

Patmos in the Reception History of the Apocalypse

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Introduction

John's island of Patmos (Rev. 1:9) has left a deep impression on the Christian imagination, disproportionate to its physical size and its significance in antiquity.¹ In Eastern Christianity, the island has become an important place of pilgrimage and provided the geographical setting for a popular set of apocryphal Acts, the *Acts of John by Prochorus*. More widely, travellers and explorers have considered the possible implications of the topography of the island for the interpretation of the Apocalypse,² and travel books continue to extol its virtues as 'the Jerusalem of the Aegean'.³ In the West, Patmos has provided the backdrop, and sometimes the foreground, to a significant number of paintings of St John, whilst Martin Luther, despite his well-known suspicion of the Apocalypse, interpreted his time in the Wartburg as 'my Patmos'.⁴ Meanwhile, such are the associations of this island location that the scholarly literature regularly describes the author of Revelation simply as 'John of Patmos'.

Yet little sense of this rich and diverse cultural impact would be gained from reading modern scholarship on the Book of Revelation. On the contrary, the treatment of Patmos in recent critical commentaries is bewilderingly brief. This fact is especially puzzling given that one key concern of the historical-critical method is the recovery of authorial context. When read through a historical-critical lens, the Apocalypse appears to be one of those rare New Testament writings which locate their author geographically.⁵ John's presence 'on the island called Patmos' (Rev. 1:9), whether that describes the actual place

¹ On the history, geography and topography of Patmos, see Georgirenes 1677; Guérin 1856; Tozer 1890; Geil 1897; Haussoullier 1902; Volonakis 1922; Schmidt 1949; Hope Simpson and Lazenby 1970; Saffrey 1975; Stone 1981.

² Guérin 1856; Stanley 1863; Bidez and Parmentier n.d.; Tozer 1890: 189; Runciman 1989.

³ E.g. Bowman et al. 2008: 16.

⁴ Bainton 1950: 197.

⁵ Other texts whose place of writing may be located with some degree of certainty are Romans (Rom. 16:1, 23; cf. 1 Cor. 1:14), 1 Corinthians (1 Cor. 16:8), 1 Thessalonians (1 Thess. 3:1; Acts 17:1–18:1), and 1 Peter (1 Pet. 5:13).

of writing, simply the location of his inaugural vision,⁶ or the fictional location of the implied author,⁷ roots the text explicitly in a specific geographical and social setting.⁸

Moreover, the set of questions posed to the text by historical-critical commentators is surprisingly limited, with the exegesis often getting side-tracked into background issues of geography and authorial identity rather than consideration of what Patmos might *mean*, and discouraging reader participation in favour of ‘detached’ historical reconstruction. Most commentators will locate the island in the wider geography of the Aegean, and conclude that John was present on the island as an exile; they may also debate Patmos’s purported status as a recognized place of banishment or penal colony, and the implications of this for John’s social status.⁹ Few stray beyond these narrow parameters to consider questions of significance. By way of illustration, I offer in *Appendix 1* the results of a survey of post-1900 commentaries on Rev. 1:9.

This book is an attempt to redress the balance. It is written out of the conviction that attention to the diverse receptions of John’s visionary text throughout history will open up possibilities for interpretation long forgotten by the ‘received wisdom’ of the academy. Specifically, it sets out to identify the variety of ways in which interpreters of the Apocalypse over the centuries have invested John’s island with significance. The resulting catalogue of interpretations reveals a range of hermeneutical possibilities much richer than those suggested by the modern commentaries, thus posing challenging questions to the ways in which contemporary exegetes regularly approach their task.

The priority in this monograph is to provide as comprehensive a guide as possible to the significance accorded to Patmos by interpreters of John’s book. Thus space will not allow for close consideration of the milieu and motives of all the interpreters, although these have been borne in mind in the collation and interpretation of the material. Significant and particularly interesting exemplars will be examined in more detail, with explicit discussion of their contexts and concerns.

⁶ Several scholars interpret the aorist as evidence that John was no longer on Patmos: e.g. Charles 1920: I, 21; Bonsirven 1951: 95, n. 2; Beasley-Murray 1974: 64; Smalley 2005: 50. However, the tense is appropriate to John’s narration of a past event: Krodel 1989: 93.

⁷ For this scenario, see van Kooten 2007: 240. He considers the possibility that the author of Revelation has chosen Patmos as setting for the visions because of its proximity to Asia, or its location in the Rome-dominated sea, or because of the associative link between *νήσος* and *ἔρημος* (*νήσος ἐρήμη* being well-attested in Greek literature).

⁸ See also the thesis of E. Lipiński, that the author writes pseudonymously as John the Apostle, and that in the narrative ‘John’ is on Patmos, not literally, but ‘in the spirit’ (as he also travels ‘in the spirit’ to heaven, the wilderness and the high mountain: Rev. 4:2; 17:3; 21:10): Lipiński 1969: 225.

⁹ A more detailed survey of such discussions will be offered at the appropriate chronological point, at the end of Chapter 6.

A second aim of this work is to reflect explicitly on the task undertaken, in order to illustrate the wider implications of what might appear a narrow reception-historical study for the interpretation of the Book of Revelation, and for New Testament interpretation more generally. In particular, I hope to justify the claim that attention to reception history is ‘an integral and indeed inescapable part’ of the quest for understanding New Testament texts,¹⁰ offering an account of the meaning(s) of a text which is more truly ‘diachronic’ than historical-critical attempts to get ‘behind the text’ in order to establish the ‘original meaning’.¹¹ Locating the discussion in the context of a broad reception-historical survey from the 2nd to the 21st centuries will, it is hoped, illustrate the extent to which recent historical-critical commentators are themselves part of that reception history, developing certain strands within it and neglecting others in the limited choice of questions they pose and the possibilities they are prepared to imagine.¹² In other words, what has been forgotten over the past century or so, and why, is as significant as those aspects of the text’s reception which modern commentators have remembered.

This study does not make any claim to be exhaustive. Rather, it acknowledges the provisionality of all reception-historical work, bearing in mind Ulrich Luz’s caveat that ‘the history of the influence of biblical texts is infinite; the knowledge of every commentator is finite’, and Markus Bockmuehl’s likening of the history of reception to ‘a vast iceberg of Christian experience which lies very largely submerged beneath the waves of history’.¹³ Thus the account provided of how the task of locating and categorizing material has been approached will be as important for future scholarship as the provisional evidence collated in this monograph.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

The first chapter of this monograph offers a close reading of the text of Rev. 1:9, in order to tease out the potential offered by what is only superficially a straightforward verse. As my analysis will reveal, the ‘plain sense’ of this apparently clear autobiographical statement (‘I, John, . . . was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus’) is in

¹⁰ Bockmuehl 2006: 65. One of the criticisms of the EKK series, at least in terms of its format, is that *Wirkungsgeschichte* remains secondary to the ‘main task’ of historical criticism.

¹¹ See Rowland 2009: 290–2 for this use of ‘diachronic’ to describe tracing a text’s reception ‘through time’, and the related term ‘synchronic’ for the study of a text at a particular time and place (in contrast to the typical usage in New Testament scholarship, where ‘diachronic’ and ‘synchronic’ describe historical-critical and literary-critical approaches respectively).

¹² See Roberts and Rowland 2010: 132; Lyons 2010: 213.

¹³ Luz 1989: 95; Bockmuehl 1995: 66.

fact highly ambiguous, offering interpretative space which diverse readers of Revelation have readily exploited.

This scene-setting chapter serves as a springboard for the major reception-historical survey which forms the substance of the book. My aim has been to bring together, for the first time in a systematic manner, a wide variety of interpretations of Patmos reflecting different chronological periods, cultural contexts, and interpretative traditions. In order to cast the net as widely as possible, I have not restricted myself to commentaries proper, but instead I explore interpretations of Patmos in a wide range of genres, including hagiographical traditions, liturgy, hymnody, poetry, sermons, and art. This breadth has allowed popular and marginal readings to be examined alongside more mainstream and magisterial interpretations.

Chronological, cultural-geographical, and hermeneutical considerations are reflected in the extent and organization of individual chapters, which collectively take the reader on a journey from the 2nd century through to the more familiar historical-critical interpretations which have dominated 20th- and 21st-century scholarship (Chapters 2–6).

