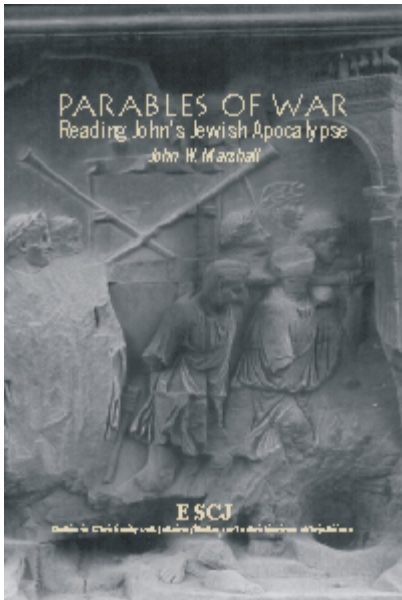


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Marshall, John W.

Parables of War: Reading John's Jewish Apocalypse

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In the introduction to this provocative but flawed work, “a Jew named John” gazes from the island of Patmos at the events across the Roman Empire during the turbulent year 69 C.E. Like Saruman with his *palantir* in Orthanc, he sees all! In the east the siege of Jerusalem and, farther east, the ghost of Nero leading the armies of Parthia against Rome; in the west, assassination and civil war in Italy; armies marching across Asia toward Rome; and the Jewish communities in the Seven Cities harassed by their neighbors and giving way to the temptations of the Greeks. With this sort of clarity, one wonders why John did not become the emperor himself. Instead, apparently, he wrote the Apocalypse.

Marshall’s main thesis in this revised Princeton dissertation (1998) is that the Apocalypse should be read not as a Christian text but as a Jewish one. This claim has been made before, from Martin Luther to Rudolf Bultmann, who dismissed the Apocalypse as “weakly Christianized Judaism” (see *Theology of the New Testament* [2 vols.; Scribner, 1955], 2:173–75), and many scholars since have identified Jewish elements in the text. Marshall, however, deconstructs the categories “Christian” and “Jewish” as part of his study and maintains that the text, its author, and its audience should be understood completely within a Jewish context. He joins a significant minority of commentators who date the text to the time of Nero. Finally, he argues that John calls on his readers to resist Roman culture and religion. Marshall offers a new combination of previous proposals

and approaches—the Apocalypse as Jewish; the Apocalypse as a Neronic text; the Apocalypse as countercultural; and the Apocalypse as read through poststructural lenses—but the results are unpersuasive.

Marshall engages a limited set of scholarship on Revelation. He caricatures scholarship on Revelation as full of “clichés” and defined by the master narrative of orthodox Christianity. By “commentators” in the first half of the book, Marshall means almost exclusively Adela Yarbro Collins (whose *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* [Westminster, 1984] receives extensive criticism), Leonard Thompson, David E. Aune, and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. These are all influential scholars, but the book would have been more effective if it had more fully engaged a wider set of authors from the past ten years. These might include Greg Carey, Paul Duff, Steven Friesen, Catherine Keller, Stephen Moore, Stephen Moyise, Tina Pippin, and my own work. Granted, *Parables of War* is a new reading. But his critique of modernist scholars from a poststructuralist perspective, while ignoring similar approaches, fights against only paper tigers. The “clichés” he tries to debunk (175) have also been deconstructed by others.

The introduction (ch. 1) tackles a couple of thorny methodological problems. Marshall questions outright whether the presence of “Christ” demands the presence of Christianity. Claiming that, in John’s Apocalypse, “the faith, the institutions, and the cult of Judaism are not even objects of criticism” (6), he attempts a “noncanonical” reading of Revelation that would not retroject Christianity into the text. The task involves a “continual self-examination and constant reformulation that will ideally enrich the terms ‘Judaism’ and ‘Christianity’ ” (9). Marshall critiques the complex of dogma and belief that have defined the Christianity through which the Apocalypse has been read. But he does not consider alternative definitions of Christianity proposed by scholars, for instance, as social construct, symbolic universe, or discursive formation.

