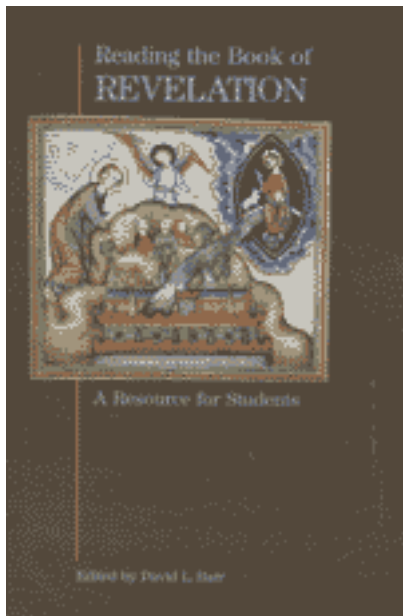


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Reading the Book of Revelation: A Resource for Students

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The twelve essays in this book are chosen to reflect the various types of methodologies that are currently being used in Revelation scholarship. In his first essay (“The Story John Told: Reading Revelation for Its Plot”) Barr considers John Collins’s definition of apocalypse as defined in 1979. Helpful as this is, students should also be aware that some scholars argue that “function” must be integrated into the definition (see Hellhom, *Semeia* 36 [1986]: 27). Barr also analyzes Revelation as three interrelated, interacting stories (Rev 1–3; 4–11; and 12–22), tied together by a common storytelling framework. He states that Jesus the slain lamb dominates the second story in Rev 4–11. The slain lamb, however, does not appear until Rev 5 and is not present in Rev 11. Moreover, the lamb appears only eight times in these chapters, whereas in the third story (Rev 12–22) the lamb appears considerably more times than eight. Further, war is considered the mythic paradigm for Rev 12–22. Although war does appear more dominant in these chapters, the fact that the seer is told that there must be repentance or Jesus will make war with the sword of his mouth in 2:16 again undermines this compartmentalizing.

Dating Revelation to Domitian’s reign, Leonard Thompson (“Ordinary Lives: John and His First Readers”) argues that there is no evidence that Domitian was a tyrant or that he extended the practice of the imperial cult or that he persecuted Christians. However,

before students throw in their lot with Thompson's well-known view, perhaps they should also consider the extension of the Jewish tax reported in Suetonius, *Domitian* 12.2, as well as the coins distinctive to Domitian's reign that suggest coinage was employed by Domitian to project an ideological message related to the emperor's aspiration to divinity (see I. Carradice, *Coinage and Finances in the Reign of Domitian AD 81-96*, and E. P. Janzen in the *1994 SBL Seminar Papers*). Thompson's argument that the problem John faced was not persecution but the threat to churches to compromise with Rome is well made. In line with this, he suggests that if it were not for the compromising Christians, maybe the church would have disappeared (46). This, however, does not convince me; if a community compromises with the dominant force, then it simply loses its identity and is assimilated into the dominant power. Surely this was a great concern of John.

Steven Friesen ("The Beast from the Land: Revelation 13:11–18 and Social Setting") considers Rev 13:11–18 through the lens of his understanding of the way the imperial cult in the first century C.E. functioned in Asia. Friesen is concerned that commentators on Revelation consider more seriously the specifics of the imperial cult. He demonstrates in his examination of 13:11–18 how the particulars can elucidate our reading of the text. Furthering this concern, Friesen provides helpful primary material for students to use.

Paul Duff ("Wolves in Sheep's Clothing: Literary Opposition and Social Tension in the Revelation of John") examines Revelation's depiction of Jezebel, John's rival, in contrast to the righteous woman of Rev 12, but similarly to the female figure, Babylon, in Rev 17–18. By doing this John portrays his rival like the bloodthirsty Babylon. This study encourages students to consider a particular literary tendency of John.

Edith Humphrey in a provocative essay ("A Tale of Two Cities and [At Least] Three Women: Transformation, Continuity, and Contrast in the Apocalypse") considers the city/women figures. She examines more specifically how they fit within the overall structure of Revelation as it reveals the mysteries of heaven, past, present, and future, but also as a retelling of the story of God's new humanity. This is a detailed study and may not always be reader friendly to students beginning their work on Revelation.

