

Nicolaitans: Clarifications concerning their identity

By Sotirios Despotis*

The Greek name *Nikolaos* (*Nikos+laos*) [*«Νικόλαος (νίκος+λαός)»*] means *the conqueror of the common people*. This was the name of the last Deacon in the Catalogue of the Seven, Nicholas of Antioch, a convert to Judaism (*«προσήμετος Ἀντιοχεύς»*)¹, therefore the only non-Jewish one. No Church venerates him as a saint, though in *Acts* Luke does not note a later fall, while today his connection with the Nicolaitans' (N.) heresy is being hotly disputed. In John's *Revelation*, the Nicolaitans are found in Ephesus, Thyateira² and Pergamum, where they are probably identified with those who "hold the teachings of Balaam"³, the Hebrew namesake of Nicholas (=master/destroyer of the people)⁴. They are accused of fornication and "things sacrificed to idols" (*«εἰδωλοθύτων»*) and thus of violating the Apostolic Council's decision⁵.

According to bishop Ireneus, the N. teach that it is totally irrelevant if someone commits adultery and eats *«εἰδωλόθυτα»*⁶, while elsewhere the same author records the doctrinal substantiation of this particular ethic: they distinguish between (a) the Lord's Father and (b) a lesser Creator, as well as between (a) the Word/Christ from above and (b) Jesus,

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1. *Acts* 6, 9.

2. *Rev.* 2, 20.

3. *Rev.* 2, 14; cf. *Fig.* 31, 16.

4. *Rev.* 2, 14-15.

5. *Acts* 15.

6. 1, 26, 3.

the Creator's son⁷. According to Hippolytus⁸, Nicholas preached that the resurrection (which he identified with the faith in Christ and baptism, not with the flesh's eschatological resurrection) had already occurred⁹.

Clement¹⁰, followed by Eusebius of Caesarea¹¹ and Theodoret of Cyrillus¹², distinguishes between Nicholas, who taught an extreme asceticism («*παραχρησθαι τῇ σαρκί*»), and those who usurped his name to justify their lewd acts. The deacon, like his daughters and his son, were indeed ascetics:

ώραίαν, φασί, γυναῖκα ἔχων οὗτος, μετὰ τὴν ἀνάληψιν τὴν τοῦ Σωτῆρος πρὸς τῶν ἀποστόλων ὀνειδισθεὶς ζηλοτυπίαν, εἰς μέσον ἀγαγὼν τὴν γυναῖκα γῆμαι τῷ βουλομένῳ ἐπέτρεψεν. ἀκόλουθον γὰρ εἶναι φασὶ τὴν πρᾶξιν ταύτην ἐκείνη τῇ φωνῇ τῇ ὅτι «*παραχρησασθαι τῇ σαρκί δεῖ*. Καὶ δὴ κατακολουθήσαντες τῷ τε γενομένῳ τῷ τε εἰρημένῳ ἀπλῶς καὶ ἀβασανίστως ἀνέδην ἐκπορνείουουσιν οἱ τὴν αἵρεσιν αὐτοῦ μετιόντες. πυνθάνομαι δ' ἔγωγε τὸν Νικόλαον μηδεμιᾶ ἐτέρα παρ' ἣν ἔγρημεν κεχρησθαι γυναικὶ τῶν τ' ἐκείνου τέκνων τὰς θηλείας μὲν καταγρηᾶσαι παρθένους, ἄφθορον δὲ διαμεῖναι τὸν υἱόν· ὧν οὕτως ἐχόντων ἀποβολὴ πάθους ἦν εἰς μέσον τῶν ἀποστόλων ἢ τῆς ζηλοτυπουμένης ἐκκύκλησις γυναικός, καὶ ἡ ἐγκράτεια τῶν περισπουδάστων ἡδονῶν τὸ παραχρησθαι τῇ σαρκὶ ἐδίδασκεν. οὐ γάρ, οἶμαι, ἐβούλετο κατὰ τὴν τοῦ σωτῆρος ἐντολὴν δυσεὶ κυρίοις δουλεύειν, ἡδονῇ καὶ θεῷ.

