This interpretation suggests that a liquid is still behind the metaphor, in this case wine instead of water.[20]

3.2 Critique of Koester's hypothesis

Koester rightly observes that dining imagery is found in the message, particularly Jesus's invitation to the Laodiceans to repent so he can eat with

16. Readers are encouraged to read my full discussion of this new archaeological evidence in the complementary article, Mark Wilson, 'Did the Laodiceans Drink Lukewarm Water? A Hydrological Inquiry into the Temperature Metaphor of Revelation 3:15-16', *Lycus Journal* 8 (2023): 72–87, https://doi.org/10.54577/lycus.1381310. David E. Graves, *Jesus Speaks to Seven of His Churches* (Electronic Christian Media, 2017), 442–443, while aware of this archaeological activity, does not offer an alternative interpretation regarding the temperature metaphor.

17. For a review of these suggested interpretations, see Wilson, 'Did the Laodiceans Drink Lukewarm Water?', 75–76, 83–84.

18. Craig Koester, *Revelation*, AYB (Yale University Press, 2014), 337, https://doi.org/10.5040/9780300262148.

19. Koester, *Revelation*, 343, 344.

20. John Christopher Thomas and Frank D. Macchia, *Revelation*, The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary (Eerdmans, 2016), 127–128, n. 107, adopt Koester's reading and reject the water interpretation.

them (3:19-20). Nevertheless, this interpretation founders on several points.[21] First is the contention that hot and cold must relate to something people would take into their mouth. Therefore, lukewarm applies to what would be spat out.[22] However, the text makes no explicit reference to a liquid, whether water or wine. Instead, the metaphor relates to the quality of their works (ἔργα; 3:15) – neither hot nor cold. For his interpretation, Koester presumes a dining context in which hot or cold beverages are served. Regarding the *miliarion*, he provides an illustration of the device in a later fourth-century CE mosaic from Ephesus. However, most of the ten or so heaters discovered across the Roman Empire come from the context of a bathhouse, not a dining context in a triclinium. Koester cites ancient writers such as Cicero and Seneca, but their comments are equivocal regarding such devices.[23] As Hurard et al. note, 'such water boilers must have been very common all over the Roman Empire, as they were an essential piece of equipment in order to operate a bath in any rural settlement or urban context'.[24] A final point is more substantive. Given the association of wine, especially unmixed (ἄκρατος), with immorality and judgement later in Revelation (cf. 14:8,10; 16:19; 17:2; 18:3), why doesn't Jesus introduce that as an intertextual metaphor at this point? Rothschild likewise finds Koester's hypothesis a 'constructive proposal', but calls it 'not persuasive', a view shared here.[25]

21. Huttner's proposal is even less plausible: 'the author's aim was [to] paint the Laodiceans a vivid picture of their reprehensible indecision and indifference'; see Ulrich Huttner, *Early Christianity in the Lycus Valley* (Brill, 2013), 158, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004264281. As will be argued, wrong ethical decisions, not indifference, were what Jesus was condemning.

22. Koester, 'The Message to Laodicea', 410.

23. The wording is ambiguous in Cicero (*Rosc. Amer.* 133) since *miliarion* is absent. In Seneca (*Nat*. 3.24.2) the Latin *dracones* only appears here to describe this heating device. The note to 'calefactor' in the Loeb translation of Lucian's *Lexiphanes* 8 suggests that ἰπνολέβης, which it represents, is the equivalent of the *miliarion*.

24. Séverine Hurard et al., 'A Roman *Miliarium* from a Private Bath House in Northern Gaul: From Water Technology to Ritual Offering', *Antiquity* 90.354 (2016): 1570, https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2016.192. That a *miliarion* has never been found in Asia is inconclusive evidence, since 'nearly all have disappeared, being systematically recycled for their valuable metal' (p. 1563).

25. Claire Rothschild, 'Principle, Power, and Purgation in the Letter to the Church in Laodicea (Rev 3:14-22)', in *Die Johannesapokalypse*, ed. Jörg Frey, James A. Kelhoffer, and Franz Toth (Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 266, n. 30.

4. Hermeneutical considerations regarding the temperature metaphor

4.1 Introductory considerations

Before a new hypothesis can be advanced, several introductory considerations must be discussed regarding how it was formed. These include discussions about material culture, structure, and language, all important for interpreting the metaphor.

4.2 Material culture as a consideration

Koester is to be credited for attempting a fresh reading of the temperature metaphor, noting rightly that tying local references to specific churches can produce a flawed interpretation. This is because the Seven Churches shared a common rhetorical situation. As Parker observes, 'If the assumption is that the letters are intended to be circulated, then the context must be familiar to those who not only know Laodicea's environs and reputation but who themselves are able to relate to the images.'[26] This is seen in the references to familiar objects and structures related to material culture: menorah (λυχνία) in Ephesus,[27] wreath (στέφανος) in Smyrna, synagogue (συναγωγή) in Smyrna and Philadelphia, sword (ῥομφαία) and throne (θρόνος) in Pergamum, dining couch in Thyatira (κλίνη), clothing (ἱμάτιον) in Sardis and Laodicea, and column (στῦλος) in a temple (ναός) in Philadelphia. Such aspects of 'small history' would be readily identifiable and understood by John's audience.[28] While a water system might similarly qualify as material culture common to Asia's cities, that hypothesis is now disproven to interpret the metaphor.

---

26. Cyndi Parker, 'The Social and Geographical World of Laodicea', in *Lexham Geographic Commentary on Acts through Revelation*, ed. Barry Beitzel (Lexham, 2019), 691. Scobie, 'Local References', 614, similarly notes that there are 'no good reasons for doubting that the members of the different communities would be familiar with well-known characteristics of the other communities.'

27. For a suggestion on how to explain the phrase 'you have left your first love' (3:4) using honorific inscriptions from Ephesus, see my article 'Whom Do the Ephesians Love: Christ or Caesar?', *Pharos Journal of Theology* 101 (2020): 1–16.

28. This phrase comes from Eliav, who notes that 'ordinary, seemingly unimportant institutions lie at the heart of this research, which attempts to show the richness they can bring to our understanding of the past'; see Yaron Z. Eliav, *A Jew in the Roman Bathhouse: Cultural Interaction in the Ancient Mediterranean* (Princeton University Press, 2023), 16, https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691243443.

4.3 Structure as a consideration

The structure of the Laodicean message is unique in several aspects. From a literary perspective, it is the most complex of the seven and features the most metaphors. Unlike the other messages, Jesus gives no praise for positive deeds, but immediately admonishes with a word of judgement: because they are lukewarm, the Laodiceans are about to be vomited out of his mouth.[29] What might the Laodiceans have thought upon hearing the words cold, hot, and lukewarm? Parker notes that 'these temperature adjectives do not come with a noun, so the object must be inferred based on context.'[30] After hearing their spiritual condition assessed through the temperature metaphor, how would they then understand the metaphor of being vomited from Jesus's mouth unless they repent? Structurally, the reproof using these metaphors occurs before the metaphors of nakedness, clothing, and dining are introduced.[31]

4.4 Bilinguality as a consideration

The first audience of Revelation included Hebrew-/Aramaic-speaking Jews, some of whom, heeding the words of Jesus, had fled to Asia when the Roman army approached Jerusalem (Matt 24:16; Mark 13:14; Luke 21:21). This is particularly true if an early date of around 69 CE, before the fall of Jerusalem, is accepted.[32] In several places in Revelation John shows his familiarity with both the Greek and Hebrew texts of the Jewish Scriptures, for example, in 2:27 with Psalm 2:9 and in 3:7 with Isaiah 22:22. Later two Hebrew names, Abaddon and Harmagedon (9:11; 16:16), are introduced, and the gematria 666 (13:18) finds its usual interpretation, NERON KAISAR, based on the Hebrew alphabet.[33] Beale thus concludes: 'The likelihood is that John draws from both Semitic and Greek biblical sources and often modifies both.'[34] This observation regarding the author's bilinguality is significant when vomiting, nakedness, and shame are discussed.