Chapter 2 begins the story in the foundational early patristic period (2nd–5th centuries). Given the paucity of Apocalypse commentaries during this period, most of the sources are biographical and hagiographical texts, locating Patmos within the wider story of John, the seer, apostle, and evangelist. However, the interest of some early patristic authors in John's island sojourn is more than merely historical, given the perceived parallels between John's situation vis-à-vis a persecuting emperor and their own experience of dislocation and persecution.

Chapters 3 and 4 trace the ways in which Western interpretations build upon and develop this patristic foundation, treating material from c.500 (a starting-point justified by the relative explosion of Apocalypse commentaries in the 6th century) through to the eve of the Reformation. There is a major focus in these chapters on Latin Apocalypse commentaries, although liturgical and homiletic traditions are also considered. Interpretations during this period become more complex through a combination of literal, allegorical, and tropological (or moral) levels of meaning. Noteworthy is the increasing prominence given to Patmos as a place set apart, the necessary context for privileged access to the heavenly world (and therefore a place where actual and mythic geography merge).

Eastern interpretations from the 5th century onwards (encompassing Greek, Syriac, Armenian, Coptic, and Ethiopic traditions) are treated separately in Chapter 5, in recognition of their unique character. A significant percentage of this chapter is devoted to discussion of the *Acts of John by Prochorus*, which create a whole narrative world for Patmos, and are particularly memorable for their typological reading which connects John's experience on the island with that of Moses on Sinai. The chapter concludes with a

consideration of the foundation of the Patmos monastery by St Christodoulos in 1088, and the consequent importance of Patmos for the Eastern monastic tradition.

Chapter 6 continues the Western story through the Reformation and Counter-Reformation period up to the present, concluding with a survey of post-1900 commentaries. Unsurprisingly in this modern period, one finds renewed interest in the biography of John (prompted by the Renaissance return *ad fontes*, especially to the patristic and classical sources), as well as in the geography and topography of the island. Reformation historical-prophetic interpretation of the Apocalypse also opens up correspondences between John's exile and exile or persecution experienced by early Protestants, while Catholic interpreters continue to exploit the potential of the island as sacred place and monastic ideal. Particular attention is devoted to Martin Luther's description of his time in the Wartburg as 'my Patmos', a surprising designation given his ambivalence towards the Book of Revelation. There is also consideration of poetic apprehension of Patmos, most notably by Hölderlin, but also by a number of British Victorian poets. By comparison, the treatment of Patmos in the post-1900 commentaries with which Chapter 6 concludes is decidedly unimaginative.

Given the particular issues associated with what Paolo Berdini calls 'visual exegesis',¹⁴ the depiction of Patmos in art receives a separate treatment in Chapter 7. This chapter combines a broad discussion of the main strands of visual interpretation of John's island, across a range of chronological periods, geographical locations, and artistic genres (frescoes, icons, illuminated manuscripts, altarpieces), with more detailed consideration of specific art works. Integral to this chapter is the conviction that visual media may often function as better interpretative keys to the highly visual and symbolic Apocalypse than the verse-by-verse commentary.

The concluding chapter engages in more explicit reflection upon what has been achieved in the preceding chapters, urging a more positive attitude to reception-historical 'cataloguing' than is often the case. It offers an 'analogical' juxtaposition of different interpretations employing similar reading strategies. It also considers the extent to which possibilities raised in Chapter 1 have been explored in Revelation's reception history, and outlines the wider implications of the findings of this monograph—despite its narrow focus on one verse—for the contemporary interpretation of John's Book of Revelation, and for New Testament interpretation more broadly.

One implication of this reception-historical study is to illuminate the relationship between historical-critical commentators and their own interpretative predecessors. While this relationship is often unacknowledged, the former are heavily dependent on specific strands in the history of reception

¹⁴ Berdini 1997.

for their questions and conclusions, to the neglect of others. Thus, this present book invites a greater acknowledgement by scholars of the shoulders on which they stand, together with a greater openness to alternative readings of familiar texts, be they unknown, half-forgotten, or familiar but too swiftly rejected.

In the second place, this book argues for a greater sensitivity to the multivalency of biblical texts, and the possibility that, on occasion, even the human author (the focus of interest for many historical critics) may deliberately exploit ambiguity. What this means in the case of Revelation is that 'non-literal' readings may not be so readily dismissed as unscientific interpretations of the text, particularly granted its invitations elsewhere to employ alternative reading strategies (e.g. the non-literal interpretation of place names at Rev. 11:8, or the gematrial possibilities of words encouraged by Rev. 13:18).

A third characteristic of this book which has wider implications for New Testament scholarship is its plea for a broader vision of the exegetical task. Such a vision would include a reconsideration of the role of the imagination, which is found in rich supply in the earlier ('pre-critical') history of reception, but is no less necessary for contemporary historical criticism, especially in its reconstruction of plausible contexts for both authors and original audiences. It would also encourage reader participation rather than a detached historicism, and a broader concept of meaning than the focus on those historical *prolegomena* which is typical of critical commentaries (discussions of Patmos, for example, are regularly dominated by questions of identity, origins, and geographical location rather than consideration of what Patmos might *mean* or *signify*).

DEFINITION OF TERMS

As a preface to the book as a whole, the remainder of this introduction will provide a rationale for the approach taken, followed by an explanation of how the task has been executed. This current section therefore offers a definition of key terms, notably the interrelated 'reception history', 'history of interpretation', and *Wirkungsgeschichte*, in order to explain and justify the preference for a reception-historical approach. This will be followed by a preliminary sketch of the methodology employed, including an account of how the material was located, selected, and categorized.

Reception history, along with the closely related 'history of interpretation' and *Wirkungsgeschichte* (a phrase derived from Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode*¹⁵ and variously translated 'history of effects', 'history

¹⁵ Gadamer 1989 (first German edition 1960).

of influence', and 'effective history'), has become increasingly significant in contemporary biblical studies. In terms of New Testament studies, key figures have included commentators in the *Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament* (EKK), especially Ulrich Luz in his work on Matthew,¹⁶ Heikki Räisänen,¹⁷ Markus Bockmuehl,¹⁸ and the authors of the *Blackwell Bible Commentaries* (BBC).¹⁹

There has also been significant work on various aspects of the reception history of Revelation (though little so far on Patmos specifically). Pioneering work includes the monograph by Arthur Wainwright, the BBC volume by Judith Kovacs and Christopher Rowland, and the recent collection of articles edited by John Lyons and Jorunn Økland.²⁰ Earlier works which engage with 'pre-critical' interpretation of Revelation include Wilhelm Bousset's commentary, R. H. Charles's somewhat unsympathetic *Studies in the Apocalypse*, the extensive four-volume history by LeRoy Froom (from a Seventh-Day Adventist perspective), and the monographs by Gerhard Maier and Georg Kretschmar.²¹

There are also a number of studies focusing on the interpretation of the Apocalypse in specific periods, including the patristic period,²² the Middle Ages,²³ the Reformation²⁴ and the English Renaissance,²⁵ or on Revelation's influence on Christian art (notably Frederick van der Meer and Natasha O'Hear).²⁶ Other scholars have focused on particular commentators,²⁷ or the interpretation of specific passages from Revelation; e.g. Pierre Prigent on Rev. 12 and Seth Turner on Rev. 11:1–13.²⁸

Although the three terms 'reception history' (*Rezeptionsgeschichte*, following the literary critic and pupil of Gadamer, Hans Robert Jauss),²⁹

¹⁶ Luz 1989, 1994, 2005: 265–379 and 2006. See also Räisänen 2001: 263–82. For a recent critical consideration of Luz's contribution in this field, see Elliott 2010.

¹⁷ Räisänen 2001.

¹⁸ Bockmuehl 1995 and 2006. He places emphasis on the early reception history of the New Testament, as a corrective to later reconstructions of early Christianity or authorial intent.

¹⁹ For a discussion of the rationale for the BBC series, see Sawyer 2000.

²⁰ Wainwright 1993; Kovacs and Rowland 2004; Lyons and Økland 2009. Shorter studies on the reception of Revelation include Kyrtatas 1989 and Kovacs 2005. By way of comparison, see the study of Matthew's account of the walking on the water: Nicholls 2008.

