

“In this elegantly written and engaging book, Micah D. Kiel presents us with a kind of biography of the book of Revelation, moving from its content, ancestors, and original context, through its legacy (as seen in some of its later illuminated manuscripts) and onto its contemporary message in an age of environmental crisis. Kiel not only provides an accessible introduction to Revelation but also powerfully makes the case that John’s critique of the ecological destructiveness of the Roman Empire can challenge us today—and can inform and shape a scientifically informed but radical response to the economic and environmental problems we face. The rich combination of historical contextualization, careful and critical interpretation, and informed contemporary reflection make this book an ideal stimulus to fresh thought, both about the book of Revelation (and Christian eschatology more generally) and about our contemporary environmental crisis.”

—David G. Horrell
Professor of New Testament Studies
University of Exeter, UK

“For many, the book of Revelation is self-evidently detrimental to environmental concerns. In this engaging and provocative book, full of rich insights on every page, Micah Kiel forces readers to think again. Once we allow that Revelation’s terrifying vision of environmental catastrophe is more descriptive than prescriptive, an ancient visionary response to deforestation and water and air pollution, new possibilities open up for us. Kiel skillfully uncovers dimensions of Revelation that reveal humanity’s connectedness to the earth, to animal and vegetable life, dimensions acknowledged by many of the book’s medieval illuminators. He challenges us to swallow our anthropocentric pride and enter into its vision in which nonhuman animals lead the way to a proper orientation of the cosmos. Most important, he unleashes Revelation’s surprisingly rich potential for developing a contemporary, theocentric ecology.”

—Ian Boxall
Associate Professor of New Testament
The Catholic University of America

“In his innovative study of Revelation, Micah D. Kiel employs different strategies to show what Revelation’s ‘apocalyptic ecology’ can offer the environmental crisis. His most challenging question concerns the book’s depiction of earth’s destruction. How can a book where the sea is annihilated contribute positively to ecological consciousness? In the refusal of John of Patmos to diminish his critique of the Roman Empire, and its devastating effect on the earth, lies Revelation’s theocentric vision of nothing less than a new earth.

“Revelation is not an anthropocentric book. The earth protects the woman from the dragon, and birds refuse to let evil have the last word. But humankind is not passive in the drama of John’s eschatology. In his engaging eco-critical journey through the historical contexts that have formed John’s theology to the illuminated manuscripts that depict Revelation’s legacy, Kiel shows that Revelation’s apocalyptic eschatology provides a robust call to ecological action. Biblical students and scholars alike will find in *Apocalyptic Ecology* much inspiration for ecological hope.”

—Marie Turner

Flinders University of South Australia

Apocalyptic Ecology

*The Book of Revelation,
the Earth, and the Future*

Micah D. Kiel

Foreword by
Barbara R. Rossing



A Michael Glazier Book

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*For my sons, Harrison and Brendan:
May Psalm 148 always ground your worldview*

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Foreword

Barbara R. Rossing

Our planet is in trouble. As fears of the “end” convulse our culture, the biblical book of Revelation can help us hear Earth’s urgent pleas on behalf of the whole creation. Micah Kiel’s *Apocalyptic Ecology* makes an exciting contribution to the study of the Apocalypse within the emerging scholarly discipline of ecological hermeneutics. This book diagnoses our current ecological crisis in light of Revelation’s critique of the way the ancient Roman Empire abused the natural world. Most important, it shows us hope for our future.

Three elements make *Apocalyptic Ecology* especially important. First, the attention to art: Kiel introduces us to the exuberant and colorful world of illuminated illustrations of Revelation by medieval and Gothic artists. He shows us their love of nature. It turns out that in the early Middle Ages people’s attention was captured not by the toxic aspects of Revelation but by the book’s rich zoological life, the saving grace of birds and animals praising God. The Trier Manuscript gives us Earth as a fully personified figure opening her mouth to save the heavenly woman and her child. The Beatus Manuscript adds a Noah’s ark interlude, transporting the living world of Noah’s animals into the Apocalypse—animals of every color look out at us from the windows of the boat. These medieval artists paint Revelation as a book of joy and vibrant hope for life. Their “visual exegesis” of Revelation shows us God’s beloved world, including animals, our kin.