In the first part of the book (chs. 2–7), Marshall unpacks his theoretical claims. He builds his analysis around a series of “aporias,” interpretive cruxes that produce circular readings if the text is read as Christian but that become clear when the text is read as Jewish. These aporias are the references to the “synagogue of Satan” in Rev 2:9 and 3:9; the portrayal of the protagonist community as “those who keep the commandments of God and the witness of Jesus” (12:17; 14:12); the visions of the 144,000 in 7:4–8 and 14:1–5; and the “holy city” and “great city” in 11:2 and 11:8, respectively. Marshall examines briefly how commentators have tried to fit these passages into Christian formulations, producing contradiction rather than clarity. Since Marshall is working from Jacques Derrida’s *Aporias* (Stanford University Press, 1993), his claim to find *the interpretive key* that clarifies the contradictions of the text is rather alarming.

In chapter 3 Marshall deconstructs the notion of “Christianity” in first-century texts. For Marshall, scholars bring the baggage of homogeneity, teleology, and logocentrism when applying the term “Christian” to the Apocalypse. The deconstruction of the term is apt, but the assumptions Marshall makes about readings of the Apocalypse, which are not as “homogenous” as he would have it, are problematic. There is significant scholarship that reads the Apocalypse as one voice in a range of competing “Christianities,” historical-rhetorical communities defined discursively rather than theologically. Chapter 4 looks at the problem of John’s religious identity as “Christian,” which locates Christianity as a taxonomic complement or supplement to Judaism. Marshall sees the taxon “Christian” in the Apocalypse as an unnecessary application of teleology but does not define what he means instead by “Judaism.” In chapter 5, drawing on Jonathan Z. Smith’s critique of taxonomy (“Fences and Neighbors: Some Contours of Early Judaism,” in idem, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* [University of Chicago Press, 1988], 1–18), he proposes a polythetic, polyadic (i.e., multiple elements) taxonomy for defining Christianity. Marshall argues against categorizing Christianity merely by the presence of Christ or the stipulation of the belief in Jesus. While he notes the influence of Clifford Geertz’s 1966 “Religion as a Cultural System” (in idem, *The Interpretation of Cultures* [Basic Books, 1977], 87–125), he does not recognize the numerous studies, led by Wayne A. Meeks, that have developed rich social descriptions of early Christian communities. Studies of early Christianity have, for the past twenty-five years or more, gone beyond theological definitions alone.

In chapter 6 Marshall applies a postmodern critique of foundational metanarratives to the scholarship of Yarbro Collins, Schüssler Fiorenza, and Thompson. He criticizes them for uncritically applying the term “Christian” to every first-century text with the name of Jesus or Christ, thereby anachronistically invoking the teleology of the Christian metanarrative. But these scholars have also described significant differences within and between the communities of the Apocalypse, which Marshall does not acknowledge. Finally, he concludes the first part in chapter 7 by examining key Greek terms in first- and second-century texts: *christianos*, *christanismo*s; *christos*; *ioudaismo*s, *ioudaios*; *ekklēsia*, and *synagōgē*. Curiously, he does not treat “Jesus” as well. Marshall observes that *christianos* is both relatively late (second century) and appears in contexts that embrace or tolerate the Roman imperial order (71). While this lends weight to his thesis that the Apocalypse is not “Christian,” Marshall does not consider that John and his community are engaged in a struggle over *the definition of Christianity*.

The second part, chapters 8–12, is more exegetical than theoretical, but this methodological breach is unsettling. Having deconstructed the taxonomy and definitions of first-century Christianity, Marshall turns to a historically positivistic application of his thesis to the text. The questions of the first part of the book are leveraged to clarify and

explain the Apocalypse; they lose their critical edge in the process. One wonders why a scholar who can handle Derrida deftly uses such narrow notions of historical processes and social formations in New Testament texts.

In chapter 8 Marshall argues that the Apocalypse, in its entirety, was written between 68 and 70 C.E. Marshall takes a strong stance on the integrity of the text, arguing against any stratification within the Apocalypse. His claims about “the work as a whole” (89) overlook evidence of John’s prophetic activity and followers; he was clearly widely known in Asia. An active prophet produces prophecy (Rev 1:3; 10:1–11; 19:10; 22:7, 18); prophets have disciples who collect and edit visions, leaving seams and layers in the text. Marshall then examines the evidence for dating—the seven kings of Rev 17:10, the use of the term “Babylon” for Rome, the meaning of 666, and external testimonies—concluding that “the Apocalypse [meaning here the *entire* Apocalypse] was written within the period roughly between the summer of 68 and the late spring of 70 CE” (97).