---

29. While the message to Thyatira is the longest with 230 words, the one to Laodicea has the longest blame saying with 97 words, over half of its 188 words; see Mark Wilson, *The Victor Sayings in the Book of Revelation* (Wipf & Stock, 2007), 64–65.

30. Parker, 'Social and Geographical World', 691.

31. Medicinal salve to correct a vision problem is another metaphor introduced in the message.

32. For the early dating of Revelation, see Mark Wilson, 'The Early Christians in Ephesus and the Date of Revelation, Again', *Neotestamentica* 39.1 (2005): 163–193.

33. Koester, *Revelation*, 596–599, 605–606.

34. G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Eerdmans, 1999), 78.

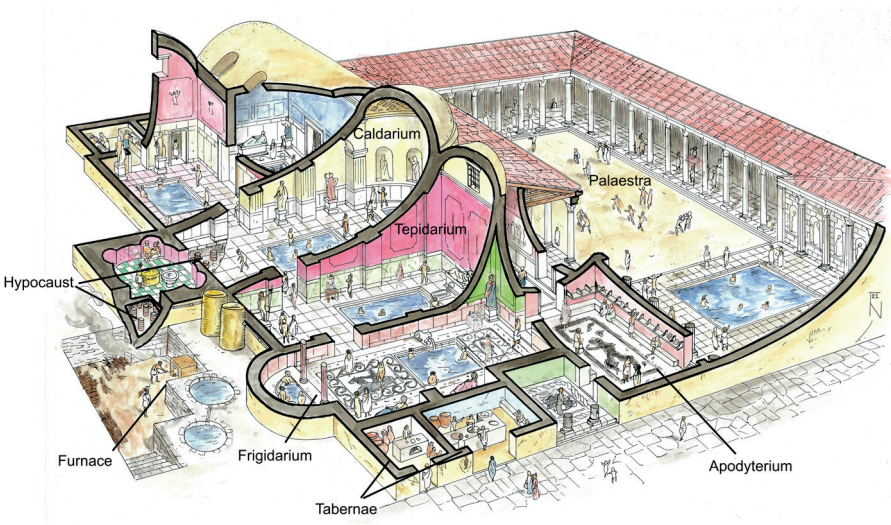

Figure 1: Plan of a Roman bathhouse. From *A Jew in the Roman Bathhouse: Cultural Interaction in the Ancient Mediterranean* by Yaron Z. Eliav and drawn by Yannis Nakas. Copyright © 2023 by Princeton University Press. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.

5. Rethinking the material culture behind the temperature metaphor

5.1 Roman baths and bathing as the material culture background[35]

The adjectives used in the temperature metaphor become very familiar to visitors of biblical sites in Turkey today, albeit in a different context. Along with visits to civic structures such as stadiums, theatres, and agoras, a tour of one or more Roman bathhouses is customary. Tour guides routinely point out the three major sections of a bathhouse (βαλανεῖον) using their Latin names – frigidarium (cold room), tepidarium (lukewarm room), and caldarium (hot room). A typical arrangement of these sections is shown in Fig. 1, and the specific layout in the southern bath of Laodicea is shown in Fig. 2. Bathers changed in the apodyterium before entering the frigidarium.[36] Might the order

35. For resources on ancient baths and bathing see https://ancientbaths.com/.

36. The Latin Vulgate translates these verses using *frigidus*, *calidus*, and *tepidus*. Witherington notes that these terms characterised ancient bathing culture and that 'Lukewarm water for bathing was not seen as a bad thing'; see Ben Witherington III, *Revelation*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 106, n. 106, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511814631. Yet lukewarm water was not the attraction to the baths for, as Fagan notes, 'the bather was invited to participate in true communal bathing … in shared pools of cold or heated water (called *alvei* or *solia*)'; see Garrett G. Fagan, 'Socializing at the Baths', in *The Oxford Handbook of Social Relations in the Roman World*, ed. M. Peachin (Oxford University Press, 2011), 3, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195188004.013.0017.

Figure 2: **Plan of the southern bath, Laodicea.**

of temperatures in the message provide any clues to its interpretation? If spiritual fervour were the emphasis, as some interpreters suggest, hot should be placed first. However, two times cold is mentioned first, which is the room bathers would initially enter. Only after cold and hot are mentioned twice does lukewarm even appear; after that hot is mentioned before cold.[37] Does this perhaps reflect the reverse order of a bather leaving the bath? Leaving these questions unanswered, we next explore the possibility of interpreting the temperature metaphor in light of the Roman bathhouse and the culture related to bathing.[38]

Civic water systems, according to Vitruvius (*De arch.* 8.6.2), were firstly to supply basins and public fountains, and then the public baths so as to provide a regular income for the city.[39] Entrance fees were small – a *quadrans*, a quarter of an *as* (Seneca, *Ep.* 86.9) – so baths were accessible to all. The bathhouse was one of the essential civic structures that characterised an ancient *polis*. The afternoon bath became a regular ritual for hygienic and social purposes and epitomised the Roman ideal of urban living. Yegül observes: 'Bathers must have spent most of their time in the caldarium and the frigidarium, the main halls for hot and cold bathing, as well as for a wide variety of social, sportive, and recreational activities and even performances.'[40] Ling similarly notes that the normal procedure for a typical bather 'would be to head for the hottest room first, sweat out impurities, rinse the body in a hot bath, then return to the cold room for the invigorating tonic of a cold dip.'[41] In terms of imperial thermae, Yegül defines the tepidarium as the 'relatively small heated room (or a "heat lock") between the caldarium and the frigidarium.'[42] In other words, the lukewarm room – the tepidarium – had just a minimal function in the bathing process. Koçak notes that the tepidarium was 'essentially a transit space

37. The NRSVue misses this inversion found in the Greek text, translating 'So, because you are lukewarm and neither cold nor hot'.

38. The entrenchment of the bathing culture into daily life is epitomised by the supposed exchange of Epictetus with Hadrian comparing the four rooms in a bathhouse with the four stages of life (Altercatio Hadriani Augusti et Epicteti philosophi 32). The tepid room, incidentally, is compared to a newborn infant.

39. Vitruvius (*De arch.* 5.10.1) provides detailed plans for constructing baths.

40. Fikret Yegül, *Baths and Bathing in Classical Antiquity* (Architectural History Foundation, 1992), 39.

41. Roger Ling, *Pompeii: History, Life and Afterlife* (Tempus, 2005), 128. Fagan curiously suggests that bathers began their visit in the tepidarium before visiting the caldarium and frigidarium; Garrett G. Fagan, *Bathing in Public in the Roman World* (University of Michigan Press, 1999), 10, https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.14923.

42. Yegül, *Baths and Bathing*, 493.

between the frigidarium and the caldarium, as the name suggests. Its aim was to prevent the heat loss of the warmer caldarium.'[43] Some lower-class believers in Laodicea may even have been employed at the baths since the workforce necessary to maintain them was among the largest in a Greco-Roman city.[44]

5.2 Bathhouses in Roman Asia Minor

In the imperial period, 'immense, carefully planned structures with extraordinarily rich decoration were provided for public use in most Roman cities, both in the East and the West.'[45] By the first century CE, Pompeii already had four public baths, while Herculaneum had two.[46] However, did baths exist in Asia Minor by then? Bath complexes dated to the reign of Augustus have been found at Pergamum[47] and Assos.[48] Beaujean et al. observe that 'there are convincing arguments to establish the presence of a mid-1st c. A.D. bathing facility at Sagalassos.'[49] Significant about the 'Old Baths' in this Pisidian city is that they were discovered under the much larger 'Bath-Gymnasium', built

43. Mustafa Koçak, 'The Nero Bath of Patara', in Havva İşkan, ed., *Patara: City, Harbor, Cult* (Türkiye Bankası Kültur Yayınları, 2019), 241. He nevertheless concedes that the tepidarium in Patara 'served more than a mere passage function' (p. 242). Galen (*De med.* 11.10) called it a *cella media*, which points not only to its central position but also that its temperature was neither hot nor cold.