Second, the structure of *Apocalyptic Ecology* takes us on a journey over time, interpreting Revelation’s environmental consciousness

over multiple generations. We are introduced to Revelation's "ancestry" in the Jewish apocalyptic tradition of resistance to empires, and to Revelation's later career and legacy. Not every scholar can make the apocryphal book of *I Enoch* interesting, but Kiel does so—and wonderfully. Revelation draws on *I Enoch*, a book infused with creation imagery to critique the brutalities of Hellenistic conquests. *Apocalyptic Ecology* reveals the environmental impacts of warfare: the devastation of animals, forests, and agriculture. It also deconstructs the underlying logic of military ideology, using archaeological and textual evidence from inscriptions and coins. This book makes a contribution to empire-critical scholarship as well as to ecological hermeneutics.

Revelation engages in a battle of imaginations over who controls the universe. This is the third and most important contribution. The chapters on Revelation in the context in the Roman Empire—what Kiel calls Revelation's "Upbringing"—bring impressive new details and insights about the Roman Empire's totalizing claims of empire. Revelation "fights back" against imperial systems of cruelty and conquest, against an economy fueled by destructive mining, deforestation, trade, and slaughter of animals. In Kiel's most original contribution, he introduces us to the *venationes*, the mind-bending killing of animals for entertainment in public spectacles. The massive slaughter in the arenas of cities throughout the Mediterranean actually drove species to the brink of extinction. Kiel suggests that one reason Revelation opposes eating meat offered to idols is that the meat may have been that of animals killed in such gruesome spectacles. Domination of the animal kingdom constitutes an obscene affront to the role of God as creator. Revelation exposes and critiques such domination as idolatry.

Revelation's "personality" can be a challenge for the biographer. Yet Kiel's novel biographical approach is compelling reading. Some of his best writing comes when he relates Revelation to popular culture, including films and poetry. The question of annihilation or renewal—the degree to which Revelation insists that our Earth must be destroyed—finds no easy resolution. Kiel is a gentle and fascinating guide, helping us grapple with today's urgent questions.

Preface

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not. Great God! I'd rather be
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.

—William Wordsworth

The Wordsworth poem above laments a relationship between humanity and nature that has gone awry. He longs for another worldview and creed through which he can experience the natural world with awe and wonder. In this book, I will argue that the book of Revelation provides such a worldview. The book of Revelation envisions an entirely new reality, which is exactly what we need in order to survive our modern ecological crisis and to overcome the malaise we feel when thinking about the future. Revelation's "Apocalyptic Ecology" challenges the foundations of a society that destroys the earth and rarely has to face the consequences; its suggestions are radical and dangerous. Writing this book has changed me. I hope that understanding Revelation's message, and thinking about it in light of modern ecology, will have a similar impact on my readers.

Most of the work on this book was completed in conjunction with a sabbatical leave granted to me in the fall of 2015 by St. Ambrose University. I am grateful to the administration at St. Ambrose for granting this sabbatical, and to my colleagues in the Theology Department for supporting it unfailingly. Lisa Powell took over for me as department chair during my absence, for which the words “Thank you” hardly suffice. Upon my return, the St. Ambrose library staff, particularly the interlibrary loan office, have helped me immensely. I also received help from stalwart work study students: Madison Schramer, Lauren Schroeder, Autum Yarger, and Delina Tesfamichael.

I spent my sabbatical as a resident scholar at the Collegeville Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research in Collegeville, MN. My family packed up in August, my wife took a leave of absence from her job (thanks, Fr. Jim Vrba), my kids changed schools, and we moved to the shores of Stumpf Lake for the semester. The institute’s staff, Carla and Jan, made us feel at home. Don Ottenhoff was a great resource and leads an amazing program. My family and I were enriched by the community of scholars, leaders, and pastors at the Collegeville Institute. I would like to thank Richard Gaillardetz in particular for his friendship, exemplified in walking to noon prayer together, chats over baseball, racquetball games, and listening to tales of my fishing exploits.

The monastic community warmly welcomed our family as well. We extend our gratitude to Fr. Bob Koopmann, Fr. Timothy Backous, Br. Paul Richards, Fr. Anthony Ruff, and Sr. Colman O’Connell, among many others, for their friendship and camaraderie during our time there. The liturgical life and the natural setting at Saint John’s were a constant source of peace, beauty, and inspiration during our stay. The services offered to me through Alcuin Library were efficient and professional, making my work possible. I also would like to thank Fr. Columba Stewart and Matthew Heinzelmann for their hospitality at the Hill Monastic Manuscript Library, whose resources I utilized for the research in chapter four of this book. I also benefited from conversations with Fr. Michael Patella and Charles Bobertz, both of the Saint John’s School of Theology. Tim Ternes was kind enough to give me a private tour of the Saint John’s Bible originals, a very moving experience. I am deeply grateful to all of the great people

at Liturgical Press. Peter and Hans met with me early in the writing process, which was very helpful. All of the staff, Tara, Colleen, and Lauren, were prompt in answering my many questions and consistently professional and encouraging.