²¹ Bousset 1896; Charles 1913; Froom 1946–1952; Maier 1981; Kretschmar 1985.

²² Helms 1991.

²³ Emmerson and McGinn (eds) 1992.

²⁴ Bauckham 1978; Firth 1979; Backus 2000.

²⁵ Patrides and Wittreich 1984.

²⁶ van der Meer 1978; O'Hear 2011.

²⁷ Bibliographical references will be provided in the appropriate places below, when individual interpreters are discussed.

²⁸ Prigent 1959; Turner 2005. Unlike Turner, Prigent pays little attention to pre-1700 exegesis, and his main focus in the post-1700 period is on historical-critical exegesis of the chapter. See also Boxall 2001 on Rev. 17.

²⁹ Jauss 1982; Parris 2009: 116–47.

Wirkungsgeschichte, and ‘the history of interpretation’ are often used almost interchangeably,³⁰ it is possible to draw theoretical distinctions between them. Before embarking on the reception-historical survey, therefore, some clarification of terminology is called for, together with an explanation of my preference for the term ‘reception history’.

By ‘history of interpretation’, following Luz’s distinction between *Auslegungsgeschichte* and *Wirkungsgeschichte*, I understand the narrower history of how biblical texts have been interpreted in commentaries and other theological writings and scholarly monographs;³¹ i.e. a subcategory of wider reception history. The ‘history of interpretation’ includes the exegesis of classic interpreters (in the case of the Apocalypse, figures such as Victorinus, Tyconius, Andreas of Caesarea, Bede, Beatus, Nicholas of Lyra, and Luís de Alcázar). The scope of this study, however, is broader than the ‘history of interpretation’ in this sense, encompassing interpretations in visual art, poetry, liturgy, and hagiography as well as the commentary proper. It does not restrict itself to ‘normative ecclesial-dogmatic tradition’,³² but incorporates diverse, including marginal, and maverick voices.

The logical distinction between the remaining two terms, as I use them here, is more one of focus than of content. *Wirkungsgeschichte* (particularly when translated as ‘history of effects’) can be understood as prioritizing the *effects* or consequences (both good *and* bad) of particular readings of the biblical text, i.e. the text as ‘effective agent’,³³ while reception history is arguably more interested in the *interpreters* themselves and how they receive the text in diverse contexts.

In practice, however, it is not always easy to differentiate the two. The distinction between them is not as sharp as that posited by Heikki Räisänen: namely, the contrast between ‘the actual “effectiveness” of a text and such “reception” as does not let it be effective’.³⁴ Räisänen’s distinction arguably underestimates the dynamic interplay between text and reader, effect and use. Attention to reception history in no way excludes receptions of the biblical text in which the text itself can be shown to have had an effect on those receiving it. Rather, although not ignoring how readings of the text have influenced human lives and communities, nor indeed the theological claims for the text a more *wirkungsgeschichtliche* approach might

³⁰ ‘Reception history, history of interpretation, call it what you will, is a subject whose time has come’: Roberts and Rowland 2010: 132.

³¹ Luz 1989: 95; 2002: 107; see also Räisänen 2001.

³² Räisänen 2001: 266. In practice, different Christian communities have their own normative traditions, and therefore may recount the history of interpretation rather differently.

³³ Rowland 2008:11.

³⁴ Räisänen 2001: 269.

prioritize,³⁵ my preference for the term ‘reception history’ reflects the main thrust of the exploration on the range of readers/interpreters and what they have taken the text to mean.

There is, however, a second way of understanding the distinction. In arguing for ‘effective history’ as the more appropriate English translation of Gadamer’s term *Wirkungsgeschichte*, Ulrich Luz emphasizes the extent to which the interpreter, far from being a detached observer of the history he or she studies, is part of that history:

History is ‘effective’, because we owe to it almost everything we are: our culture, our language, our questions and our worldviews.³⁶

Wirkungsgeschichte is thus an important tool for enabling reading communities and individuals to relearn where they have come from. Luz sees this as the appropriate goal of reception history. Although emphasizing the ‘reception’/‘receiver’ aspect of the process, therefore, I will attempt to keep in mind the question of the interpreter’s relationship to history.³⁷

METHOD

The term ‘history’ within the phrase ‘reception history’ implies some kind of analytical process: the need to make decisions both about the material to include, and how to organize this selected material into an interpretative narrative.³⁸ Prior even to this are strategies for identifying where such material might be located. What follows is a brief account of the method employed in the research for and the writing of this book, which will hopefully be of assistance to those engaged in reception-historical study in the future.

In line with the definition of ‘reception history’ given above, the focus of this book has been as wide-ranging as possible. There is a small body of Patmos scholarship, mainly in articles, which has provided initial encouragement that closer attention to the history and significance of John’s island would be a fruitful exercise. An important 1975 article by H. D. Saffrey flags up the historical, cultural, and mythological potential of attention to Patmos within the classical world, notably its close connections with Miletus, and its associations with the cult of Artemis (for the ‘pre-Johannine reception’ of Patmos,

³⁵ For the proposal that a preference for reception history over *Wirkungsgeschichte* reflects the increasing secularization of biblical studies, see Morgan 2010: 175–6.

³⁶ Luz 2006: 125.

³⁷ Nicholls 2005: 6; Roberts 2011: 1–2.

³⁸ ‘The term “history” implies a focus on what has already happened and evokes the sense of an ordered and descriptive account’: Nicholls 2005: 4.

see *Appendix 2*).³⁹ Friedrich Wilhelm Horn's essay in the *Festschrift* for Otto Böcher offers an in-depth analysis of Rev. 1:9 and its ambiguity about the reasons for John's presence on Patmos, with particular consideration of early patristic evidence.⁴⁰

Finally, Eve-Marie Becker's recent article overlaps significantly with the interests of my own work in exploring the potential of both a 'history of interpretation' (*auslegungsgeschichtlich*) and a broader 'cultural-historical' (*kulturgeschichtlich*) approach to understanding Patmos.⁴¹ She considers the potential for viewing Patmos as *locus visionis* as well as place of exile, a possibility highlighted by the foundation of the monastery by Christodoulos in the 11th century, discusses some depictions of Patmos in Christian art, and examines the cultural impact of the island for figures as diverse as Luther, Herder, and Hölderlin.

Broader work already done on the history of interpretation and reception of the Apocalypse (notably the studies already mentioned in this introduction) have also served as useful starting-points, as have standard bibliographical resources on biblical interpretation in particular historical periods, such as (for the patristic age) *Biblia Patristica*, and collections of texts such as Migne. These resources have suggested key interpreters and influential commentaries and other writings to be followed up.

Particular mention should be made of works which have been regularly mined in the research for this monograph. Seth Turner's doctoral thesis has been an excellent guide to key patristic and medieval commentaries, while the BBC commentary by Judith Kovacs and Christopher Rowland has been equally invaluable in ensuring that later centuries are also covered.⁴² In the case of commentaries, discussions of Patmos have been relatively easy to locate, given that these generally (although not always) occur in comments on Rev. 1:9. Since Patmos functions as a location in the wider biography of John, apocryphal lives and other hagiographical texts have also been examined. Although not exhaustive, Alan Culpepper's study *John the Son of Zebedee* has therefore been an important resource, particularly for identifying more obscure traditions and interpreters from the patristic and early medieval periods.⁴³

Nevertheless, given the much broader interest of this monograph, incorporating visual as well as verbal interpretations, and the reception of Patmos in liturgical contexts and wider culture, much of the material has been stumbled across by chance, or through searches in library catalogues or online resources

³⁹ Saffrey 1975.

⁴⁰ Horn 2005.

⁴¹ Becker 2008.

⁴² Turner 2005; Kovacs and Rowland 2004; for the patristic period, see also Gumerlock 2003.

⁴³ Culpepper 2000.

such as Googlebooks, with the inevitable risk that potentially relevant material may have been missed. However, I hope the benefits of this wide focus will be amply demonstrated throughout this book, even if the material assembled here constitutes only the tiny tip of a very large iceberg.