44. Huber's article would seem promising for this topic. However, her emphasis is primarily on agonistic training in the gymnasium wherein male 'victors' developed not only physical strength but also a virtuous lifestyle; see Lynn R. Huber, 'Making Men in Rev 2–3: Reading the Seven Messages in the Bath-Gymnasiums of Asia Minor', in *Stones, Bones and the Sacred: Essays from the Colloquia on Material Culture and Ancient Religion in Honor of Dennis E. Smith*, ed. Alan Cadwallader (Society of Biblical Literature, 2016), 119–124, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1j2n8nc.11.

45. Andrew N. Sherwood et al., *Greek and Roman Technology: A Sourcebook of Translated Greek and Roman Texts*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2020), 376, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315682181.

46. For a discussion of these baths and their bathing culture, see Paul Wilkinson, *Pompeii: An Archaeological Guide* (I. B. Tauris, 2017), 36–37, 87–90, 118–125, 143–148, https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350987555.

47. Marianne Mathys, Verena Stappmanns, and Ralf von den Hoff, 'The Gymnasium: Architecture, Use and Images', in *Pergamon: A Hellenistic Capital in Anatolia*, ed. Felix Pirson and Andreas Scholl (Yapı Kredi, 2014), 307.

48. Nurettin Arslan and Beate Böhlendorf-Arslan, *Assos: An Archaeological Guide* (Homer, 2010). A date before 2 BCE is suggested by a dedicatory inscription mentioning a βαλανῆον. For a photograph and discussion see the Boston Museum of Fine Arts website: https://collections.mfa.org/objects/199448/dedicatory-inscription-of-lollia-antiochis?ctx=f6a38e0d-c04d-4306-a840-0d5d7c86b575&idx=1.

49. See Bas Beaujean et al., 'A Chronological and Functional Assessment of the Roman Imperial Bath-Gymnasium of Sagalassos (SW Asia Minor)', *Istanbuler Mitteilungen*

a century later. This suggests that many early bathhouses in Asia Minor were either overbuilt because of earthquake damage or expanded because of civic growth in the prosperous second century CE. Eliav elaborates regarding the first point: 'From an archaeological standpoint, perhaps Early Roman public bathhouses have not been unearthed because they were incorporated into the more elaborate bathing facilities that replaced them, leaving no clear trace.'[50]

Asia Minor's distinct contribution 'was the bath-gymnasium complex, a new type developed during the early Imperial period that combined the large colonnaded peristyle of a Greek gymnasium with the great vaulted halls of a Roman bath.'[51] An early example is the baths of Vergilius Capito in Miletus, dated to the reign of Claudius.[52]

5.3 Baths in the seven cities

Each of Revelation's seven cities is known to have had a bathhouse, even multiple ones, by the second century CE.[53] The Sardis bath complex (second century CE) is the most documented bathhouse among Revelation's seven cities. In his monograph, Yegül devotes entire chapters to its frigidarium and caldarium. Significantly for this discussion, its tepidarium is mentioned only in a brief sentence.[54] This again suggests that the tepidarium was never a destination and had simply a transitional function in the bathing process. Four baths have been discovered in Laodicea: South, Central, West, and East. The latter three have architectural evidence pointing to their construction

---

73 (2023): 155, https://doi.org/10.34780/ue6f-76d4. This bath complex was originally dated to the Augustan period, around 10–30 CE.

50. Eliav, *Jew in the Roman Bathhouse*, 89. This is one of several suggestions on pages 84–89 discussing why few baths dating to the early imperial period have been found in the Greek East, particularly Judaea.

51. Fikret Yegül and Diane Favro, *Roman Architecture and Urbanism: From the Origins to Late Antiquity* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 684, https://doi.org/10.1017/9780511979743.

52. Yegül and Favro, *Roman Architecture and Urbanism*, 687. Paul saw and might have used these baths while waiting for the Ephesus elders (Acts 20:17-18). However, he never saw the baths near the harbour at Patara because they were built in 63 CE under Nero, as the in-situ inscription attests; see Koçak, 'Nero Bath of Patara', 235–237.

53. The baths in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Sardis, and Laodicea are well documented in the archaeological record; those in Thyatira and Philadelphia, while not yet found, are surely buried under the modern cities of Akhisar and Alaşehir. For plans and illustrations of these baths, see Yegül, *Baths and Bathing*, 271–294.

54. Fikret K. Yegül, *The Bath-Gymnasium Complex at Sardis* (Harvard University Press, 1986), 8 for tepidarium, 67–76 for frigidarium, 112–116 for caldarium.

Figure 3: Bathhouses of Laodicea. © Tutku Educational Travel. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

in the second century CE.[55] The South bath-gymnasium complex stood above the stadium and west of the southern water terminal (see Figs 3 and 4).[56] An inscription found at Colossae mentions the repair of a bathhouse after the 60 CE earthquake that devastated the cities in the Lycus valley.[57] If the smaller city of Colossae as well as cities like Sagalassos and Miletus had bathhouses in the first half of the first century CE, surely Laodicea had a functioning bathhouse then as well. It too was probably damaged in the 60 CE earthquake and rebuilt with

55. Celal Şimşek, *Laodikeia (Laodicea ad Lycum)*, rev. ed. (Ege, 2013), 193, 202, 205. For an aerial photograph of the South Bath-Gymnasium complex, see 196, fig. 258.

56. Graves, *Jesus Speaks*, 482–483, mentions Laodicea's bath complexes among his six explanations of the temperature metaphor, but never develops it.

57. Alan H. Cadwallader, 'Honouring the Repairer of the Baths: A New Inscription from Kolossai', *Antichthon* 46 (2012): 176, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0066477400000186.

Figure 4: Arches of the Apodyterium of South Bath, Laodicea. © Mark Wilson. All rights reserved

civic resources rather than receiving assistance from Rome.[58] Ramsay found a dedicatory inscription in the ruins of the South bath-gymnasium complex dedicated to Hadrian by the governor Gargilius Antiquus (ca. 135 CE).[59] The object of the dedication is missing, so Ramsay suggests that 'Hadrian perhaps ordered the Gymnasium (?) to be built, or it may have been dedicated during his visit.'[60] Hadrian apparently dedicated a restored bathhouse rather than constructing a new one, and this restored bath was likely in use in John's day.

58. The comment by Tacitus – *propriis opibus revaluit* (*Ann.* 14.27.1) – about Laodicea's refusal of financial aid has been related to a similar attitude among the Laodicean believers: 'I have need of nothing' (καὶ οὐδὲν χρείαν ἔχω; 3:17).

59. For the use of this inscription to date the bathhouse, see Şimşek, *Laodikeia*, 201.

60. William M. Ramsay, 'Antiquities of Southern Phrygia and the Border Lands (I)', *AJA* 3 (1887): 345, https://doi.org/10.2307/496240. An additional restoration of 'βαλανεῖον?' is suggested. The combination βαλανε[ῖον] κ̣αθιέρωσαν is found in an inscription from Lycia (KILyk I 137). A review of inscriptions on the Packard Humanities Institute website shows that κατασκευάζω is the preferred verb for building a civic structure like a bathhouse.