Our Collegetown experience would have failed miserably had our children not been well cared for. Cheri Burg and Betty Pundsack, who taught our kids at All Saint's Academy in St. Joseph, were gracious and caring, knowing that our children would be there only for a semester. We also had a lot of fun with Allison and Carl Driggins and family, who lived on the other side of Fruit Farm Road and hosted us more times than I can count.

Shortly after returning from sabbatical, I was diagnosed with a rare benign tumor called Vestibular Schwannoma. These tumors grow on the eighth cranial nerve that connects the ear with the brain. In May 2016 I had major skull-base surgery to remove the tumor. I express my gratitude to Dr. Marlan Hansen and his team of doctors and nurses at the University of Iowa Hospital. They helped me avoid serious complications from this condition and treatment. Had the outcome been different, it certainly would have jeopardized my ability to complete this book.

This book was also made possible by the incredible work of the many scholars and teachers who have gone before me. Much of this will be documented in the footnotes and bibliography. There have been many foundational treatments of the book of Revelation from which I have benefited. At the same time, recent treatments of the Bible and ecology have set new and interesting directions for my field. Specifically, I am grateful to my colleague Robert Grant and my friend Peter Lane, both of whom read and commented on an early draft. Barbara Rossing graciously read and commented on the full manuscript. She offered many important insights and saved me from some potentially embarrassing mistakes. Despite this help, any remaining errors are, to quote Blind Willie Johnson, "nobody's fault but mine."

Finally, to my family, I offer my fullest gratitude. They tackled the sabbatical challenge with aplomb. My wife, Eleanor, read several iterations of the manuscript and has, as always, been an insightful first reader. She also has listened to me talk things through over countless walks, drives, or martinis. It is to my boys, Harrison and Brendan,

that I dedicate this book. They are a constant source of joy, wonder, and love. I am hopeful for the future world they will inhabit.

Micah D. Kiel
Davenport, IA
4 October 2016
Memorial of St. Francis of Assisi

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Introduction

Burnmarks and Biography: Guiding Metaphors

“Revelation takes us on a journey . . . into the heart of God,
a journey into the heart of our world.”¹

—Barbara Rossing

I. The Bible’s Environmental Legacy: A Sharp Two-edged Sword

The movie theater darkens. (Most) people silence their cell phones. The extensive previews end and the movie begins. The film slaps its watchers with raging seas, scorched earth, and meteors falling from the sky. People run. Cities are consumed. The end is nigh.

A preoccupation with “the end” is in our DNA. We could not escape it even if we tried. The apocalypse offers us a libretto that reveals how things will play out. The apocalypse often lies dormant, but it will surface at any natural disaster, terrorist attack, rare lunar eclipse, or five-hundred-year-old Mayan calendar. As Robert Frost

1. Barbara R. Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), xviii.

famously put it: “Some say the world will end in fire, some say in ice.”² In either case, the world *will* end and we are preoccupied with the manner of that end.

The manner of “the end” has become explicitly environmental in recent decades. Scientific descriptions of environmental degradation suggest that we might be the cause of our own undoing. We hear predictions on a weekly basis about the dangers of deforestation, loss of biodiversity, and rising global temperatures. The sea could inundate New York City in fifty to eighty years.³ The decline in bees and their ability to pollinate threatens crop production, food security, and human well-being.⁴ In all likelihood we now are in the midst of the sixth great extinction in the history of our planet.⁵ There is no scientific doubt: we face an environmental crisis.