The resulting body of accumulated material is understandably large. Inevitably, some decisions have had to be taken about what to include in this study. For the earlier patristic period (Chapter 2), when patterns were being laid which became foundations for later interpreters, and where the surviving commentary evidence is minimal, all material has been included. For later periods, where extant interpreters are more numerous and interpretations more repetitive, some selectivity has been necessary and the presentation is therefore illustrative rather than exhaustive. The priority here has been to include examples of each type of interpretation, though avoiding undue repetition, and often majoring on treatments of Patmos which are especially interesting or innovative. To ensure breadth, interpretations from a range of Christian traditions have been selected, including texts which reflect popular (e.g. the *Prochorus Acts* from the East, or the *Travels of Sir John Mandeville* from the West) and even marginal viewpoints.

The principles for organizing the selected material have been primarily chronological and geographical, and secondarily what might be called 'genealogical'. In other words, my starting-point (paralleling the strategy of historical-critical approaches) has been to attend to the date, geographical location, and cultural context of specific interpretations of Patmos. This might be called, following Rowland's definition, a *synchronic* approach. Sometimes this is tackled relatively briefly, although closer attention is paid to contextual issues when particularly surprising or innovative readings occur. As noted above, the distinctive characteristics of what Paolo Berdini calls 'visual exegesis'⁴⁴ justify treating the reception of Patmos in visual art separately from the main discussion (Chapter 7), although employing a similar methodology for organizing the artistic material.

A second-stage concern in the chronological organization has been to categorize the material according to different genres and types of interpretation within the same broad chronological period. One reason for this is to highlight probable 'genealogical' relationships between interpreters who offer similar interpretations of Patmos (a more *diachronic* approach), identifying possible antecedents for a given reading, and also clarifying significant innovations where they occur. Sometimes, later authors are explicit about their dependence upon earlier generations (Victorinus, Tyconius, and Primasius are commentators regularly cited by successors). In many cases, however, the links are more tentative, and genealogical descriptions therefore remain

⁴⁴ Berdini 1997.

provisional, pending further discoveries from that major part of the iceberg currently below the water.

This chronological and genealogical framework orders the material in the bulk of this study. But there is a further *analogical* process which may be usefully undertaken. This involves juxtaposing similar types of reception from diverse chronological and cultural contexts in order to identify common interpretative strategies across different centuries and cultural contexts. Although present in the unfolding analysis (Chapters 2–7), this will receive particular attention in the final chapter, which will reflect more systematically on what has been achieved, and its implications for contemporary study of the Apocalypse.

My analysis of different types of interpretation is particularly indebted to the categorization proposed by Judith Kovacs and Christopher Rowland in their BBC volume on Revelation. Kovacs and Rowland distinguish not simply (as do standard histories of interpretation of the Apocalypse) between interpretations—such as preterist, church-historical, world-historical, and futurist—which focus on past, present and future (‘idealist’ interpretations falling outside this chronological framework). While their interpretative grid does acknowledge this temporal axis, it regards it as insufficient for appropriately categorizing interpretations of Revelation. Their key distinction is between allegorical or ‘decoding’ approaches, and those which use Revelation as a heuristic lens through which interpreters view their own time and circumstances (for which they use the term ‘actualization’).⁴⁵

The decoding strategy, as defined by Kovacs and Rowland, is often characterized by close attention to detail, translating the text into another medium by one-to-one correspondence in order to detect ‘what it really means’. Such a definition highlights the similarities between the future eschatological interpretation encouraged by the *Scofield Reference Bible* and attention to first century imperial politics typical of historical-critical interpretations: both are essentially forms of decoding.

‘Actualization’ is closer to ‘analogy’, in that it generally regards the text as multivalent. Kovacs and Rowland identify two forms. The first type juxtaposes the Apocalypse, as a kind of lens, with the interpreter’s own situation. The second is a more visionary kind of re-appropriation (as in the visions of Hildegard of Bingen), whereby the Apocalypse serves as the springboard for visionary experience similar to John’s on the part of the interpreter.

⁴⁵ Kovacs and Rowland 2004: 7–11. Actualization is defined as ‘reading the Apocalypse in relation to new circumstances, seeking to convey the spirit of the text rather than being preoccupied with the plethora of detail’ (Kovacs and Rowland 2004: 8). It is borrowed from the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s 1993 document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, where it is used more broadly to describe attempts to ‘discover what the text has to say to the present time’, which might include the use of allegory: Houlden (ed.) 1995: 82–6.

The Kovacs-Rowland grid is particularly useful in that it enables chronological emphasis (past, present, or future) to be plotted alongside an interpreter's location on the decoding/actualization axis. Nevertheless, my chronological survey will also attempt to integrate more 'emic' terminology appropriate to particular time periods, whether the use of allegory and the language of *τύπος*, and *figura* in the patristic period, or the fourfold senses of Scripture typical of the Middle Ages.⁴⁶

A final word of explanation is called for regarding primary source material in ancient languages. For reasons of brevity and accessibility, I have either used published English translations of Greek or Latin texts, or provided my own. Where the original languages are crucial to the argument, I have retained the relevant phrases along with the English translation, or as part of an interpretative gloss. In the case of other ancient languages with which I am unfamiliar (e.g. Coptic, Ethiopic, Armenian, and Arabic), I have of necessity relied upon extant English translations.

⁴⁶ On parallels between the medieval four senses of scripture and modern literary and reader-oriented approaches, see Gibbs 2009: 378–9.

1

‘I was on the Island Called Patmos’: Re-reading Rev. 1:9

INTRODUCTION

This opening chapter is devoted to a close reading of the verse containing John’s solitary reference to Patmos (Rev. 1:9), phrase by phrase, in advance of a systematic exploration of its treatment in the Apocalypse’s reception history. The purpose of this section is not to replace one kind of foundationalism (authorial intention) with another (philology) on which the reception history is then built as a superstructure. Rather, it seeks to describe the imaginative space offered to interpreters by the ambiguities and multivalency of the text, which might have been obscured by scholarly focus on a narrow set of questions and interests. These ambiguities relate to both the Greek original,¹ with its idiosyncratic grammar and syntax,² and the Vulgate translation which largely informed its reception history in the Latin West.³

One caveat needs to be expressed at the outset. The close reading of the text which now follows cannot fail to have been influenced, consciously or otherwise, by my own reception-historical research undertaken prior to the writing of this chapter, reflecting to a significant degree the new possibilities such a survey has opened up. In other words, it is as much retrospective (reflecting knowledge of readings already uncovered) as prospective (setting out possible ambiguities yet to be explored).

Ἐγὼ Ἰωάννης . . . ἐγενόμην

From a form-critical perspective, John’s self-description in the wider passage Rev. 1:9–20 offers a broader interpretative context for the reference to Patmos.

¹ Text in Aland et al. 1983: 883. The Greek manuscript tradition of this verse is fairly stable.

² Charles 1920: cxvii–clix.

³ There are no substantial differences between the ancient African text, represented by Cyprian, and the Vulgate.

Table 1.1. Visions of Exiled Prophets

	<i>Rev. 1:9–11</i>	<i>Ezek. 1:1–4</i>	<i>Dan. 10:2–5</i>
‘I was . . .’	1:9 Ἐγὼ Ἰωάννης . . . ἐγενόμην	1:1 LXX ἐγὼ ἤμην ἐν μέσῳ . . .	10:2 LXX ἐγὼ Δανιηλ ἤμην πενθῶν
Seer’s name	1:9	1:3	10:2
Place of exile	1:9 Patmos, surrounded by water	1:3 River Chebar	10:4 River Tigris
Day of vision	1:10	1:1, 2	10:4
Seeing/hearing	1:10 (hear) 1:11 (see)	1:1–4 (see) 1:24 (hear)	10:5 (see) 10:9 (hear)
Word of God/Lord	1:9 τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ	1:3 LXX λόγος κυρίου	
Spirit	1:10	1:4 (LXX πνεῦμα); cf. 1:20–21; 2:2	

Although there is debate over whether to classify Rev. 1:9–20 as a ‘prophetic call narrative’,⁴ its formal characteristics certainly invite comparison with Old Testament visionary reports: Daniel’s vision by the river Tigris (Dan. 10), and Ezekiel’s vision of the Merkabah (Ezek. 1).⁵