5.4 Baths and nakedness

Participants in a Roman bath undressed in the apodyterium, and a cloth wrap was available to use, much like in a Turkish *hammam* today.[61] While sitting in the caldarium or swimming in the pool in the frigidarium, bathers would normally be nude. Nudity was a common aspect of public life in antiquity: men urinating in the pots of fullers, young men training in the palaestra, statues of gods, goddesses, and emperors displayed ubiquitously, and athletes competing in the stadiums. Eliav notes that 'the Roman landscape was much more revealing, in the carnal sense of the word, than ours, and Roman culture embraced utterly different ideas and perceptions about nudity than those common today.'[62]

Whether Jews and Christians bathed with pagans is debated. Keener claims that 'Jews and Christians regarded bathing as decadent.'[63] A scholarly consensus has developed that Jews rejected the public aspects of Roman culture and therefore never visited bathhouses.[64] However, the archaeological discovery of baths in Palestine along with frequent references to baths and bathing in Rabbinic sources suggests that Jews did, in fact, partake of the Roman bathing culture. If participation in public bathing was prevalent in Judaea, it is likely the case for diaspora Jews as well. Since the bathhouse was the means of hygienic cleansing for everyone, believers in the Seven Churches, whether Jew or Gentile, would use the baths along with their neighbours. Paul and his companions likely used the baths after a day of hot, dusty walking. Irenaeus (*Haer.* 3.3.4) recounts that when John went to a bathhouse in Ephesus and saw Cerinthus there, he rushed out, refusing to bathe with this heretic. One of the complaints of the persecuted believers in Lugdunum and Vienne was that they had been excluded from the public baths (Eusebius, *H.E.* 5.1.5, 5.4.2). And Tertullian (*Apol.* 42.2) observed that Christians were like other people: they went to the forum, the food market, and the baths.

61. Yegül, *Baths and Bathing*, 34–35, notes that while Greeks exercised and bathed in the nude, Romans seemingly wore simple cloth wraps that concealed the lower body. In a bath there was possibly a mix of garb depending on one's ethnic and religious predilection.

62. Eliav, *Jew in the Roman Bathhouse*, 37.

63. Craig Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (Baker, 2014), 3:2753. His discussion of the development of baths among Jews in Judaea does not mention any Jewish practices in the Diaspora.

64. Eliav, *Jew in the Roman Bathhouse*, 80–89, 108–109, summarises these objections.

5.5 Baths and mixed bathing

Another issue related to bathhouses is mixed bathing (*balnea mixta*), a topic that has elicited conflicting opinions.[65] Early bathhouses in Italy had separate baths for men and women (cf. Vitruvius, *De arch.* 5.10.1). However, by the first century CE, mixed bathing began to be practised, for the axial symmetric baths of Asia Minor did not have separate bathing areas. It is posited that some baths had separate hours: women bathed in the morning while men bathed in the afternoon. Separation perhaps occurred in more conservative regions.[66] But there is also evidence that mixed bathing was widely practised in the first century. Eliav writes: 'Not only did men and women bathe naked in Roman bathhouses, they did so together. Jewish men and women too, like all other people in the Mediterranean world, often – though perhaps not always – intermingled freely in the bathhouse.'[67] Eliav concludes: 'Jewish men and women too, like all other people in the Mediterranean world, often – though perhaps not always – intermingled freely in the bathhouse.'[68] It is therefore likely that Jews and Gentiles continued to practise mixed bathing, even after they came to faith.[69]

Because of the moral issues related to mixed bathing, even pagans had qualms about the practice. The first-century Roman rhetorician Quintilian (*Inst*. 5.9.14) posits that 'it is an indication of adultery that a woman bathes with men'. Hadrian (r. 117–135 CE) even banned the practice (Dio Cassius 69.8.2; Hist. Aug., Vit. Hadr. 18.10).[70] Regarding the role of baths in Greco-Roman society, Yegül judiciously concludes,

---

65. Lest this discussion seem shocking to some readers, it should be noted that Christians in Europe routinely enter hot springs and saunas in the nude. This was confirmed in conversations with an Austrian pastor and an American Bible professor living in Germany. Both said this is how their families bathe in public today.

66. Cautioning not to make definitive comments that bathing customs were static, Fagan, 'Socializing at Baths', 11–12, writes: 'Even if it was common to go naked in the baths, that custom could change over time or vary by region, or even by bathhouse within a community.'

67. Eliav, *Jew in the Roman Bathhouse*, 144. For the case of Gentile mixed bathing, see Roy Bowen Ward, 'Women in Roman Baths', *HTR* 85.2 (1992): 134–139, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816000028820.

68. Eliav, *Jew in the Roman Bathhouse*, 144. He provides a comprehensive discussion of Jewish mixed bathing and opposing views on pp. 141–149.

69. At the later synod of Laodicea in 363–364 CE, canon 30 banned mixed bathing for Christians, calling it 'the greatest reproach among the heathen'. If mixed bathing were not occurring at the time, such an ordinance would be unnecessary.

70. Ward disputes the historicity of these sources; see Ward, 'Women in Roman Baths', 139–142; cf. Eliav, *Jew in the Roman Bathhouse*, 144–146. Maréchal counters: 'Even

> That they provided a wholesome and altogether realistic form of recreation for the great majority of the public is sufficient defense against the perhaps justifiable claim that the baths induced indulgent and crude behavior. Such behavior and sexual promiscuity, too, would have existed in the Roman society with or without the help of the baths.[71]

The baths had a reputation for moral turpitude, specifically licentiousness (*porneia*). The Stabian Baths at Pompeii present an egregious example. In the apodyterium, eight numbered erotic scenes were found on one wall. As Wilkinson observes,

> We have entered a world of unbridled sexuality where various positions and pleasures are numbered, presumably so the male (or female) clientele could, if they wished, after their bath, retire upstairs to the three flats and enjoy from prostitutes 'number 5 or number 7'. The staircase to this sexual heaven is located internally, in the south corner of the complex.[72]

Whether such pornographic scenes were painted in any baths in Asia is unknown; nevertheless, they depict the reality of the sexual debauchery from which Gentile believers had emerged.

Jesus rebuked believers in Pergamum and Thyatira who were attending public banquets where they ate meat sacrificed to idols and indulged in sexual immorality (2:14,20). Just as sexual acts occurred at times on the dining couches after banquets, they also occurred at the baths. While the location had moved from the banquet hall to the bathhouse, the problem was the same. Certain Laodiceans saw their spiritual freedom as licence for libertinism.[73] Jesus's admonition 'to buy white garments so you might be dressed' (3:18) is a prescription for moral reckoning rather than a directive for Christian bathers to cover up. Instead of using the baths simply for sanative purposes, some Laodicean believers, most probably men, were participating in them for prurient reasons. A change of practice or even temporary abstention from the baths were perhaps necessary correctives for such ungodly behaviour.

---

if the episode probably never happened, it is important that in the eyes of the author and the readers, it unmistakably pointed to Hadrian's humble and righteous nature'; see Sadi Maréchal, *Public Baths and Bathing Habits in Late Antiquity* (Brill, 2020), 37, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004419421.

71. Yegül, *Baths and Bathing*, 42.

72. Wilkinson, *Pompeii*, 89. Plate 21 depicts some of these scenes. Interestingly, he notes that by 79 CE tastes had changed, and they had been whitewashed over.

73. Paul also dealt with the issue of sexual libertinism in his first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 5:1-13; 6:12-19).