Epiphanius¹³ maintains that Nicholas initially abstained from his beautiful wife, imitating those devoted to God. But then he could not bear to resist debauchery, even claiming: «*εἰ μὴ τις καθ' ἐκάστην ἡμέραν λαγνεύῃ, ζωῆς μὴ δύνασθαι μετέχειν τῆς αἰωνίου· ἐκ προφάσεως γὰρ εἰς πρόφασιν μετηνέχθη ἑτέραν. ὁρῶν γὰρ τὴν ἑαυτοῦ σύμβιον κάλλει μὲν διαπρέπουσαν, ταπεινότητι δὲ φερομένην, ἐζηλοτύπησε ταύτην καὶ κατὰ τὴν ἰδίαν ἀσέλγειαν τοὺς ἄλλους εἶναι νομίσας, τὰ πρῶτα μὲν ἐμπαροινῶν εἰς τὴν ἰδίαν γαμετὴν διετέλει καὶ διαβολὰς τινὰς αὐτῇ ἐπιφέρων διὰ λόγων, τὸ δὲ πέρας ἑαυτὸν κατέσπασεν οὐ μόνον εἰς τὴν χρῆσιν τῆς σαρκὸς τὴν κατὰ φύσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων, ἀλλὰ καὶ*

7. 3, 11, 1.

8. *De resurrection ad Mamma Eam*, CPG 1900.

9. Cf. 2 Timothy 2, 18: Hymenaeus and Philetus.

10. *Stromata* 3, 4, 25-29.

11. *E.I.* 3, 29.

12. PG 83, 401.

13. *Panarion* 1, 268.

εἰς βλάσφημον ὑπόνοιαν καὶ βλάβην κακοτροπίας καὶ πλάνην παρεισδύσεως».

Victorinus, in the ancient *Memorandum*, comments on *Rev.* 2, 9 as follows: “At that time men of disputatious and corrupt minds created a heresy in the name of Deacon Nicholas: They claimed that the things sacrificed to idols are subject to an exorcism so that anyone can eat them and that whoever fornicates has the possibility on the eighth day to receive peace (*ut delibatum exorcizaretur et manducari posset, et ut quicumque fornicatus esset octava die pacem acciperet*)”. The N., based on a special knowledge of Satan’s inner depths, are shown to cleanse the sacrificial victims with exorcism formulas by participating in the sacrificial meals, while the fornicators are fully integrated into the community after one week.

The following views have been expressed in modern research¹⁴:

1. The Nicolaitans (N.) was a post-Pauline proto-Gnostic group, which proclaimed to know «τὰ βαθέα»¹⁵ and adapted to their national environment, interpreting the *Epistle to the Ephesians* in a Gnostic manner.

2. The N. are followers of Paul. Thus, John represents in the *Rev.* the view of those Jews in *Acts* 25:1 and of Paul’s opponents in Galatia. The separation of the church from the synagogue, and the polemic concerns the non-Christian Jews has been taken as a prerequisite¹⁶ in order for the criticism of the *Rev.* in other passages against the Jews to be justified¹⁷.

3. The Nicolaitans represent the liberal wing of Paul’s disciples and the “powerful” of Corinth, who sought to adapt to the environment. Others see them as representatives of a Hellenistic rationalist attitude.

4. Siamakis¹⁸ associates “Nikolaos” (= «νῆκος λαοῦ» = “manhood of the people”), [...] with the sexual drive of “the pilgrims exalted in the

14. G. Guttenberger, „Johannes von Thyateira“, *Studien zur Johannesoffenbarung und ihrer Auslegung. Festschrift für Otto Böcher zum 70. Geburtstag*, Friedrich Wilhelm Horn/Michael Wolter, Neukirchener Verlag 2005, pp. 160-188, especially 170 not. 3.

15. *Rev.* 2, 24.

16. *Rev.* 2, 9. 3, 9.

17. See N. Walter, „Nikolaos. Proselyt aus Antiochien. Und die Nikolaiten in Ephesos und Pergamon. Ein Reilrag aueh zum Thema: Paulus und Ephesos“, *ZNW* 93 (2002), pp. 200-226.

18. *Εἰσαγωγή στὴν Ἀποκάλυψη*, <http://www.philologus.gr/4/68-2010-01-01-01-22-30/76--i> [07.09.2021].

ritual prostitutes and the obscene priests, who were ‘priestly’ catamites” and the Nicolaitans with the widespread in the Aegean (Tinos, Mycale, Myra) feast of the *Poseidonia*, who was also called *Nicolaia*: «ἐν δὲ ταύταις ταῖς ὀμηγύρεσι πᾶν εἶδος ἀκολασίας ἐτολμᾶτο· καὶ γὰρ αἱ τελεταὶ καὶ τὰ ὄργια τὰ τούτων εἶχεν αἰνίγματα»¹⁹. The palm branches used ceremonially during the Nicolaitan period, were called “Nicolaitan palms”. A magical papyrus says that magic ink for writing exorcisms was made from seven burnt stalks of «φοινίκων νικολα<ῖ>ων» (P. Mag. Berolin. A and B, Papyrus 1, verse 244).