Although our crisis has us thinking about the end, it also ought to get us thinking about the beginning. Our environmental crisis is not just a modern problem. It is a human problem. Humans have been having a negative ecological impact since our culture emerged. Thus, it is a cultural problem. We have embedded in our culture certain traditions that justify our exploitation and destruction of the environment. In a widely cited article from 1967, Lynn White lays responsibility for the environmental crisis at the feet of the Christian tradition. White’s arguments form the starting point for virtually every theological book on the environment because he states the problem simply and clearly: humans, he says, are “conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion.” He goes on to say: “More science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecologic crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one.”⁶

2. Edward Connery Lathem, *The Poetry of Robert Frost* (New York: Holt and Company, 1969), 220.

3. Vivien Gornitz, Stephen Couch, and Ellen Hartig, “Impacts of Sea Level Rise in the New York City Metropolitan Area,” *Global and Planetary Change* 32 (2001): 61–88.

4. Simon Potts et al., “Global Pollinator Declines: Trends, Impacts and Drivers,” *Trends in Ecology and Evolution* 25 (2010): 345–53.

5. S. L. Pimm et al., “The Biodiversity of Species and Their Rates of Extinction, Distribution, and Protection,” *Science* 344 (2014): 1246752-1–1246752-10.

6. Lynn White Jr., “The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science* 155 (1967): 1205–6.

The Bible is the primary virus in Lynn White's diagnosis. Its legacy on environmental concerns is, to borrow a biblical image, a sharp two-edged sword. On one hand, the dominion given to humanity over creation in the book of Genesis has long been detrimental to the earth. In the book of Genesis, the first creation myth culminates in the creation of humanity. God immediately sets them over the other things that have been created:

and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth. (Gen 1:26)

Two verses later, after creating male and female in the divine image, God reiterates and expands upon their role:

God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." (Gen 1:28)

We have interpreted these verses to give us *carte blanche* to do whatever we want to the world around us.⁷

On the other hand, the Bible contains beautiful and passionate language about the necessity and importance of creation, its integral role in understanding God, and its merit and beauty irrespective of humanity. The creation myth in Genesis I deems creation "good" long before humanity arrives on the stage. The Psalms are a treasure of poetry about the importance of God and creation:

He covers the heavens with clouds,
prepares rain for the earth,
makes grass grow on the hills.
He gives to the animals their food,
and to the young ravens when they cry. (Ps 147:8-9)

7. For a historical overview of this text's influence, see chapter 2, "Dominion Interpreted—A Historical Account," in Richard Bauckham, *Living with Other Creatures: Green Exegesis and Theology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011), 14–62.

Psalm 148 describes all the things of creation praising God:

Praise the LORD from the earth,
you sea monsters and all deeps,
fire and hail, snow and frost,
stormy wind fulfilling his command!
Mountains and all hills,
fruit trees and all cedars!
Wild animals and all cattle,
creeping things and flying birds! (Ps 148:7-10)

The final chapters of the book of Job offer a vision of creation devoid of humanity altogether, undoing the anthropocentrism in Genesis chapter 1. In the New Testament, Jesus's exhortation to consider the ravens and the lilies (for example, Luke 12:22-31), which are beautiful and thrive because of God's creative providence, reiterates the same idea of the goodness of creation and its internal harmony.

Despite these positive strains, lauded by figures like Francis of Assisi, the Bible's environmental legacy is often perceived as overwhelmingly negative. In the beginning we started destroying because the Bible's beginning told us we should.

II. The Bible and the Apocalypse: "Biblical Burnmarks"

If the Bible's myths of the beginning establish an environmentally problematic precedent, its visions of the end offer little reprieve. Many biblical texts—some of the prophets, portions of the gospels, and Revelation—present a scenario in which the earth must endure a series of upheavals before the end of time. Jesus in the Gospel of Mark describes an end of the ages that includes earthquakes and famines (Mark 13:8). Ultimately, "in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken" (13:24-25). These words of cosmic upheaval are reminiscent of a variety of texts from the Hebrew Bible, including the prophets Isaiah, Joel, and Ezekiel. The book of Revelation is even more explicit. It suggests that God will create a new heaven and a new earth, because "the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more" (Rev 21:1). These future-oriented texts suggest

Revelation's Personality

The Earth and the Future in an Apocalyptic Ecology

“About this book of the Revelation of John, I leave everyone free to hold his own ideas . . . I say what I feel. I miss more than one thing in this book, and this makes me hold it to be neither apostolic or prophetic. . . . My spirit cannot fit itself into this book.”¹

—Martin Luther

When we meet someone new, we size her or him up. What is the person like? What are her or his features, propensities, and habits? Does this person annoy us, entertain us? We ask: Is this someone we want to spend time with? In the quotation above, Martin Luther has found Revelation's personality unappealing. In this chapter we will acquaint ourselves with the book of Revelation by asking questions we might ask of a stranger: What is it like? What are its features? How does it present itself? Within the world of biblical scholarship, we call this type of investigation “exegesis.” This is from a Greek word