6. Vomiting as a prophetic emetic

6.1 Vomiting in translation

The warning of judgement follows the call to repentance in the messages to Ephesus, Pergamum, Thyatira, and Sardis, However, Jesus warns the Laodiceans of judgement well before his call to repentance. That warning immediately follows the temperature metaphor. Because they are lukewarm, 'I am about to vomit you out of my mouth' (μέλλω σε ἐμέσαι ἐκ τοῦ στόματός μου; 3:16). Most English translations of Revelation 3:16 offer the gloss 'spit'. Texts with 'spit' usually translate the verbs πτύω (e.g. Num 12:14; Mark 7:33; John 9:6) and ἐμπτύω (e.g. Deut 25:9; Matt 26:67; Luke 18:32). Translating ἐμέω with a stronger verb such as 'spew' or 'vomit' is required here. Beasley-Murray rightly calls this 'a violent metaphor, even a shocking one'.[74] Indeed, the image of a regurgitating Jesus is not only nauseating and disgusting but contrasts starkly with his other exalted epithets found throughout Revelation.[75]

6.2 Greco-Roman background of vomiting

Some may still argue that a liquid is implied in the temperature metaphor because vomiting is a consequence of drinking a lukewarm beverage. For example, Celsus (*Med.* 1.3.19-23) mentions how drinking lukewarm wine or water was an emetic. Regurgitation is a known practice related to dining in antiquity. Cicero (*Att.* 13.52) notes that Julius Caesar was on a regimen of emetics, practising it daily after dining. Vitellius was noted for his wanton gorging and then regurgitating (Suetonius *Vit.* 13; Cassius Dio 64.2.2). That lukewarm liquids induced vomiting was well known in antiquity.[76] Thus Leithart argues: 'The angel *unwelcomes* Jesus with lukewarm wine, and Jesus spews it out in disgust.'[77] While conceding that lukewarm water or wine was a

74. G. R. Beasley-Murray, *The Book of Revelation*, NCB (Oliphants, 1974), 105.

75. Although regurgitate is an acceptable synonym, it is seldom used in normal speech. Commonly used euphemisms like throw up, barf, heave, puke, and upchuck are likewise unsuitable in translation.

76. Rothschild has proposed that the interpretive key to the metaphor is found in ancient medical literature. Just as purgation is used to correct physical imbalances, lukewarm 'represents the tepid water given to patients to induce vomiting, a standard part of the procedure. The negative valuation of the church as unlike the elements connotes their ineffectiveness and, thus, the risen Christ's threat to purge them.' See Rothschild, 'Principle, Power, and Purgation', 261; cf. 283, 290–291. If this were the point of the metaphor, its interpretation is rather arcane. The exhortation to rub salve in their eyes to cure spiritual blindness is more perspicuous as a medical metaphor.

77. Peter J. Leithart, *Revelation 1–11*, T&T Clark International Theological Commentary (Bloomsbury, 2018), 200, https://doi.org/10.5040/9780567664914.

recognised emetic, nevertheless, such a liquid is never explicitly stated in the text but only inferred. Therefore, interpretating the temperature metaphor through this lens is not persuasive.

6.3 Jewish background of vomiting

The Jewish Scriptures provide a compelling background for Jesus's threat to vomit out the Laodiceans for their lukewarmness.[78] This is found both in the Law and the Prophets. Moses warned the Israelites that severe judgement would result if they defiled themselves with the egregious sexual acts practised by the Canaanites. Newton points out that it 'recalls the prophetic threat to a defiled Israel of being vomited out of the promised land'.[79] This emetic judgement is made explicit in Leviticus 18:25,28 and 20:22. Here John follows the Hebrew text, which uses the verb קִיא, meaning vomit.[80] Péter-Contesse and Ellington suggest a translation like 'I am rejecting them from the land.' Conceding that this loses the vividness of the metaphor, they believe that for most languages 'a literal rendering will be very unnatural'. They conclude: 'If the vivid image of the text is to be retained, one may even add "... as a person vomits up bad food".'[81] Since vomiting is the normal physical reflex when the body ingests something harmful, readers in any culture should be able to understand this vivid metaphor.

6.4 Prophetic emetic for Israel's shameful immorality

The reason that the Israelites are threatened with regurgitation out of the land follows: they have uncovered nakedness (לְגַלּוֹת עֶרְוָה).[82] This euphemism indicates the nature of their defiling acts: 'to have sexual intercourse with that person'.[83] The phrase is used twenty-four times in these chapters (Lev 18:6-18;

78. While some texts in the LXX (Prov 25:16; Sir 31:21) associate ἐμέω and its cognate ἐξεμέω with drunkenness and gluttony, others (Isa 19:14; Jer 32[25 MT]:16,27) relate vomiting with divine judgement.

79. J. K. Newton, *A Pentecostal Commentary on Revelation* (Wipf & Stock, 2021), 113; cf. Martin M. Culy, *The Book of Revelation: The Rest of the Story* (Pickwick, 2017), 208. Both fail to develop this important insight.

80. This is undoubtedly because the LXX translates the Hebrew with the verb προσοχθίζω, meaning 'become angry' (NETS), which loses the vividness of the metaphor.

81. René Péter-Contesse and John Ellington, *A Handbook on Leviticus* (United Bible Societies, 1992), 280.

82. The LXX uses the idiom ἀποκαλύψαι ἀσχημοσύνην to translate the Hebrew idiom. Although BDAG, 147 s.v. notes that ἀσχημοσύνην is a euphemism for genitals, citing Lev 18:6ff. and Rev 16:15, it fails to connect its use to Rev 3:18.

83. J. E. Hartley, *Leviticus*, WBC (Word, 1992), 294. Hartley also notes that there is a difference between nudity and nakedness in the Hebrew text.

20:11,17-21) to describe a variety of illicit sexual acts both within and outside the family including incest, homosexuality, and bestiality.[84] As Zobel explains, 'The most frequent object of *glh* in the piel is *ʿervah*, "shame," "nakedness" ... the phase "uncover the shame" means "to commit fornication".'[85] The consequence for disobedience to God's sexual laws was that the land would vomit them out (Lev 18:25,28; 20:22).[86] For Israel, God himself 'will administer the emetic causing the land to vomit out its inhabitants'.[87]

Ezekiel used this same euphemism to decry Jerusalem's immorality associated with her idolatry. The prophets like Ezekiel used 'similar expressions as figures for fornication, shame, and utmost insult ...'[88] Leaving her youthful innocence behind, God threatened to tear down Jerusalem's place of whoring and leave her naked and shamed (γυμνὴν καὶ ἀσχημονοῦσαν; Ezek 16:39). Dubbed with the prophetic name Oholibah, Jerusalem was exposed for both her whoring and her shame (ἀπεκάλυψεν τὴν πορνείαν αὐτῆς ... τὴν αἰσχύνην; 23:18). Here, as in 23:10,29, the LXX translates αἰσχύνη for the Hebrew עֶרְוָה (nakedness). Again, she will become naked and shamed (γυμνὴ καὶ ἀσχημονοῦσα), and the shame of her whoring will be exposed (ἀποκαλυφθήσεται αἰσχύνη πορνείας; Ezek 23:29).[89] Block notes that just as Israel bared herself before her lovers, God will now expose her publicly in 'an intentional shaming action'.[90] Ezekiel's prophecy thus connects nakedness, shame, and whoring. Leviticus and Ezekiel use similar language to describe Israel's sexual debauchery that was often coupled with her spiritual idolatry.

84. Bruce K. Waltke, 'גָּלָה (gālā)', *TWOT* 161.

85. Hans-Jürgen Zobel, 'גָּלָה gālāh', *TDOT* 2:479.

86. Mark F. Rooker, *Leviticus* (Broadman & Holman, 2000), 248–249, notes: 'The use of the word "vomit" to describe the people's expulsion from the land particularly stressed the Lord's repulsion at the people's activity since vomiting is probably the most violent of all bodily reactions.'

87. Hartley, *Leviticus*, 298. Rothschild, 'Principle, Power, and Purgation', 279, does not accept this connection, writing that 'for Leviticus to be the background of Rev 3:16 requires that the risen Christ be analogized as "the land," an unusual link.' Péter-Contesse and Ellington, *A Handbook on Leviticus*, 280, address this objection: 'The ultimate agent is, however, the Lord himself.'