We do not think that the N. are identified with those heretics, who are also treated harshly in the Catholic Epistles *Jude* 4:11 and *2 Peter* 2:1, where they are associated with Cain (for crimes) and Korah (for rebellion against the Church). Their case must be studied in the context of the book of *Revelation* in its entirety. In it, they are probably presented in contrast to the 144,000 virgins of the Lamb Jesus²⁰, who follow him wherever he goes, and therefore also in martyrdom. Their main problem must not have been the abuse of the sexual instinct. That is why we have already seen that the Sources are not unanimous regarding Nicholas’s corresponding attitude. It should be noted that Epicurus, though he was an advocate of non-indulgence in pleasures, had already in the time of the Lord Jesus become a “flag” of what was known as his “herd”. What the N. advocated was their active participation in the economic and social life of the cities, combined with sacrifice; therefore, the eating of fine meat («ἱεροθύτων»), which came from the sacrifices of the heathen and were then consumed in the temple’s dining room²¹, or bought at a reduced price from the butcher’s shop, because the meat could not be preserved for more than two days. Their inclusion in the life of their city meant that they were in communion with the Whore (*Rev.* 17), who sits on the scarlet beast and is shrouded in the luxurious purple.

19. Theodoret, *Ἑλλην. παθ. θερ.*, 7 PG 83, 993d; cf. Herodotus 1, 148, 1; Strabo 10, 5, 11. Athenaeus 13, 59.

20. Ch. 7 and 14.

21. *1 Cor.* 8: ἐδῶλα, demons’ benches.

In one of our earlier articles²², as a model of John's particular inspiration (i.e. Rome as a harlot), apart from the Old Testament parallels (see below), we have suggested the following:

(a) some "demonic" empress: [1] the brilliant bald general Cleopatra, Julius Caesar's "Wife" [who was honored with a statue as *Venus Genetrix* – "Aphrodite Mother" (cf. *Mother of Harlots*) in a newly built temple of her and the "new Dionysus" Mark Antony; [2] the nymphomaniac "She-wolf – Harlot" Messalina, Claudius's wife. It should be noted that under Domitian, Hesiads were also put to death for immorality in 83 and 90 AD²³.

(b) The goddess Rome, who (as was already the case in Hellenism with Fortune and partly with Victory) was worshipped in the cities of Asia Minor (and not in the Eternal City itself in the 1st century AD) together with the emperor. They (the cities) competed to see which one would be "anointed" (even as a goddess) a sacristan, to receive the "blessing" – the grants of Rome. The Romans themselves were believed to be descendants of Aeneas, son of Aphrodite, the goddess of love. Thus, the seven-headed *Roma* was also called *Flora* (= flora, fertility of the earth), and associated with *Amor* – a reverse reading of *Roma*. The Latin term *Lupa* meant (i) the she-wolf, who nourished the ancestors of Rome, which is why she was depicted on imperial "engravings" (coins, the Altar of Peace), but (ii) also the prostitute.

According to Aune²⁴ these elements, combined with the rumors of orgies in the Roman palaces, in which women such as Messalina played a leading role, contributed to John's parody through the literary medium of *ἔκφρασις* (= "descriptio") of Rome as a whore. Of course, it is not excluded that the «μυστηριῶδες ὄνομα»²⁵ is connected with the

22. «Ἡ Αἰώνια Πόλις ὡς Πόρνη», in: P. Arapoglou (ed.), *Βίβλος καὶ Πολιτική*, Biblical Society Editions, Athens 2019, pp. 114-142.

23. Suetonius, *Domitian* 8.

24. D. E. Aune, *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 52c: Revelation 17-22*, Word Books Publisher, Dallas TX 1998, *ad loc.* K. Bourazelis and Prof. P. Valianos (March-August 2021). Recently, the first of the two also published the relevant work: *Οἱ τρόφιμοι τῆς λύκαινας*, M.I.E.T. Publications, Athens 2017.

25. Cf. *Rev.* 17, 5: «Καὶ ἐπὶ τὸ μέτωπον αὐτῆς ὄνομα γεγραμμένον, Μυστήριον, Βαβυλὼν ἡ μεγάλη, ἡ μήτηρ τῶν πορνῶν καὶ τῶν βδελυγμάτων τῆς γῆς» [= *And upon her forehead was a name written, Mystery, Babylon The Great, The Mother Of Harlots And Abominations Of The Earth*].

element of power (= «*ρώμη*»), on which in 144 AD (Antonine era) Aelius Aristides from Asia Minor will base his well-known «*Ρώμης Ἐγκώμιον*» (“*Praise of Rome*”). This “power” is subsequently mocked by John (*Rev.* chapter 18).