1. Martin Luther, in the preface to his German Bible. As quoted in Judith Kovacs and Christopher Rowland, *Revelation*, Blackwell Bible Commentaries Series (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 44.

that literally means to “read out” the meaning of a text. Exegesis pays close attention to the details, forms, and features of a biblical text in order to come to an understanding of its author’s aims and purposes. We will begin with broad contours, like observing someone’s personality traits from across the room. We will then become increasingly focused—looking for the kind of depth that emerges from an engrossing dialogue—as we explore Revelation’s personality in relation to ecological concerns.

First, we will summarize Revelation and its content. Then, we will ask six questions of Revelation, the answers to which will help us as we try to interpret the book. Finally, we will look at Revelation’s view of the future, one in which God creates a new heaven and a new earth. Can such a vision of the future be helpful in caring for the environment? In the end, I hope to show that Revelation is interesting and worth reading, and that we can find a way, unlike Martin Luther, for it to fit with our spirits.

I. Introductions: A First Encounter with Revelation

When I was young my youth pastor told me that I shouldn’t read Revelation until I had read and understood the rest of the Bible. If that were the point of entry, who could ever give it a try? Revelation is probably the most misunderstood book in the Bible. A quick YouTube search on “Revelation” spits back a ghastly array of doomsday predictions and opportunities to donate money. For most Christians, Revelation is probably the least read book in the New Testament. It is certainly intricate and unfamiliar, but once we acquaint ourselves with some of its features and convictions, its message is not that complicated.

Revelation will not hurt you. Ignore the advice of my youth pastor and read it. Forget that you are reading “THE BIBLE” and experience Revelation as a piece of literature. Know from the outset that its plot and message might be hard to follow. It is full of visions and symbolism that may be lost on our ears twenty centuries after it was written. Yet its seemingly illogical presentation is part of its power. The apocalypse is meant to resonate at an emotional, not an intellectual, level. Its personality is vivid and visionary; it’s

The Hunger Games meets *Game of Thrones*. Let yourself enjoy it. I begin with a brief overview of its content so readers have some idea of what to expect.

Chapter 1 introduces the book as an “apocalypse.” The author introduces himself in the first person (1:9) and says he was on the island of Patmos. John sees an opening vision and is directed to write down what he sees.

Chapters 2 and 3 contain letters that John writes to seven churches. These churches are clustered in the western parts of the Roman province of Asia (what we today might call Asia Minor), in modern-day Turkey. The letters show that these communities experienced a variety of religious and social struggles (for example, Rev 2:2, 9-10), and in many cases faced persecution or death (2:13-14).

Chapters 4 and 5 provide the first expansive vision of heaven and its throne. This vision contains elements that recur throughout Revelation. Twenty-four elders surround the throne, along with four living creatures. Note the detail with which these creatures are described (4:6-11); we will discuss the symbolism of such visions below. The elders and the creatures worship God constantly. In chapter 5 we meet the lamb, who has been slaughtered and whose blood has won victory and deserves praise.

Chapters 6 and 7 describe the seven seals. Revelation is fond of cycles of seven (there are seven seals, trumpets, and bowls of wrath). Each of the first four seals sets loose a horse and rider, each of which is given dominion to destroy the earth in various ways (such as with swords, famine, or wild animals). The remaining seals throw the entire cosmos into turmoil: the sun, moon, and stars are all darkened. People flee to the mountains from the greatness of God’s fury and wrath (6:15-17).

Chapters 8 to 11 move to seven trumpets, each of which unleashes further devastation. One third of the earth is burned up (8:6-7); one third of the sea became like blood, killing its creatures (8:8-9); waters are polluted and made bitter by a falling star (8:10-11); and the sun, moon, and stars are dimmed. The

fourth and fifth trumpets have more expansive consequences, with a smoky pit spewing frightening war-like locusts (9:1-12). The sixth trumpet releases four angels, along with two hundred million cavalry, whose job it is to kill one third of humanity. The blowing of the seventh trumpet brings this section to a close (11:5-19), after which loud voices in heaven declare God's sovereignty and proclaim that the time has come to destroy those who destroy the earth (11:18).