88. Zobel, *TDOT* 2:479.

89. Allen titles his discussion of chapter 29 as 'Chronic Nymphomaniac'; see Leslie C. Allen, *Ezekiel 20–48*, WBC (Word, 1990), 41.

90. Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 1–24*, NICOT (Eerdmans, 1997), 501, https://doi.org/10.5040/bci-008w.

7. Bathhouses as the setting for Laodicean profligacy

7.1 Laodiceans' shameful immorality

John's use of γυμνός and ἀσχημοσύνη suggests intertextual warnings drawn from these Old Testament texts. As Beale writes, 'The prophetic idiom is repeated here also to highlight the idolatrous nature of Laodicea's sin.'[91] That Jesus threatens to vomit them out for their 'shameful nakedness'[92] suggests that the Laodiceans are committing illicit sexual acts like the Israelites. Thus, the promised emetic is related to their lukewarmness regarding sexual purity, a situation similarly affecting some in Ephesus, Pergamum, and Thyatira (e.g. the Nicolaitans, Balaamites, and Jezebelites; cf. 2:6,14-15; 20–22).[93] Just as the land would vomit Israel out for her shameful disobedience, Jesus threatens to do the same for the Laodiceans who do not repent.

This interpretation is affirmed in 16:15 where the beatitude reinforces such a spiritual diagnosis. When Jesus comes as a thief, he warns his audience to keep their cloaks on, so they do not go about naked and expose their shameful condition (ἵνα μὴ γυμνὸς περιπατῇ καὶ βλέπωσιν τὴν ἀσχημοσύνην αὐτοῦ; 16:15). 'Naked' is an intratextual reference pointing back to 3:17, while the abrupt shift to the third person plural suggests an intertext with Leviticus 20:17, where incest with a sister is forbidden because 'he might see her shamefulness and she might see his shamefulness' (ἴδῃ τὴν ἀσχημοσύνην αὐτῆς καὶ αὕτη ἴδῃ τὴν ἀσχημοσύνην αὐτοῦ).[94] Alter describes how such a language cluster functions on a literary level: 'The metaphorizing habits of the mind are also to some degree implicated in the issue of co-text because we would not be inclined to see analogies, antitheses, or subterranean correspondences between texts were it not for our predisposition to grasp things through similitude.'[95] To make his point, John utilises both the Hebrew and Greek texts of Leviticus and Ezekiel to warn the Laodiceans regarding his charges against them.

---

91. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 36.

92. Osborne notes that this Hebraism is best translated as a genitive of source for 'The two combine for a single idea, disgrace and judgment'; see Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Baker, 2002), 209.

93. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, 303, similarly observes that the Laodiceans were compromised by 'idolatrous facets of the Laodicean culture (probably the same kind of compromise envisioned in the letters to Pergamum and Thyatira …).'

94. This emphasis on 'see' also alludes to Jesus's exhortation to rub salve on their eyes 'so they might see' (3:18; both βλέπω).

95. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (SPCK, 1992), 88.

7.2 Rich and wealthy

Following the temperature metaphor is the boast by at least some Laodicean believers: 'I am rich and have become wealthy' (πλούσιός εἰμι καὶ πεπλούτηκα; 3:17). The baths were noted for their opulent display of wealth. Yegül and Favro note that those built in Asia Minor in the imperial period were 'challenging the great thermae of Rome in size, scope, and luxury …'[96] Lucian (*Hippias, or the Bath* 5-8) describes some of their features: large well-lit halls, cold-water swimming pools, marble statues, sundials, and water clocks. Such ostentation was epitomised in the abundant use of marble from quarries throughout the Mediterranean. Lucian effuses: 'The hall beyond it is very beautiful, full of abundant light and aglow with color like that of purple hangings' (Lucian, *Hipp.* 6 (Harmon, LCL)). Columns of distinctive marble – Phrygian, Numidian, and Egyptian porphyry – enhanced the aesthetic effect (cf. Statius, *Silv.* 1.5; Martial, *Ep.* 6.42).[97] As Burrell writes, 'The stones were meant to remind the viewer of expensive gold, embroidered, and purple textiles.'[98]

Yegül notes that the high-vaulted ceilings and large semicircular or arched windows of the caldaria and frigidaria were much admired by bathers: 'The public, by and large, seems to have enjoyed not only the illumination but also the excessive heat of the caldarium, equating abundance with luxury.'[99] These accoutrements of the public baths made bathing a very sensual experience. Unfortunately, such luxurious interiors are little preserved in the archaeological remains of bathhouses in Turkey today. The bath at Perga is one of the best preserved and offers hints of luxury with marble veneer lining the walls and pool surfaces, and a tile floor in *opus reticulatum*. Empty bases in the frigidarium bear witness to the statues of gods and goddesses that once stood upon them.[100] Some well-preserved statues found in the pool area as well as in the adjacent gallery of Claudius Peison all testify to the rich assemblage of statuary that was just one element of a bathhouse's decoration.[101] Fagan

96. Yegül and Favro, *Roman Architecture and Urbanism*, 687.

97. For illustrations suggesting the luxurious nature of the baths, see https://www.atouchofrome.com/guide-to-roman-baths-information.html.

98. Barbara Burrell, 'Phrygian for Phrygians: Semiotics of "Exotic" Local Marble', in *Interdisciplinary Studies on Ancient Stone: Proceedings of the IX ASMOSIA Conference (Tarragona 2009)*, ed. Anna Gutiérrez Garcia-Moreno, Pilar Lapuente Mercadal, and Isabel Rodà de Llanza (Institut Català d'Arqueologia Clàssica, 2012), 781.

99. Yegül, *Baths and Bathing*, 39.

100. M. E. Özgür, *Sculptures of the Museum in Antalya* (Dönmez, 2008), 110–113, 164–165, 170–172.

101. Eliav, *Jew in the Roman Bathhouse*, 31, similarly describes the luxurious decoration in bathhouses including a 'great many statues'.

summarises: 'The baths were thus leisure palaces just as much as (if not more than) they were places to get clean.'[102] While the tepidarium could be decorated as ornately as the caldarium and tepidarium, its function, or lack thereof, is the point here.

If Jesus used the Roman bath to epitomise the Laodiceans' attraction to superfluity, he was not alone in denouncing such ostentation. Seneca (*Ep.* 86.6-7 Gummere trans.) decried such luxury in a lengthy diatribe: 'We think ourselves poor and mean if our walls are not resplendent with large and costly mirrors; if our marbles from Alexandria are not set off by mosaics of Numidian stone' (*Ep.* 86.6 (Gummere, LCL)). Noting their ceilings of glass and silver spigots, Seneca continues:

> I have so far been speaking of the ordinary bathing-establishments; what shall I say when I come to those of the freedmen? What a vast number of statues, of columns that support nothing, but are built for decoration, merely in order to spend money! And what masses of water that fall crashing from level to level! We have become so luxurious that we will have nothing but precious stones to walk upon. (Seneca, *Ep.* 86.7 (Gummere, LCL))

Yegül summarises:

> The disapproval of the excessive material luxury represented by baths; the objection to the worldly and wasteful lifestyle encouraged by them; and the condemnation of the sexual licentiousness and moral delinquency associated with the baths were among the major issues raised by conservative critics and constituted the basis of Christian opposition to bathing several centuries later.[103]

Luxury is a trope condemned later in Revelation, especially as manifested by the whore of Babylon (18:7,9). The Roman world has become rich because of the economic power manifested in her luxurious standard of living (18:3). Becoming rich, a boast by some Laodiceans in 3:17 (πεπλούτηκα), is later condemned with judgement in chapter 18. Merchants from Laodicea and the other cities in the Lycus valley had become wealthy through trade with Rome (18:15,19). Any Laodicean believer involved in this imperial supply chain was prophetically warned that their boasting about material prosperity would not last. Thus, the warning from heaven was particularly relevant for this church: 'Come out from her, my people, so you will not participate in her sins and will

102. Fagan, 'Socializing at the Baths', 10.

103. Yegül, *Baths and Bathing*, 40. Dan Jones attempts to recreate the atmosphere of a Roman bath in episode 4 of the series *Walking Britain's Roman Roads* (Rumpus Media, Channel 5 Television, 2020).

not contract her plagues' (18:4). Laodicean prosperity had a term limit, for God would soon destroy the source of its wealth.