(c) In a recent article it has been restated, with new arguments, the view that the source of inspiration for the representation of the Whore, unique in Hellenistic literature, was probably the Asiatic *Cybele*²⁶, who is usually depicted (similar to the Whore of *Rev.* 17) on a lion throne, but whose name is not a «*Μυστήριον*», but «*Μεγάλη Μητέρα*» (*Magna Mater*)²⁷.

We believe that the answer to John’s source of inspiration can equally be all three options. According to P. Bouyia²⁸:

theologically [...] during the Roman times there was a “Divine Mingling” of the Greek fertility deities Rhea, Demeter, and the Goddess Mother with the Phrygian Matar - Kubaba - Angdistis. She, as the mother of wild animals and creator of mankind and, consequently, absolute ruler of the cosmic order, was *the protector of the house and life*. In the case of Athens, she acted *as the guarantor of the order of the constitution and social harmony*, since she was officially worshipped in the city’s Agora, initially in the Old Parliament and then in the Hellenistic building of the *Μητροῶν*. In the Roman world, though, the goddess was also held in high esteem from the first moment of the introduction of her worship in Rome during the Second Carthaginian War, *because she was associated with the Empire’s salvation*. For this reason, Cybele’s reliefs and statues are considered to have had a dual use: they were used either for household worship, or they were offered by the faithful to the temples of the goddess, the Metropolis. The new relief Λ 9099 [...] must have been facing east.

It is not excluded that through the “Divine Mingling”, the Great Mother was combined with the goddess Rome, since, according to E. Fiorenza²⁹,

26. J. J. Schedtler, “Mother of Gods, Mother of Harlots: The Image of the Mother Goddess Behind the Depiction of the ‘Whore of Babylon’ in Revelation 17”, *Novum Testamentum* 59 (2017), pp. 52-70.

27. Soph. *Philoct.* 329, 400ff.: «*μάκαιρα ταυροκτόνων λεόντων ἔφεδρε, τῷ Λαρτίου, σέβας ὑπέρτατον*».

28. Polyxeni Bouyia, «Ρωμαϊκὰ Ἱερὰ τῆς Μητρὸς Θεῶν Κυβέλης σὲ Ἀθηναϊκὲς Ἀστικὲς Ἐπαύλεις», in: St. Vlizos (ed.), *Athens during the Roman period. Recent discoveries, new evidence*, Benaki Museum, Athens 2008, pp. 207-229, esp. 215.

29. *The Book of Revelation. Justice and Judgment*, Fortress, Philadelphia 1985, *ad loc.*

the Babylonian Whore simultaneously represents Rome as a city, as an empire, and as a goddess.

Of course, in this case, instead of being the protector-“mother” of the house and guarantor of the harmony-salvation of the empire, she is projected as the universal Mother of harlots (= «ειδώλων» [idols]) and abominations (= worship of emperors) destined for absolute ἀπώλεια (“loss”), as at the end of Chap. 18 it is proclaimed that her desolation is connected with the disappearance of basic functions of the οἴκου/*domus* (mill-loam) and the ἄστεως (“city”) (musician-craftsman): (α) καὶ φωνὴ κιθαρῳδῶν καὶ μουσικῶν καὶ αὐλητῶν καὶ σαλπιστῶν οὐ μὴ ἀκουσθῇ ἐν σοὶ ἔτι, (β) καὶ πᾶς τεχνίτης πάσης τέχνης οὐ μὴ εὕρεθῇ ἐν σοὶ ἔτι, (γ) καὶ φωνὴ μύλου οὐ μὴ ἀκουσθῇ ἐν σοὶ ἔτι, (δ) καὶ φῶς λύχνου οὐ μὴ φάνη ἐν σοὶ ἔτι, (ε) καὶ φωνὴ νυμφίου καὶ νύμφης οὐ μὴ ἀκουσθῇ ἐν σοὶ ἔτι· (i) ὅτι οἱ ἔμποροί σου ἦσαν οἱ μεγιστάνες τῆς γῆς, (ii) ὅτι ἐν τῇ φαρμακείᾳ σου ἐπλανήθησαν πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, καὶ (iii) ἐν αὐτῇ αἷμα προφητῶν καὶ ἁγίων εὐρέθη καὶ πάντων τῶν ἐσφαγμένων ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς³⁰. The justification for this crush includes witchcraft (apparently used by prostitutes to “bind” their victims)³¹ and the shedding of the innocent blood not only of the prophets and saints (the apostles not included) but of all the unjustly slain on earth.