Chapters 12 to 14 interrupt the first two cycles of seven (seals and trumpets) to narrate war in heaven. A pregnant woman clothed with the sun appears to John. A dragon chases her, but she and her child escape. After this, war breaks out in heaven (12:7) between Michael and the angels and the dragon. This dragon is clearly identified with "the Devil and Satan" (12:9). When the dragon realizes he will not be able to destroy the woman and her son (protected by a personified earth that swallows up the dragon's water), he wages war on God's people on earth instead (12:17). Chapter 13 describes two beasts, the first on the seashore and a second that arises from the earth. They are given authority by the dragon and they control the earth. The second beast is particularly devious. He receives a mortal wound, yet survives. He controls all economic interactions, and without his mark no one can buy or sell anything. His number is 666.

Chapters 15 and 16 return to a cycle of seven, this time with bowls of wrath that are poured out on the earth. The impact of these bowls recalls earlier parts of Revelation, but they were also inspired by the plagues God sent on Egypt in the book of Exodus: for example, water turns to blood, darkness covers the earth. After the seventh bowl is poured out, a voice from the throne in the temple (implying it is the voice of God) says, "It is done!" (16:17). This proves to be true, as the rest of Revelation turns to the final destruction of evil and the creation of a new heaven and new earth.

Chapters 17 to 20 begin by describing a woman, drunk with the blood of the saints, riding on the beast. She is the great city that rules over all the kings, and she and the beast are destined

for destruction. In chapter 18 a long poetic section reveals in the destruction of Babylon, clearly meant to be understood as Rome. Part of the song rejoices over Rome's fall, but part of it gives voice to those segments of humanity—particularly the rich and powerful (18:11-19)—who lament over the city's destruction. In chapter 19 heaven rejoices and a white horse arrives with the power to win. An angel, along with an army of birds, destroys the beast and his army. The evil entities are thrown into the lake of fire and the birds gorge themselves on their flesh. After this the dead are judged. Anyone whose name is not written in the book will be doomed to the lake of fire (20:15).

Chapters 21 and 22 describe the new heaven and the new earth that God will create. The first heaven and earth “had passed away” (21:1). There is no more sea. A new Jerusalem descends from heaven to earth. God will dwell in this city with humanity. There will be no more death, tears will be wiped away, and mourning and pain will be no more (21:4). The new Jerusalem is described as having been built with a dizzying array of precious metals and stones. Through the city flows the river of life and on its banks grows a tree, the fruit of which will feed and heal all the nations. There will be no need for lamps or a sun, for God will provide light to all.

This has been only a very brief summary of some of the key episodes of Revelation. As this book progresses, we will engage many parts of John's writing in greater detail. We will not, however, be able to solve every problem or answer every question.

II. Small Talk: Six Questions for a Cocktail Party

It will help our investigation of Revelation to have some introduction to its key features and components. Here I present six questions we should ask about Revelation. Such information about date, time, place, and context are important components of exegesis. Knowing as much as we can about a book and its author will help us understand and interpret its personality.

1. WHO WROTE REVELATION AND WHEN WAS IT WRITTEN?

Someone named “John” claims to have written the book of Revelation (1:4, 9). This is not the same John who wrote the gospel and three “letters” associated with that name in the New Testament. There are too many differences between the gospel and letters of John and Revelation to conclude that they stem from the same author. Who, then, was this John who wrote Revelation? We do not really know. Nevertheless, throughout this book, I will use “John” as a reference to the author of Revelation.

John says that he was an exile on the Island of Patmos (Rev 1:9). This island, today part of Greece, is close to the western coast of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), about fifty miles from ancient Ephesus. Was John really on Patmos? Maybe, maybe not. There is no convincing evidence that Patmos functioned as a regular place of exile or punishment in the ancient world, despite what some scholars have claimed.² John may have fled there on his own or been forced to live there for a while. It is also possible that John went there as part of his prophetic preaching.³ On the other hand, John may never have been on Patmos at all. Other ancient apocalyptic literature is replete with mythological and symbolic geography.⁴ Patmos could just be a literary feature of Revelation—an imagined rocky outpost in the sea where John received his wild visions.⁵

Most scholars would agree, however, that Revelation was written somewhere in the vicinity of Patmos. The churches addressed in the opening chapters are all located in Asia Minor, a region to which Patmos is adjacent. In addition, many of the ways in which Revelation addresses the Roman Empire would have found concrete expression in that part of the world (we will explore some of these

2. David E. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, WBC 52A (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 75–81.