In all three, heavenly beings appear to a prophet-visionary at a specified terrestrial location, which becomes a sacred place enabling access to the heavenly realm (for John as a prophet, see Rev. 1:3; 10:8–11; 22:9). If Rev. 1:9 is understood as alluding to exile (whether enforced or self-imposed), then all three share the motif of privileged vision being accorded to the exiled prophet. Table 1.1 lists some of the formal correspondences between the three accounts.⁶

In each of these visionary passages, the location is invested with profound significance as a consequence of the divine revelation which occurs there.⁷ Walter Brueggemann uses the phrase ‘storied place’: ‘that is a place which has meaning because of the history lodged there’.⁸

Nor is this phenomenon restricted to the canonical writings. Enoch records (like John, Ezekiel, and Daniel, using the first person singular), how he was sitting by the waters of Dan when visions fell upon him (*1 En.* 13:7). According to *2 Enoch*, Enoch was transported to heaven from his own home, where he was weeping and sorrowing (*2 En.* 1:2). Abraham heard the divine voice and encountered the angel Iloil or Jaol outside the house of his father Terah (*Apoc.*

⁴ Aune 1997: 70–3. Aune concludes that Rev. 1:9–20 is closest to the symbolic vision. For the literary aspects of John’s self-presentation, see Bovon 2000.

⁵ On the use of Daniel in Revelation, see Beale 1984; on Ezekiel, see Vanhoye 1962; Goulder 1981; Vogelgesang 1981; Ruiz 1989; Boxall 2007; also Moyise 1995.

⁶ Table adapted from Boxall 2007: 157. Used with permission.

⁷ Other biblical passages describe epiphanies and commissionings on holy ground or in cultic settings: Gen 28:10–22; Exod. 3–4; Isa. 6; Luke 1:5–23; Nickelsburg 2001: 234.

⁸ Brueggemann 1978: 187.

Ab. 8–10), before embarking on his journey to Horeb. Ezra encountered the angel Uriel while lying on his bed, lamenting over the desolation of Zion (4 *Ezra* 3:1; 4:1). In the *Ascension of Isaiah*, Isaiah was granted a ‘door into an unknown world’⁹ and his spirit was caught up to heaven while seated on the king’s couch in the palace of Hezekiah in Jerusalem (*Asc. Isa.* 6:10–12).

All these parallels suggest that the interpretation of Patmos might be fruitfully informed by attention to John’s visionary predecessors and prominent places in their visionary stories. In particular, if Rev. 1:9 is read through the standard paradigm of exile/banishment, Daniel’s and Ezekiel’s Babylonian context provides a distinctive lens through which to view John’s own ‘exile’ in Babylon, and Patmos comes to share significance with the Tigris and Chebar as place of revelation, albeit a location far from the holy city where one would expect to encounter the glory of God.¹⁰ In short, closer attention to the form of the text invites greater reflection on the significance of place.

ἐν τῇ νήσῳ...

By contrast to Ezekiel and Daniel, John’s place of revelation is an ‘island’ (νήσος, Rev. 1:9). This word provides further rich potential for interpreters of the Apocalypse. As Tamara Kohn reminds us: ‘Islands provide settings from which one can witness or partake in all sorts of splendid journeys. They are places to take off from and come home to with new riches.’¹¹ Similarly, David Barr describes islands as ‘transitional places’, participating in land and sea but belonging fully to neither, and thus making possible a journey from ‘ordinary reality’ to ‘trahistorical reality’.¹²

Again, however, the interests of modern critical commentators are decidedly narrow. They often focus on the isolated character of Patmos, its ‘rocky’, barren landscape, or its physical distance from the seven churches. Some explore the possibility that its geography and topography have played a role in shaping John’s visionary geography.¹³ All these are possible and relevant. But attention might also be fruitfully paid to the significance of islands in the biblical tradition which informs and inspires both John and his interpreters, as well as possibilities in the classical world, and the wider cultural associations of islands expressed by Kohn.

⁹ Sparks 1984: 795.

¹⁰ Corsini explicitly connects the ‘isolation and separation’ of Patmos with Ezekiel and Daniel: Corsini 1983: 84.

¹¹ Kohn 2002: 39.

¹² Barr 1998: 62.

¹³ Swete 1909: 12, 93, 160–1; Mounce 1977: 75; outside the commentary genre, Stanley 1863: 268–70; Bent 1888; Hemer 1986: 29–30 (though see Geil 1897: 65).

Patmos is not known in the Bible except for this one reference in the Apocalypse. Individual islands are mentioned exceedingly rarely in the New Testament. Outside Revelation (cf. Rev. 6:14 and 16:20), the singular *νησος* is only found in Acts, referring to Cyprus (Acts 13:6) and Melitē/Malta (Acts 28:1, 7, 9, 11; cf. 27:26).¹⁴ Other Aegean islands are mentioned in passing (e.g. Samothrace: Acts 16:11; Cos and Rhodes: Acts 21:1).

All other biblical uses of *νησος* are in the Old Testament. The Septuagint uses the plural form most often to translate the Hebrew חֹמֹת, 'coastlands' (e.g. Isa. 42:12; 44:1; 49:1, 22), a pattern largely followed by the Vulgate in its use of *insula*. Typical is Ps. 97:1:

The LORD is king! Let the earth rejoice;
let the many coastlands be glad!

The LXX translation (LXX Ps 96:1) reads 'coastlands' as 'islands' (*νησοι*), paralleling 'the earth' of the first half of the verse. At Isa. 20:6, 'the inhabitants of this coastland' become in the LXX 'those dwelling in the island' (*οἱ κατοικοῦντες ἐν τῇ νήσῳ*; cf. Isa. 23:2, addressing the merchants of Sidon). In the LXX version of Gen. 10, describing the territories of the descendants of Noah, 'the coastlands of the *goyim*' (חֹמֹת הַגּוֹיִם) is translated 'the islands of the nations' (*νησοι τῶν ἐθνῶν*, LXX Gen. 10:5; cf. 10:32; Zeph. 2:11; 1 Macc. 11:38). In Jubilees, building on the Table of Nations in Gen. 10, the cold portion of the earth given to Noah's son Japheth, beyond the river Tina, includes 'five large islands' (*Jub.* 8:29).¹⁵

Occasionally, the 'coastlands'/'islands' are named, or given an approximate location: Tubal and Javan (i.e. Greece),¹⁶ along with 'the distant islands that have neither heard my fame nor seen my glory' (Isa. 66:19); 'the coasts of Cyprus [LXX *εἰς νήσους Χερτυμ*]' (Jer. 2:10; Ezek. 27:6); 'the kings of Tarshish and of the isles' (Ps. 72:10). In Ezek. 26–27, the islands are close enough to Tyre to witness its fall, which suggests a Mediterranean location. At Ezek. 39:6 they are mentioned in close proximity to Magog.

In other passages, they are described as 'the islands of the sea[s]' (e.g. Isa. 24:15 LXX; 1 Macc. 6:29; 14:5; 15:1). The singular form may well point to the Great Sea, the Mediterranean. According to Lupieri, to a Middle-Eastern Jew 'the islands' would refer to the western parts of the Mediterranean: 'all the lands to the west, beginning with Crete and Cyprus, which we would call islands, from the small marine rocks of the Aegean to Sicily, and to the lands over the sea to the West—Greece, Italy, and Spain'.¹⁷

¹⁴ The island of Clauda is called a *νησίον* at Acts 27:16.

¹⁵ See e.g. Scott 2002: 23–43.

¹⁶ Scott 1995: 13. Gen. 10:5 identifies the 'peoples of the islands' as among the sons of Javan, elsewhere identified with 'Tonia and all Greeks': Josephus, *Ant.* 1.124; Dan. 8:21; 10:20; 11:2.

¹⁷ Lupieri 2006: 29.

In short, the Old Testament fairly consistently associates the ‘islands’ with the ‘nations’. They are places geographically distant from the land of Israel, and populated by non-Israelites. As in Isa. 66, they are sometimes mentioned in the context of the eschatological conversion of the Gentiles.