It is possible that the “Nicolaitans”³² within the Church, who attempted to reconcile the worship of the Lamb with that of the Beast, to be identified

30. *Rev.* 18, 22-24.

31. Cf. Circe and Odysseus, Dido and Aeneas; cf. Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*; cf. *Isaiah* 23, 17 (prophecy against Tyre); *Nahum* 3, 3-4: “Cavalry troops charge, swords flash, spears gleam! Corpses are piled high, dead bodies without number – men stumble over them!! Nineveh the whore is being punished. Attractive and full of deadly charms, she enchanted nations and enslaved them. The Lord Almighty says, ‘I will punish you, Nineveh! I will strip you naked and let the nations see you, see you in all your shame. I will treat you with contempt and cover you with filth. People will stare at you in horror. All who see you will shrink back. They will say, Nineveh lies in ruins! Who has any sympathy for her? Who will want to comfort her?’”. In *Siv.* 5, 165 Rome longs for witchcraft. See D. Risos (transl.), *Ἡ Μαγεία στὸν Ἑλληνικὸ καὶ Ρωμαϊκὸ Κόσμο*, Heksantas Publications, Athens 1996.

32. N., as mentioned at the beginning of this article, in *Revelation* are found in Ephesus, Thyatira (*Jezebel cycle* 2, 20), and Pergamum, where they are probably identified with the «κρατοῦντας τὴν διδασχὴν Βαλαάμ» (“holders of the Balaam doctrines”) (2, 14; cf. *Ar* 31, 16), the Hebrew namesake of Nicholas (= lord/destroyer of the people 2, 14-15).

with the quartermasters and merchants lamenting the destruction of the Eternal City in *Rev.* 18, in contrast to those in *Rev.* 19-22 who have exited it and are preparing with the Hallelujahs for the Marriage of the Lamb. Note that the “harshest” description of a “city” as a harlot is found in *Eze.* 16, 23 and is not related to the great cities of Tyre and Nineveh, but to the “chosen” Israel itself³³. It is no coincidence that John intertextually connects the end of the prostitute in 17:16 with the criticism against the N. in the opening of his «Ἑπτὰ δα τῶν Ἐπιστολῶν» (“Seven Epistles”): the end of Rome exactly echoes the end of the Phoenician queen Jezebel, and that while she: ἐστίμισε τοὺς ὀφθαλμούς της (=“painting her eyelids black with stibium”, i.e. mineral antimonite)³⁴. The syncretism of Ahab’s wife led the Zealots’ model, Elijah, to the crucial test on Mount Carmel (where later the oracle in Vespasian³⁵ concerning the “Yahweh or Baal” dipole, probably connected to the Armageddon of *Rev.* 16, 16, as well as the Jezreel region where Jezebel met her cruel end.

33. The description of the Whore in *Rev.* 17, which is in contrast to the nymph-Jerusalem (21, 1-22, 5), is, as we try to prove in our Commentary, a parody of the Jewish high priest celebrating the feast of the Atonement. Instead of the title ἅγιος τῷ Κυρίῳ (*Exodus* 28, 36), “On her forehead was written a secret name: *BABYLON THE GREAT, MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES AND DETASTABLE THINGS ON THE EARTH*” [Βαβυλῶν ἡ μεγάλη, ἡ μήτηρ τῶν πορνῶν καὶ τῶν βδελυγμάτων τῆς γῆς (17, 5)].

34. *2 Kings* 9, 30-36 (*Jer.* 4, 30· *Ezekiel* 23, 40): “^{30†}As soon as Jehu arrived at Jezreel, Jezebel adorned her eyes, arranged her hair, and peered out a window. ^{31†}When Jehu had entered through the gate, she asked, ‘Was Zimri, who murdered his master,^[a] received well?’ ^{32†}Jehu^[b] looked up toward the window and called out, ‘Who is on my side? Who?’ When two or three eunuchs looked out at him, ^{33†}he ordered, ‘Throw her down!’ So they did, and her blood splashed against the wall and on the horses, while Jehu trampled her underfoot. ^{34†}Later on, after he had come in to eat and drink, he ordered, ‘Go and see to this cursed woman, and bury her, because she was a king’s daughter.’ ^{35†}But when they went out to bury her, they found nothing left of her except her skull, her feet, and the palms of her hands. ^{36†}So they returned and reported to Jehu,^[c] and he responded, ‘This fulfills^[d] this message from the Lord that he spoke through his servant Elijah the foreigner,^[e] who said: ‘Dogs will eat Jezebel’s flesh on the property of Jezreel’”.

35. Suetonius, *Vespas.* 5.