In chapter 9 Marshall examines the evidence for the situation of the Diaspora Jews during the war with Rome. Much of his evidence is conjectural; for instance, he argues by analogy from other diasporas in other wars, as far away as the Scythians in Thrace in 378 C.E. and, by implication, the Japanese Americans in the United States during World War II. Nonetheless, Marshall makes a convincing case that the war could have produced conflict within Diaspora Jewish communities and between Jews and Gentiles over Roman policies. What he does not prove here—but which he subsequently assumes—is that the same conflict would have produced the resistance to Greco-Roman *culture* that imbues the Apocalypse. Nor does he show, more significantly, that such conflict must have been confined to the narrow window in which he claims the Apocalypse was written. This seriously undercuts his argument because he prepares the ground well for proving that the war with Rome sowed seeds of tension in Jewish and Christian communities for years to come. Many, including myself, have argued that John and his circle carried resistance to Roman rule and Greek culture from the war in Judea to the cities of Asia Minor (and by implication that John’s ongoing prophetic activity generates layers of sources in the text). There is no reason to think that tensions would have ended with the destruction of the temple. When Marshall cites Josephus on the *Sicarii* in Egypt and Cyrene (*J.W.* 7.43 §407) and notes “the events of 115 to 117 CE” (109), he calls the reader’s attention to the seventy years of struggle between the Jews and Rome. Similarly, when he cites Tacitus’s report of a Neronian pretender in 69 (*Hist.* 2.8), he notes that pretenders also arose in 79 and 88 C.E., but he discounts these later occurrences, which would weaken his argument. Marshall shows how news from Rome and Jerusalem came to Asia Minor during this “long year,” but this depends on accepting the hypothesis that John, Saruman-like, observed all these events *in real time* from Patmos.

Chapters 10–11 consist of analyses of the four aporetic “parables” in light of Marshall’s preceding theoretical and historical studies. By “parables” he means that these passages have rhetorical purposes and moral-political meanings. While Marshall’s reading of the Apocalypse as completely Jewish is unique and his focus on 68–70 C.E. is unusual, his findings are commonplace. John opposes the Roman Empire and Greco-Roman culture. Marshall ends up where many others have, only substituting “Jewish” for “Christian”—John directs his text against lax pagan God-fearers and hellenized Jews rather than lukewarm Christians.

Focusing particularly on how the “synagogue of Satan” has been construed as a polemic against Judaism in the Apocalypse, he argues that this is directed not against Jews who reject Jesus but Jews who favor Rome. He rejects the evidence of Jewish–Christian conflict in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* as too remote, but this is a circular argument that depends entirely on accepting the narrow dating he proposes. The comparisons he uses for the situation of the Diaspora Jews in 66–70 C.E. are much more removed historically and geographically than the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, set in Smyrna around 155 C.E. His arguments about “those who keep the commandments of God” are equally problematic. Diversity within Second Temple Judaism is never examined in a book that promises “continual self-examination and constant reformulation” (9). Marshall writes, “John is thoroughly consistent with an understanding that keeping the commandments of God meant everything that first-century Jews understood it to mean” (139). He glosses over the deep and long-standing divisions over these very commandments, which defined Jewish social formations. Even more significantly, he ignores the Jesus traditions that challenged Jewish practice. But Jesus could have much more to do with “The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ” than Marshall wants to acknowledge at this point. His interpretation in chapter 11 of the 144,000 (Rev 7:4–8 and 14:1–5) and the cities of Rev 11 finds more traction, but the correspondences between these passages and the situation in Jerusalem in the late 60s C.E. could also be evidence for earlier sources, a hypothesis Marshall rejects.

The final chapter surveys three broad problems in light of Marshall’s thesis: the rhetoric of the Apocalypse; the Apocalypse and other Jesus literature; and the Apocalypse in Asian Judaism. The treatment of each topic, all of which have received extensive study already, is thin and problematic. Marshall wants to reject the “clichés” of “Christianity’s narrative of its own history” (175) but throughout the chapter he fights paper tigers rather than engaging fully recent Revelation scholarship. When he writes of resurrection in the Apocalypse as “a paradigmatic mark of Jesus’ authority to inaugurate a new age of vindication for God’s people” (190), I would like to see a more complete delineation of the contours of first-century Judaism that would incorporate this statement in Marshall’s “reformulations.”

Provocative theoretical insights about the formation of early Christian communities in a first-century Jewish context have been stretched too far in this book. Scholars might suspend the terms “Christian” if such a label carries all the “clichés” of the later Christian narrative, but critical scholars can still write of early Christian social formations in John’s “Apocalypse of Jesus Christ.”