7.3 Dining and the baths

There is a distinct dining component at the conclusion of Jesus's message, as discussed earlier. Hygiene and the sensual experience of luxurious surroundings were not the only benefits of a bath, for it also served socially as the place to assemble dinner guests. After a visit to the baths in the afternoon, elite bathers moved on to dinner in the evening. Fagan writes, 'The visit to the baths marked the transition from relatively open accessibility in the forum to more limited accessibility at the dinner party, which was populated by invited guests only.'[104] Therefore, before dining, 'it was customary to take a bath and exercise.'[105] Martial notes, 'When my dinner's this bad, why should my bath be good?' (*Ep.* 1.59 (Shackleton Bailey, LCL)). In Martial's writings he mentions no fewer than eight times dinner as the culmination of bathing (cf. 11.52.1–4; 10.48.1–6). Juvenal (*Sat*. 1.141–142) warned the nouveau riche about the danger of a heart attack if one bathed too soon after overindulging in peacock at a feast. Yegül thus writes: 'Gluttony and overindulgence were generally frowned upon and the wise realized the dangers of bathing on a full stomach.'[106] Even Martial could not snag an invitation at times:

> You never invite anybody, Cotta, unless you have bathed with him; only the baths give you a guest. I used to wonder why you had never asked me to dinner. Now I know that you didn't like me in the nude. (Martial, *Ep.* 1.23 (Shackleton Bailey, LCL))

Yegül comments, 'To dine alone was something of a social disgrace for some and an outright disaster for spongers who hoped to feast sumptuously at the expense of a rich acquaintance.'[107]

The baths were places, in theory, where all classes of individuals in Greco-Roman society would gather on an equal basis without regard to class lines. However, this equality was in theory only because the elite would be evident by their slaves and personal accoutrements brought into the bathhouses. Fagan insightfully notes,

---

104. Fagan, 'Socializing at the Baths', 10.

105. Katherine M. D. Dunbabin and William J. Slater, 'Roman Dining', in *The Oxford Handbook of Social Relations in the Roman World*, ed. Michael Peachin (Oxford University Press, 2011), 11, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195188004.013.0021.

106. Yegül, *Baths and Bathing*, 42.

107. Yegül, *Baths and Bathing*, 39.

> Bathers were not physically distinguished from each other by class in the manner of, say, audiences at spectacles or diners at public banquets … but that does not imply that they mixed and mingled as equals at the baths, or even that an ethos of egalitarianism informed bathing culture (in fact, no evidence for such an ethos exists).[108]

Bathing served as a bridge to fine dining in Greco-Roman society. To the Laodiceans who repent, Jesus promises to eat with them (3:20). He is standing at the door knocking and waiting to be invited inside. Even as the Corinthians were divided along social lines because of dining practices (1 Cor 11:18-22), perhaps the Laodiceans were also dividing in the baths and subsequent feasts by forsaking to eat with fellow believers who were of a lower social status. They were more interested in snagging a dinner invitation to the villa of a local elite than partaking of the Lord's Supper in more humble surroundings. This may be another dimension of Jesus's critique of the Laodiceans.

8. Conclusion

Readers of and commentators on the prophetic message to the Laodiceans have been puzzled why Jesus would encourage his followers to be spiritually cold or hot. This demonstrates how metaphors can differ in meaning across languages and cultures. In modern English usage, cold is a negative metaphor used to describe someone who is unfeeling or disengaged, while hot suggests a person who is 'on fire' for something. For Jesus and John, cold and hot are positive metaphors. Today the metaphorical force of lukewarm suggests a person who is unenthusiastic or apathetic. But mediocrity is not Jesus's emphasis, for lukewarm in his mouth is a strong, negative metaphor that threatens judgement on the Laodiceans unless they repent.

Using the results of archaeological fieldwork at Laodicea, this article has suggested that its hydrological system was not inferior, its water not undrinkable, and its temperature not lukewarm. Thus, tralatitious interpretations linking the temperature metaphor to Laodicea's water system are no longer valid. Koester's linkage of the metaphor to drinking beverages in an ancient dining context is likewise deemed an inadequate interpretation. Instead, it is suggested that the temperature metaphor is better interpreted in light of the ubiquitous bathing culture found in the cities of Asia. Unlike the frigidarium and the caldarium, the most important rooms in the bath, the tepidarium had a minimal function that served as a lukewarm space for bathers moving between the hot and cold rooms. The baths epitomised luxury in a wealthy city like Laodicea. Nakedness

108. Fagan, 'Socializing at the Baths', 13–14.

and dining were social dimensions linked to bathhouses. Laodicea's believers were called out by Jesus for accommodating to the immoral excesses of this institution. Unless they repent, he threatens to vomit them out, alluding to similar warnings of judgement if Israel and Jerusalem failed to repent of their sexual sins. Therefore, the temperature metaphor and its interpretation are postulated to derive from the Jewish Scriptures and from the bathing culture of the Greco-Roman world.

Bibliography

Allen, Leslie C. *Ezekiel 20–48*. WBC. Word, 1990.

Alter, Robert. *The Art of Biblical Narrative*. SPCK, 1992.

Arslan, Nurettin and Beate Böhlendorf-Arslan. *Assos: An Archaeological Guide*. Homer, 2010.

Beale, G. K. *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. NIGTC. Eerdmans, 1999.

Beasley-Murray, G. R. *The Book of Revelation*. NCB. Oliphants, 1974.

Beaujean, Bas, Johan Claeys, Frans Doperé, and Jeroen Poblome. 'A Chronological and Functional Assessment of the Roman Imperial Bath-Gymnasium of Sagalassos (SW Asia Minor)'. *Istanbuler Mitteilungen* 73 (2023): 1–141. https://doi.org/10.34780/ue6f-76d4.

Block, Daniel I. *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 1–24*. NICOT. Eerdmans, 1997. https://doi.org/10.5040/bci-008w.

Blomberg, Craig. 'Common Exegetical Fallacies'. Pages 722–737 in *The Language and Literature of the New Testament: Essays in Honour of Stanley Porter's 60th Birthday*. Edited by Lois K. Fuller Dow, Craig A. Evans, and Andrew W. Pitts. Brill, 2017. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004335936_033.

Burrell, Barbara. 'Phrygian for Phrygians: Semiotics of "Exotic" Local Marble'. Pages 780–786 in *Interdisciplinary Studies on Ancient Stone: Proceedings of the IX ASMOSIA Conference (Tarragona 2009)*. Edited by Anna Gutiérrez Garcia-Moreno, Pilar Lapuente Mercadal, and Isabel Rodà de Llanza. Institut Català d'Arqueologia Clàssica, 2012.

Cadwallader, Alan H. 'Honouring the Repairer of the Baths: A New Inscription from Kolossai'. *Antichthon* 46 (2012): 150–183. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0066477400000186.

Culy, Martin M. *The Book of Revelation: The Rest of the Story*. Pickwick, 2017.

Dunbabin, Katherine M. D. and William J. Slater. 'Roman Dining'. Pages 438–466 in *The Oxford Handbook of Social Relations in the Roman World*. Edited by Michael Peachin. Oxford University Press, 2011. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195188004.013.0021.