John’s vision on an island to the west would therefore shift the locus of divine revelation to pagan territory, far away even from the exiled Jewish communities of Ezekiel and Daniel. If Lupieri is correct, then biblical prophecies concerning the islands would have been understood as encompassing that part of the known world where Patmos and other Mediterranean islands were located.¹⁸

If for the biblical mindset the islands were the distant isles of the nations, they had a more central location in the classical universe. This was particularly the case with the islands of the Aegean, described by Aelius Aristeides as in the very middle of the *oikoumene* (Aelius Aristeides 44.3–4).¹⁹ Moreover, as Christy Constantakopoulou has shown in her study of ‘insularity’ (what it means to be an island) in the ancient Aegean world, individual islands could manifest both isolation and connectivity (on a continuum between these two poles):

In other words, islands were understood as distinct ‘closed’ worlds, ideal locations for the extraordinary and the bizarre, but at the same time they were also perceived as parts of a complex reality of interaction in the Aegean sea.²⁰

Both characteristics— isolation and integration—are appropriate to a consideration of Patmos. Connectivity is particularly established through its strong links with Miletus, and via that city to other surrounding islands.²¹ The description of islands in groups (e.g. the Sporades) would also have contributed to integration. The extent of Patmos’s isolation varies according to the emphasis placed on the Miletus connection, and the weight given to traditions about the island as place of banishment.

There is one further association of islands, highlighted in ancient archaeological and inscriptional evidence from the Aegean, which also invites fruitful consideration: that of the sacred island. Delos, west of Patmos in the Cyclades, is famously remembered as the birthplace of Apollo. More significantly,

¹⁸ A similar interpretation of the islands, including the Aegean islands, as ‘the Isles of the Gentiles’ is made in 1677 by Archbishop Joseph Georgirenes of Samos: Georgirenes 1677, epistle to the reader.

¹⁹ Constantakopoulou 2007: 1.

²⁰ Constantakopoulou 2007: 2. She notes (2007: 13–15) that the ancient Greeks used the term ‘island’ predominantly for the small island, often distinguished from the larger landmasses such as Crete, Sicily, and Rhodes. On islands in general, see Kohn 2002.

²¹ Constantakopoulou notes a fragmentary inscription from Aptera, interpreted as referring to the ‘polis and the land and the islands’ of Miletus: Constantakopoulou 2007: 229, citing Robert 1940. Besides Patmos, Leros, and Lipsi, she suggests that the Milesian islands included the Argiae, Tragia (Agathonisi), Pharmacousa, and Lade in the Milesian gulf.

Patmos itself was associated in the Roman period with Apollo's sister Artemis, as *νήσος ἀγαυσάτη Λητωΐδος*, 'the most illustrious island of the daughter of Leto' (see *Appendix 2*). This rich heritage, together with wider attention to the significance of islands and the concept of insularity, is surely fundamental to any rounded scholarly treatment of the meaning of Patmos.

. . . τῇ καλουμένῃ Πάτμῳ

It is the natural assumption of critical commentators that John's reference to Patmos be understood literally. No other serious candidate presents itself besides the small island in the Sporades, now one of the Dodecanese, approximately thirty miles off the Turkish coast, also known in the early modern period as Patino (by which it was known by Westerners until relatively recently) and Palmosa (a surprising and suggestive designation, as the island 'abounding in palm trees'). The origin of the name Patmos remains uncertain: one tradition claims that it is derived from the 'step' or *πατήμα* of the god Poseidon (Neptune); another links it to a Syriac word meaning 'terebinth'.²²

This identification with the Aegean island largely remains the case, even allowing for variations in the name found in Apocalypse manuscripts and commentaries. In Greek, one occasionally finds *πάτνω* (Vat. Gr. 1190);²³ *Pathmos* is the most common variant in Latin versions and commentaries, both those following the Vulgate and those which use Old Latin versions; other variants found include *Phatmos*, *Pathamus*, *Pammos*, *Patmum*, and *Patmon*.²⁴ One rare but interesting reading in the reception history, which will be discussed at the appropriate point (the section on Victorinus of Pettau in Chapter 2), is Partha.²⁵ However, there is little indication that this reading provoked a rival location to Patmos in the eastern Aegean.²⁶

Hence it is unsurprising to find modern scholars consulting classical texts to clarify the geographical location and character of Patmos (see *Appendix 2*). Thucydides refers to Patmos in a description of a naval battle in 428–427 BCE (*Pel. War* 3.33:3);²⁷ Strabo locates the island close to Leros and the Corassiae (*Geog.* 10.5.13), while Pliny the Elder gives the circumference of the island

²² Guérin 1856: 2–4.

²³ Hoskier 1929: I, 524. In a 5th century BCE inscription, the island is called Patnos.

²⁴ Gryson 2000–2003: 124–7.

²⁵ D (Trinity College Dublin) has '*vocatur Paphmos/Partha per verbum domini et testimonium in . . .*': Gryson 2000–2003: 126–7.

²⁶ There is one exception to the Aegean location: a tradition found in some Eastern traditions, which identifies Patmos as an island of Antioch, thereby implicitly locating it in the eastern Mediterranean. This will be discussed at the appropriate place in Chapter 5.

²⁷ An alternative interpretation is offered by e.g. Gomme, who reads *Πάτμου* as an ancient correction for *Λάτμου* (Latmos, a mountain in Caria): Gomme 1956: II, 295. Guérin rightly rejects this reading, on that grounds that Latmos is not an island: Guérin 1856: 2.

during his description of the islands of the Sporades (*N.H.* 4.12.69). Finally, the *Stadiasmus Maris Magni*, probably from c.200 CE and therefore later than Revelation, gives 200 stadia as the distance between the Parthenion of Leros and the Amazonion of Patmos.²⁸

However, the text of Revelation offers other possibilities. First, as Martha Himmelfarb has reminded us, Jewish visionary texts ‘make no distinction between mythic geography and real’.²⁹ Enoch’s tour in the *Book of the Watchers* (1 *En.* 17–19; 20–36), taking in Jerusalem, paradise, and the ends of the earth, is a case in point where the blending of the two makes them difficult to separate. Such Jewish apocalypses represent the immediate interpretative context for the author of John’s Apocalypse and its first audiences.

This raises the question: at what point does real geography give way to mythic in John’s visionary book? Where does Patmos stand within this trajectory? Indeed, might not an individual location contain both ‘real’ and ‘mythic’ elements in the same visionary text? These are questions worth posing, given that Patmos arguably becomes the locus for John’s vision of the new Jerusalem, which he, like Ezekiel, viewed from a very high mountain: Rev. 21:10; Ezek. 40:2.

Second, there is a well-established exegetical tradition, shared by ancient and modern commentators, of reading other place names in Revelation figuratively. As John Sweet notes in his commentary:

The geography likely is symbolical... Like Guernica and Hiroshima for us, Sodom, Egypt, Babylon and Jerusalem were heavy with meaning.³⁰

The author of Revelation is explicit about the non-literal interpretation of the ‘great city’: it is called *πνευματικῶς* Sodom and Egypt, ‘where also their Lord was crucified’ (Rev. 11:8). *Πνευματικῶς* (Vulgate *spiritualiter*) is variously translated in English translations ‘spiritually’ (AV), ‘figuratively’ (NIV), ‘mystically’ (NAS), ‘allegorically’ (RSV), ‘prophetically’ (NRSV), and ‘known by the symbolic names’ (NJB). Indeed, there are even closer parallels between this verse and the statement about Patmos at Rev. 1:9 which might suggest to a commentator a common pattern of interpretation (namely the shared use of the verb *καλεῖν*):

Their corpses will be on the street of the great city, which is spiritually called ‘Sodom’ and ‘Egypt’, where their Lord was also crucified.

καὶ τὸ πτώμα αὐτῶν ἐπὶ τῆς πλατείας τῆς πόλεως τῆς μεγάλης, ἣτις καλεῖται πνευματικῶς Σόδομα καὶ Αἴγυπτος, ὅπου καὶ ὁ κύριος αὐτῶν ἐσταυρώθη (Rev. 11:8).

²⁸ *Stadiasmus Maris Magni* 283; Müller (ed.) 1855, I: 499. On her map of Patmos, Johanna Schmidt locates the Amazonion on the north-western tip of the island: Schmidt 1949: 2177.