3. Ian Boxall, *Patmos in the Reception History of the Apocalypse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 19–22.

4. *Ibid.*, 20.

5. *Ibid.*, 15.

details in chapter three).⁶ Beyond this broad geographical area, it is impossible to be more precise.



The Roman province of Asia at the time of the book of Revelation showing the location of the Island of Patmos. Map adapted from Accordance by Oak Tree Software. Used by permission.

When was this mostly anonymous, geographically ambiguous book written? The answer, if you have not picked up the theme yet, is: “We are not sure.” John claims to have shared in persecution and to have had “patient endurance” (Rev 1:9). Because of this, Revelation has sometimes been coordinated with the reign of Emperor Nero (54–68 CE), whose torture of Christians was legendary. More recently, however, scholars have tended to place the book later in the first century, during the reign of Emperor Domitian (81–96 CE). We have evidence for sporadic persecution of Christians during this time

6. Steven J. Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

period as well.⁷ The evidence needed to reach a specific conclusion on the date is, according to one scholar, “mixed” at best.⁸

Discussions about authorship, date, and place of composition bring out the best and worst in biblical scholars. Scholars bring an incredible amount of learning and information to the discussion, and when historical information sheds light on a biblical text, it can be indispensable. Whether written in 68 or 92, for our purposes we can proceed thinking that someone named John wrote a visionary work in the last decades of the first century. This work was written somewhere in Asia Minor and responds to the Christian experience of persecution in the Roman Empire.

2. WHAT DOES THE WORD “APOCALYPSE” MEAN?

The book of Revelation is also known by its Greek name, the “Apocalypse.” In English today, we use the word “apocalypse” to mean the “end of the world.” This is not really what the word means. The Greek word ἀποκάλυψις (*apokalypsis*) simply means “revelation.” The apocalypse is not the end of the world, but a lifting of the veil, when God decides to reveal something to humanity. The content of this revelation, in ancient literature of this type, often includes the end times, but not always. As an apocalypse, the book of Revelation describes a scenario in which God reveals something to a human recipient (in our case, a man named John). An angel often mediates or interprets the revelation. When reading Revelation our question always must be “What is being revealed?” not “What is going to happen?”

Many people refer to John’s Apocalypse as “Revelations.” THIS IS WRONG. The word “apocalypse” is singular. When talking about this book, there should never be an “S” at the end. I often give my students this multiple-choice question on their final exam:

The last book in the New Testament is:

- a. Revelations
- b. Mark
- c. Irrelevant
- d. Revelation

7. Aune, *Revelation 1–5*, lxvi–lxviii.

8. Ibid., lxix. Aune is also careful to document the ways in which the final form of Revelation that we read today may be a composite of originally independent sources that derive from various points of time in the first century.

The correct answer is “d.” Getting the name wrong threatens our interpretation. Although this book has many visions, it has only one revelation: that Jesus is Lord and God is in control of the universe and its destiny. In its own words: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever” (Rev 11:15). Jesus’ lordship is the one revelation. Adding an “S” also does not heed the warning at the book’s very end:

I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book. (Rev 22:18)

Just to be on the safe side, never put an “S” at the end.⁹ Because “Apocalypse” means “Revelation,” these two titles can be used interchangeably to refer to the book written by John.

3. IS REVELATION UNIQUE IN THE ANCIENT WORLD?

The book of Revelation is not unique. Many communities in ancient Judaism and Christianity produced apocalyptic literature. The Old Testament has one fully apocalyptic text, the book of Daniel. In the ancient world, communities of faith did not have rigid fences around what was “Scripture” and what was not. Texts that today we consider outside the Bible were important and many were apocalyptic. An anthology of apocalyptic literature, called *I Enoch*, provides a wealth of background for the New Testament and Revelation in particular. The community that wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls was very apocalyptic and wrote many pieces of revelatory literature. Many of these earliest Jewish apocalyptic texts find their origins in the Hellenistic period (approximately 300–50 BCE) and the experience of Greek culture, antagonistic kings, and oppression and violence.

The years 66–70 in the first century CE saw a war between the Jews and the Romans. At the end of the war, the Romans destroyed the temple in Jerusalem, which many Jews interpreted as a cataclysmic event. The cognitive dissonance and struggle that resulted from

9. I borrow this “joke” from Brian Blount, with his permission.

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