Throughout roughly the first third of this book (chs. 1–7), John Marshall argues that by categorizing the book of Revelation as a Christian document, interpreters have skewed our understanding of both the document and the situation lying behind it. Marshall recommends—as his subtitle suggests—that employing the category “Jewish” (instead of “Christian”) to this document will render our interpretive efforts more productive. In fact, he claims that the category “Jewish” will actually supply the hermeneutical key that will unlock four otherwise enigmatic passages, passages that Marshall, following Derrida, calls aporias (“passages without passage”).

In order to employ “Judaism” as his interpretive category, though, Marshall needs to postulate a suitable Jewish setting for the Apocalypse. This is the task of chapters 8 and 9. Of course, the location to which the Apocalypse was directed is not disputed. John clearly addressed communities in the urban centers of western Asia Minor. But the time of the writing has been (and still is) a matter of great dispute. Irenaeus (Haer. 5.30.3) tells us that the book was written “at the end of the reign of Domitian.” While many (perhaps most) contemporary scholars have accepted that date, a few have argued instead that some time shortly after the death of Nero better fits the context of the book of Revelation.
On the question of date, Marshall sides with the minority. He claims that the text originated somewhere between the summer of 68 and the late spring of 70 C.E. Some Diaspora Jews, like the author, anticipated that the war between the Jews and Rome would have a different outcome than that recorded by history. Such Jews, Marshall suggests, were probably “instigators of strife with or harassment by their neighbors” (119).

The specific texts (“aporias”) that Marshall addresses are the focus of chapters 10 and 11 of his book. He claims that these passages represent “parables that urge the audience to maintain their [religious] distinctiveness from the surrounding nations and thereby to participate in the defense of God’s holy city—Jerusalem” (120).

The first parable consists of the passages that focus on “those who call themselves Jews but are not” (a group otherwise labeled the “synagogue of Satan”) in Rev 2:9 and 3:9. Marshall suggests that when we take these passages out of the context of Christianity and reformat them to a Jewish context, the “synagogue of Satan” suddenly stands out not as the local synagogue but instead as a group of pagan God-fearers and comfortably hellenized Jews who did not maintain enough distance between themselves and the larger Greco-Roman culture (at least for John’s tastes).

The second parable concerns “those who keep the commandments.” In the vision about the woman “clothed with the sun” (Rev 12), John describes how the dragon that had been thrown down from heaven pursued the offspring of the woman, “who keep the commandments of God and witness of Jesus” (12:17). Similarly, in 14:12 the text calls for “the endurance of the saints, who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus.” Marshall correctly points out that scholars have typically focused on the latter part of each of these verses and have shown little interest in the phrase that refers to the “commandments of God.” From Marshall’s perspective, that phrase refers to the commandments that define the bounds of the Jewish community, those commandments of the Torah that deal with circumcision, Sabbath observance, purity, and the like.

The third parable centers on the 144,000 sealed with the seal of God in Rev 7:4–8 and the 144,000 standing on Zion in 14:1. Marshall insists that these passages focus on Jews rather than a redefined Christian “Israel.” The sealing in 7:4–8 and the reference to that sealing in 14:1 represents the promise of divine protection for the faithful Jews (including Diaspora Jews) at the time of the war as well as for those Gentiles who stand beside them (Rev 7:9–10).

Finally, “the holy city” and “the great city” of Rev 11:1–13 are the subject of the fourth parable. Whereas most interpreters understand these references as allusions to Jerusalem, Marshall insists that only the earlier allusion (to “the holy city”; 11:2) focuses on Jerusalem, while the later reference (to the “great city”; 11:8) points to Rome.
Accordingly, the text recommends to its readers that, although it might at first appear that Jerusalem is in imminent danger, in reality it is Rome that is about to experience the wrath of God.

This is a clearly different type of work on the Apocalypse than one normally encounters. Although Marshall applies the following methodological comments to one chapter, it could just as easily pertain to the whole work. His method, he insists, “is analogical rather than deductive, hypothetical rather than probative; it deals in possibility and probability rather than in demonstration and proof” (98). Hence, Marshall’s book functions as a kind of experiment in possibility.

In my view, one of the great successes of the work is that it forces us to take seriously the possibility that Jewish-Gentile tension (and even violence) occurred in the cities of the empire during the time of the revolt. Marshall has productively explored this possibility by reading Josephus “against the grain.” Another value of the book is the perspective that Marshall offers of John as a Jew rather than as a Christian. Although Marshall makes too much of this distinction, nevertheless, it is a valuable correction to those scholars who tend to overplay the ἐκκλησία-συναγωγή opposition in this text (as well as other first-century “Christian” texts).

However, while Marshall has put forth an interesting proposal, ultimately he has not made his case. Even though his hypothetical Sitz im Leben might fit some of the evidence in the text, other scholars have postulated different scenarios that work at least as well. Marshall needs more evidence to show what makes his better than the others. His interpretations of the passages that he calls aporias are not persuasive enough to overturn the consensus.

Regardless, Marshall’s book is well worth reading. It effectively lays bare many of the unwarranted (and largely unrecognized) presuppositions with which interpreters typically approach the Apocalypse. Marshall is quite persuasive when he argues that much can be learned if we approach the book of Revelation more from the standpoint of Judaism than we normally do.