²⁹ Himmelfarb 1991: 63.

³⁰ Sweet 1979: 15.

I . . . was on the island which is called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

... ἐγενόμην ἐν τῇ νήσῳ τῇ καλουμένῃ Πάτμῳ διὰ τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τὴν μαρτυρίαν Ἰησοῦ (Rev. 1:9).

The passive voice of both the indicative at 11:8 and the participle at 1:9 might legitimately be interpreted as a divine passive: it is God who 'calls' the island 'Patmos', further legitimating the quest for a non-geographical interpretation.³¹

Given the lead provided by the *πνευματικῶς* of Rev. 11:8, and further textual hints,³² other place names in Revelation are generally interpreted in a similar manner, notably Babylon (Rev. 17). The interpretation of Babylon usually involves one of two strategies. The first is to treat 'Babylon' allegorically, as a code for another real city (normally Rome, although occasionally 1st-century Jerusalem).³³

The second approach might be called analogical, interpreting 'Babylon' as a symbol for the archetypal idolatrous and oppressive city/empire/politico-religious system, wherever that may be found.³⁴ Equally, the 'new Jerusalem' is not the earthly Jerusalem, although it has continuity with and resemblance to the latter. To varying degrees, critical commentators will apply similar figurative or analogical strategies to other geographical locations in the Apocalypse: e.g. 'the wilderness' (Rev. 12:6); Mount Zion (Rev. 14:1); the River Euphrates (Rev. 16:12); Armageddon (Rev. 16:16); Gog and Magog (Rev. 20:8).³⁵

Despite this clear hermeneutical precedent, however, the regular strategy for commentators in the cases of Patmos, the cities of the seven churches, and the territory of Asia itself, is to interpret them literally. There is little or no attempt to offer explicit justification for such a hermeneutical move. In the case of the seven churches, this may be contrasted with a common strategy in medieval Apocalypse commentaries, where the names of the seven cities have symbolic meaning, although whether this presupposes an etymological explanation is not always clear.³⁶ This contrast is all the more surprising given the widespread acceptance among many critical commentators of the view (already found in the earliest extant Latin commentator Victorinus) that the sevenfold character of the Asian churches has symbolic significance.³⁷ In the light of the

³¹ Other divine passives in the Apocalypse include the repeated *εδόθη* at Rev. 6:2, 4, 8, 11, the references to heaven or heavenly realities being 'opened' (Rev. 11:19; 15:5; 19:11), and the 'snatching up' of the male child (*ἡρπάσθη*) to God's throne at Rev. 12:5.

³² E.g. the explanation of the beast's seven heads as seven mountains/kings (Rev. 17:9–10).

³³ On the latter, see e.g. Ford 1975; Barker 2000.

³⁴ E.g. Rowland 1998: 685–6.

³⁵ At Ezek. 38:2, Gog refers to an individual and Magog the land from which he comes; here Gog and Magog seem to be both rebellious nations and the territory of those nations.

³⁶ See e.g. Apringius's 6th-century commentary: Gryson 2003: 41.

³⁷ E.g. Caird 1966: 15.

wider hermeneutical strategy suggested by the text as a whole, one might expect similar possibilities to be explored in the case of Patmos.

There is a second hermeneutical possibility suggested by the text, albeit associated with names of persons rather than places: the practice of gematria. Rev. 13:17–18 invites the reader or audience to calculate the number of the beast's name. The reception history of that passage is littered with rival attempts to identify that name and its meaning, not only using the Greek and Hebrew alphabets, but also exploiting the potential of Latin names.³⁸ This is certainly an avenue worth considering in the case of the name 'Patmos', and the variant readings found in both Greek and Latin manuscripts. Given that names in the Apocalypse, whether of persons or places, often have more than literal significance, attention to possible symbolic meanings of Patmos is a justifiable scholarly exercise.

διὰ τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τὴν μαρτυρίαν Ἰησοῦ

Eugene Boring is typical of many modern commentators in expressing the 'consensus view' that John was exiled to Patmos:

The grammar prohibits our understanding this phrase to mean that John had gone to Patmos for missionary preaching or in order to seek solitude to prepare for prophetic visions. The phrase 'on account of' is always used in Revelation for the result of an action, not its purpose. John has been banished to Patmos because he had been preaching the Christian message.³⁹

Yet (*pace* Boring) the Greek *διὰ* with the accusative and the Latin *propter* retain an inherent ambiguity, irrespective of the use of the preposition elsewhere in Revelation. Such ambiguity calls for consideration before final conclusions are drawn.⁴⁰ On the one hand, there is a significant minority of scholars prepared to entertain the possibility that the preposition at Rev. 1:9 might indeed express purpose. It could be taken to mean that John goes to Patmos in order to preach the word of God, treating the island as prime missionary territory.⁴¹

³⁸ Brady 1983; Kovacs and Rowland 2004: 157–8.

³⁹ Boring 1989: 82.

⁴⁰ Those who consider other possibilities include Ratton 1912: 131; Beckwith 1919: 204–5, 434; Loisy 1923: 75–7; Corsini 1983: 83–4; Aune 1997: 81–2; Barr 1998: 38–9; Rowland 1998: 565, 569; Knight 1999: 21, 38; Barker 2000: xii, 57, 79; Farmer 2005: 38; Boxall 2006: 10–11, 39; Resseguie 2009: 71–2.

⁴¹ E.g. Farrer 1964: 64 (though Farrer ultimately opts for the exile theory); Corsini 1983: 83–4; Trudinger 1988: 365; 289; Farmer 2005: 38.

Alternatively, John voluntarily retreats to Patmos as part of his regular prophetic activity,⁴² in order to receive prophetic inspiration or apocalyptic vision,⁴³ or to edit previously received visions for publication.⁴⁴ Margaret Barker, for example, makes the intriguing proposal that John came to Patmos on escaping from Jerusalem, where earlier visions and prophecies had caused trouble for him; Patmos would then have provided the context for producing the final form of the text, perhaps under inspiration.⁴⁵ That the text invites these possibilities is underscored by the earlier use of the phrase 'the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ' (τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τὴν μαρτυρίαν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ) at Rev. 1:2, where it refers not to John's preaching of the gospel, but to what John saw (ἑσα εἶδεν); i.e. the Apocalypse itself.

On the other hand, if we accept the weight of the argument that John's typical use of *διὰ* is determinative, a certain ambiguity remains. The claim that Rev. 1:9 must refer to exile as a consequence of preaching activity itself rests on a paraphrase: 'I, John, . . . was on the island called Patmos as a result of *preaching* the word of God.' It often also depends on interpreting *θλίψις* as Roman persecution, rather than general hardships, or the expected 'tribulation' of the last days (e.g. Mark 13:19; Rom. 8:35).

Alternative explanations are possible, however: John was prompted as a result of *hearing* God's word to go to Patmos; i.e. God rather than any Roman official directed him there. In a text which so strongly emphasizes divine agency, this might suggest itself as a more compelling interpretation. An alternative might be that John went to Patmos as a result of *studying* God's word and the testimony borne by Jesus, which prompted him to seek out one of the 'islands of the nations'. Or the phrase might mean that John chose Patmos in an act of voluntary flight or self-imposed exile, to escape possible arrest or persecution resulting from his missionary activity in Asia. Michael Volonakis considers this latter possibility: 'that his associates at Ephesus may have advised him to leave that city and take shelter in the island, remote from the danger which threatened him as the most prominent teacher of Christianity during the persecutions of the Christians'.⁴⁶

In short, this one phrase contains rich potential for the developing biography of John.⁴⁷ Indeed, as David Barr notes in his narrative-critical reading of the book, how the reader chooses to construe the allusive reason for John's location has a major bearing on how the unfolding story is read.⁴⁸ Historical

⁴² E.g. Knight 1999: 20–1, 38.

⁴³ Schüssler Fiorenza 1991: 50.

⁴⁴ Barr 1998: 39.

⁴⁵ Barker 2000: 57. This is one plank in Barker's distinctive interpretation of Revelation as a whole, which places more emphasis on Jerusalem than on Patmos.

⁴⁶ Volonakis 1922: 352.

⁴⁷ On the development of the John legend, see Culpepper 2000; Hamburger 2002.