Barr's second essay in this volume ("Doing Violence" Moral Issues in Reading John's Apocalypse") challenges the idea that John's story is about divinely sanctioned violence. He argues that for John "the use of coercive power is always wrong and is judged to be wrong by the Apocalypse itself. In fact, in John's story what most distinguishes the rule of God from that of the devil is that the latter uses coercive force" (98). Central to Barr's argument is that victory is gained by the death of the lamb, not by the exercise of divine

power. This is a helpful essay that challenges the understanding of Revelation as promoting a vengeful and violent message.

Ronald Farmer uses a process hermeneutic derived from Alfred North Whitehead to look at contradictory texts/metaphors (“Undercurrents and Paradoxes: The Apocalypse to John in Process Hermeneutic”). For example, when John looks for the warrior lion he sees a slain lamb. This conveys the idea that God’s power is not revealed by brute force but in suffering and redemptive love. The strength of this hermeneutic is that it urges the modern reader not to lose the message communicated by the original image. Instead, we must see an interaction between the contrasting images. I was a bit puzzled with his discussion of Rev 6 (112), where Farmer says the “inhabitants of earth” hide in the caves, since it is the great and small alike who hide.

Jean-Pierre Ruiz (“Taking a Stand on the Sand of the Seashore: A Postcolonial Exploration of Revelation 13”) is concerned with how Revelation is read from the margins of society using postcolonial criticism. Quoting R. S. Sugirtharajah, Ruiz states what postcolonial criticism involves: “scrutinizing and exposing colonial domination and power as these are embodied in biblical texts and in interpretations, and . . . searching for alternative hermeneutics while thus overturning an dismantling colonial perspectives” (125). Ruiz applies this method to his reading of Rev 13 in which he reiterates that Revelation is anti-empire rhetoric. I suspect that a student encountering postcolonial criticism for the first time may wonder how this approach differs from liberationist readings of Rev 13. It would have been helpful if the differences between liberationist and postcolonial readings had been brought out. My sense is that one needs neither a liberationist nor a postcolonial reading to reach these conclusions. A number of scholars would reach the same understanding without using a postcolonial approach.

Central to Leonard Thompson’s second essay (“Spirit Possession” Revelation in Religious Studies”) are the following questions: What does the spirit do when it incites the prophet? How does the prophet’s natural disposition shape the prophecy? Do the prophets simply project their own views onto the prophetic screen so that they are given divine sanction? What does the spirit contribute to the process? He considers that John is more a shaman than a medium—an active agent and not merely a vehicle of the spirit. Therefore the spirit works within the culturally specific context transforming the way John sees the world into a religious one. Thompson points out that John through spirit possession sees that his world is “but the ephemeral surface of a deep ocean of reality” (149). This essay compensates for a gap in commentaries that do not really deal with the impact the spirit has on John.

Jon Paulien reads Revelation from the perspective of popular culture (“The Lion/Lamb King: Reading the Apocalypse from Popular Culture”). This reading fits the overall aims of the volume of introducing students to the variety of ways of reading Revelation today. In terms of the content of the essay, I am not altogether sure how *Terminator* films can be considered a modern form of Revelation. Surely Revelation is the very opposite of the redemptive violence genre according to other essays in this volume (particular Barr and Farmer). Yet Paulien makes the very important point that careful exegesis of Revelation is essential in order to combat the more dangerous fringe readings that have led to many being deceived by such figures as David Koresh. This point cannot be restated enough times.

In his conclusion to the whole volume (“Choosing between Readings: Questions and Criteria”) Barr asks about the best way to read the book of Revelation. Barr stresses that the multiple readings in this volume present students with the opportunity to read Revelation for themselves and to extend these readings to the rest of Revelation in ways that open further insights. While I agree with Barr’s sentiments about listening to what others are saying, all the essays, except Paulien’s, take seriously the original intentions of Revelation. They all agree that Revelation is anti-empire for similar reasons and hint at the nonviolent side to the text. They may all focus on different aspects of the text, but in doing so they often support the other. Therefore, I am not sure that this volume has totally satisfied the aims stated in the introduction. All the readings in this volume engage with the author of Revelation’s first-century perspective except one. They do not challenge the moral usefulness of the book or the scholarship that dismisses Revelation as a violent and sexist work. This does not really give students a broad perspective of readings. Also, one major failing is that there is no essay on the use of the Old Testament in Revelation. Surely the key to Revelation is appreciating John’s use of his tradition and not only the social setting of the late first century.

Generally, however, this is an introductory book I would recommend to teachers wishing to introduce Revelation. I think some of the essays may be too difficult for students beginning theological study, but they are of a high standard and will provoke much discussion and hopefully inspire interest in Revelation.