Eliav, Yaron Z. *A Jew in the Roman Bathhouse: Cultural Interaction in the Ancient Mediterranean*. Princeton University Press, 2023. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691243443.

Fagan, Garrett G. *Bathing in Public in the Roman World*. University of Michigan Press, 1999. https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.14923.

Fagan, Garrett G. 'Socializing at the Baths'. Pages 358–373 in *The Oxford Handbook of Social Relations in the Roman World*. Edited by M. Peachin. Oxford University Press, 2011. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195188004.013.0017.

Graves, David E. *Jesus Speaks to Seven of His Churches*. Electronic Christian Media, 2017.

Guizzi, Francesco and Michela Nocita. *Laodikeia (Laodicea on the Lycus): Greek and Latin Inscriptions Found in the Excavation 2003–2021*. Ege, 2022.

Hartley, J. E. *Leviticus*. WBC. Word, 1992.

Hemer, Colin J. *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in their Local Setting*. Sheffield Academic Press, 1986.

Huber, Lynn R. 'Making Men in Rev 2–3: Reading the Seven Messages in the Bath-Gymnasiums of Asia Minor'. Pages 101–128 in *Stones, Bones and the Sacred: Essays from the Colloquia on Material Culture and Ancient Religion in Honor of Dennis E. Smith*. Edited by Alan Cadwallader. Society of Biblical Literature, 2016. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1j2n8nc.11.

Hurard, Séverine, Luc Leconte, Aurélien Lefeuvre, and Pascal Raymond. 'A Roman *Miliarium* from a Private Bath House in Northern Gaul: From Water Technology to Ritual Offering'. *Antiquity* 90.354 (2016): 1562–1575. https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2016.192.

Huttner, Ulrich. *Early Christianity in the Lycus Valley*. Brill, 2013.

Keener, Craig. *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*. 4 vols. Baker Academic, 2012–2015.

Koçak, Mustafa. 'The Nero Bath of Patara'. Pages 234–249 in *Patara: City, Harbor, Cult*. Edited by Havva İşkan. Türkiye Bankası Kültur Yayınları, 2019.

Koester, Craig R. 'The Message to Laodicea and the Problem of Its Local Context: A Study of the Imagery in Rev 3.14-22'. *NTS* 49.3 (2003): 407–424. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688503000201.

Koester, Craig R. *Revelation*. AYB. Yale University Press, 2014. https://doi.org/10.5040/9780300262148.

Leithart, Peter J. *Revelation 1–11*. T&T Clark International Theological Commentary. Bloomsbury, 2018. https://doi.org/10.5040/9780567664914.

Ling, Roger. *Pompeii: History, Life and Afterlife*. Tempus, 2005.

Lucian. Translated by A. M. Harmon et al. 8 vols. LCL. Harvard University Press, 1915–1967.

Maréchal, Sadi. *Public Baths and Bathing Habits in Late Antiquity*. Brill, 2020. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004419421.

Martial. *Epigrams.* Translated by D. R. Shackleton Bailey. 3 vols. LCL. Harvard University Press, 1993.

Mathys, Marianne, Verena Stappmanns, and Ralf von den Hoff. 'The Gymnasium: Architecture, Use and Images'. Pages 302–317 in *Pergamon: A Hellenistic Capital in Anatolia*. Edited by Felix Pirson and Andreas Scholl. Yapı Kredi, 2014.

Newton, J. K. *A Pentecostal Commentary on Revelation*. Wipf & Stock, 2021.

Osborne, Grant R. *Revelation*. BECNT. Baker Academic, 2002.

Özgür, M. E. *Sculptures of the Museum in Antalya*. Dönmez, 2008.

Parker, Cyndi. 'The Social and Geographical World of Laodicea'. Pages 684–696 in *Lexham Geographic Commentary on Acts through Revelation*. Edited by Barry Beitzel. Lexham, 2019.

Péter-Contesse, René and John Ellington. *A Handbook on Leviticus*. United Bible Societies, 1992.

Porter, Stanley E. 'Why the Laodiceans Received Lukewarm Water (Revelation 3:15-18)'. *TynBul* 38 (1987): 143–149. https://doi.org/10.53751/001c.30560.

Ramsay, William M. 'Antiquities of Southern Phrygia and the Border Lands (I)'. *AJA* 3 (1887): 344–368. https://doi.org/10.2307/496240.

Ramsay, William M. *The Letters to the Seven Churches*. Hodder & Stoughton, 1904.

Rooker, Mark F. *Leviticus*. Broadman & Holman, 2000.

Rothschild, Claire. 'Principle, Power, and Purgation in the Letter to the Church in Laodicea (Rev 3:14–22)'. Pages 259–292 in *Die Johannesapokalypse*. Edited by Jörg Frey, James A. Kelhoffer, and Franz Toth. Mohr Siebeck, 2012.

Rudwick, M. J. S. and E. M. B. Green. 'The Laodicean Lukewarmness'. *ExpTim* 69.6 (1957–1958): 176–178. https://doi.org/10.1177/001452465806900605.

Scobie, Charles H. H. 'Local References in the Letters to the Seven Churches'. *NTS* 39 (1993): 606–624. https://doi.org/10.1017/S002868850001198X

Seneca. *Epistles*. Translated by Richard M. Gummere. 3 vols. LCL. Harvard University Press, 1917–1925.

Sherwood, Andrew N., Milorad Nikolic, John W. Humphrey, and John P. Oleson. *Greek and Roman Technology: A Sourcebook of Translated Greek and Roman Texts*. 2nd ed. Routledge, 2020. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315682181.

Şimşek, Celal. *Laodikeia (Laodicea ad Lycum)*. Rev. ed. Ege, 2013.

Thomas, John Christopher and Frank D. Macchia. *Revelation*. The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary. Eerdmans, 2016.

Waltke, Bruce K. 'גָּלָה (gālā)'. *TWOT* 160–161.

Ward, Roy Bowen. 'Women in Roman Baths'. *HTR* 85.2 (1992): 125–147. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816000028820.

Wilkinson, Paul. *Pompeii: An Archaeological Guide*. I. B. Tauris, 2017. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350987555.

Wilson, Mark. 'Did the Laodiceans Drink Lukewarm Water? A Hydrological Inquiry into the Temperature Metaphor of Revelation 3:15-16'. *Lycus Journal* 8 (2023): 72–87. https://doi.org/10.54577/lycus.1381310.

Wilson, Mark. 'The Early Christians in Ephesus and the Date of Revelation, Again'. *Neotestamentica* 39.1 (2005): 163–193.

Wilson, Mark. *Revelation*. Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary. Zondervan, 2002.

Wilson, Mark. *The Victor Sayings in the Book of Revelation*. Wipf & Stock, 2007.

Wilson, Mark. 'Whom Do the Ephesians Love: Christ or Caesar?' *Pharos Journal of Theology* 101 (2020): 1–16.

Witherington, Ben, III. *Revelation*. New Cambridge Bible Commentary. Cambridge University Press, 2003. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511814631.

Wood, Peter. 'Local Knowledge in the Letters of the Apocalypse'. *ExpTim* 73.9 (1962): 263–264. https://doi.org/10.1177/001452466207300903.

Yegül, Fikret. *The Bath-Gymnasium Complex at Sardis*. Harvard University Press, 1986.

Yegül, Fikret. *Baths and Bathing in Classical Antiquity*. Architectural History Foundation, 1992.

Yegül, Fikret and Diane Favro. *Roman Architecture and Urbanism: From the Origins to Late Antiquity*. Cambridge University Press, 2019. https://doi.org/10.1017/9780511979743.

Zobel, Hans-Jürgen. 'גָּלָה gālāh'. *TDOT* 2:476–488.