⁴⁸ Barr 1998: 39.

critics might even consider the possibility that the ‘intended’ meaning encompasses more than one of these multiple possibilities: the author might have chosen such an ambiguous phrase deliberately.

ἐγενόμην ἐν πνεύματι ἐν τῇ κυριακῇ ἡμέρᾳ

One final element in John’s inaugural vision is the association made between Patmos and the Temple. Some commentators have understood the Son of Man in this vision as a high priest, clothed in the highly priestly ‘long robe’ (ποδήρη) and golden belt (Josephus, *Ant.* 3.153–55, 159; cf. Exod. 28:4; Lev. 16:4; Wisdom 18:24), standing in the midst of seven menorahs (cf. Exod. 25:31–40; 37:17).⁴⁹

Such a reading provides an additional lens through which the Patmos vision might be interpreted. Patmos becomes the point of access to the divine presence. John’s statement that he was ἐν πνεύματι also connects him to visionary antecedents such as Ezekiel (e.g. Ezek. 2:2; 3:12, 14, 24; 43:5).

If the text invites association between Patmos and a Temple vision, then further interpretative possibilities follow. Martha Himmelfarb has drawn attention to the close association of the Temple and the Garden of Eden in Jewish visionary texts (Ezek. 40–48; *1 En.* 18; 24–25; Sir. 24).⁵⁰ Ezekiel’s new Temple has a river flowing out from it, and trees of every kind on its banks (Ezek. 47:7–12; cf. Gen. 2:9). *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* on Gen. 2:7 makes the link even stronger by having Adam created out of dust from the Temple, and then taken ‘from the mountain of worship’ (*Tg. Ps.-J.* on Gen. 2:15) to dwell in Eden:

And the Lord God created man with two inclinations. And he took *dust* from the place of the Temple and from the four winds of the world, and he mixed them from all the waters of the world and he created him ruddy, black and white.⁵¹

In the second of the four narratives in the *Book of the Watchers*, Enoch comes to seven mountains, on the middle one of which is the throne of God with the tree of life (*1 En.* 24–25). In Enoch’s vision, in other words, aspects of Eden such as the tree of life have been transplanted to the Temple in the eschatological future. Enoch will later also come to the Garden of Righteousness in the east (*1 En.* 32). A similar tradition is preserved in the *Book of Jubilees*: ‘And he

⁴⁹ E.g. Knight 1999: 39; Smalley 2005: 54; Fletcher-Louis 2007: 59.

⁵⁰ Himmelfarb 1991. ⁵¹ Bowker 1969: 110.

was taken away from the sons of men, and we conducted him into the garden of Eden in majesty and honour . . .' (*Jub.* 4:23).⁵²

In Sirach, Wisdom herself, identified with Torah and established in the Temple, is the tree of life for her people (Sir. 24; cf. Prov. 3:18). Wisdom-Torah is compared at Sir. 24:25–27 to the four rivers of Eden, along with the Jordan. Similarly, later in Rev. 21–22, John will view the descent of the new Jerusalem, which is both a new Temple (with the dimensions of Solomon's Holy of Holies) and a renewed Eden (containing the tree and river of life). What it might mean for the interpretation of Revelation to view Patmos as a new Jerusalem, or a new Eden, is a question ripe for exploration.

POSSIBLE PATMOS ALLUSIONS ELSEWHERE IN APOCALYPSE

The author jumps from heaven to earth and back again, and we do not always know whether the phenomena he describes are here or there. The paradox leaves artists, preachers, scholars and other readers alike with the exciting and challenging task of putting together the pieces of this spatial-visual jigsaw puzzle . . .⁵³

This perceptive comment of Jorunn Økland highlights the particular interpretative dilemma posed for any interpreter of this apparently chaotic text. But it is also pertinent for considering the place of Patmos in the Apocalypse. For the frequent jumping 'from heaven to earth and back again' offers the possibility of seeing Patmos as the setting, not simply for the inaugural vision of Rev. 1, but for other visionary passages also.

The 'after this' and 'immediately' (*Μετὰ ταῦτα . . . εὐθέως*) of Rev. 4:1–2, for example, would suggest that it was from Patmos that John was caught up 'in spirit' to witness the remainder of his visions. No doubt it is partly on these grounds that some scholars have explored the possible effect on John of his physical environment. The rocky, barren character of the island, or the separation of John's visionary cosmos into land, sea, and islands (e.g. Rev. 6:14; 13:1), are particular examples of this. Theodore Bent put forward the intriguing theory that the events accompanying the opening of the sixth seal at

⁵² Translation from Sparks 1984: 23. According to *Jub.* 4:26, there are four places on earth holy to the Lord: 'the garden of Eden, the mount of the east, this mountain on which you are to-day (mount Sinai), and mount Zion, which in the new creation will be set apart for the hallowing of the earth'.

⁵³ Økland 2009: 8.

Rev. 6:12–17 are due to John’s having witnessed the eruption of the volcanic island of Thera or Santorini which began in 60 CE.⁵⁴

Yet there are specific points in the Apocalypse where John the seer appears to be back on earth, Patmos being the most obvious location suggested by the narrative. In Rev. 10, a mighty angel descends to earth with a little scroll, which John is commanded to devour. Depictions of this scene in medieval illuminated Apocalypses regularly portray John’s physical environment in a manner similar to their depictions of Rev. 1:9.

Nor is this confined to visual exegesis: it is in the context of his commentary on Rev. 10 that Victorinus makes his specific comments about Patmos and the nature of John’s exile there. Within the narrative, John would then still be on Patmos at the beginning of Rev. 11, when he is invited to measure ‘the temple of God’ (Rev. 11:1).

A second possibility comes at the end of Rev. 12. Manuscripts differ as to their reading of Rev. 12:18. While many read ‘and he stood on the shore of the sea’ (*καὶ ἐστάθη ἐπὶ τὴν ἄμμον τῆς θαλάσσης*, referring to the dragon, ready to witness his first beast emerging from the sea), the variant first person singular ‘I stood’ (*ἐστάθην*) is also attested. This reading (which was adopted by the *Textus Receptus*, and thus influenced English-speaking Christianity through the AV) envisages John standing on the shore of Patmos, at that liminal point between land and sea, to witness the emergence of the beast himself.⁵⁵

Finally, the text raises the tantalizing question of the location of the desert and high mountain, from which vantage points John is privileged to see Babylon and the new Jerusalem respectively (Rev. 17:3; 21:10). Has John been taken ‘in spirit’ to another part of the globe, akin to Enoch’s journey to the ends of the earth? Or are we to envisage both destinations—whether actual or mythic—as located somewhere on Patmos island, its own boundaries expanding to incorporate such visionary places? In the case of the Babylon vision, Geil speaks suggestively of the ‘seven mountains of Patmos’ (cf. Rev. 17:9).⁵⁶ With respect to the new Jerusalem vision, later associations made between Patmos and Jerusalem (Patmos being ‘the Jerusalem of the Aegean’)⁵⁷ point to at least some interpreters of the Apocalypse understanding the heavenly city to have descended to John’s island. These passages suggest that Patmos might play a more central narrative role than often proposed.

⁵⁴ Bent 1888.

⁵⁵ It is found in P 046 051 and most minuscules: Metzger 1971: 748. This is Sir William Ramsay’s preferred reading: Ramsay 1904: 86–7.

⁵⁶ Geil 1897: 61.

⁵⁷ Although sometimes claimed (though without attribution) that this title is found on a 5th-century inscription, I have so far been unable to locate evidence for this.

CONCLUSION

The aim of the previous discussion has been to flag up the rich interpretative potential suggested by a close reading of the text, particularly if one attends both to the wider narrative of the Apocalypse on the one hand, with its rich tapestry of intertextual echoes of biblical and non-canonical texts, and the broader associations of Patmos as an island of the ancient Aegean world on the other.

The potential of the text having been considered, Chapters 2–7 turn to a chronological-genealogical catalogue of the actual treatment of Patmos in Revelation's wider reception history, including its visual reception, from the 2nd century through to the 21st. It will then be part of the work of the final chapter to consider the extent to which the different possibilities outlined in this chapter have been taken up and developed in the emerging history of reception, and indicate avenues for future fruitful reflection.