

Reassuring Visions

THE CATECHIST'S GUIDE TO

READING JOHN'S BOOK OF REVELATION

STEVE MUELLER

Faith Alive Books

Grand Rapids, MI
www.faithalivebooks.com

Faith Alive Books

491 Prestwick Dr. SE
Grand Rapids MI 49546
tel: 616-956-5044
www.faithalivebooks.com

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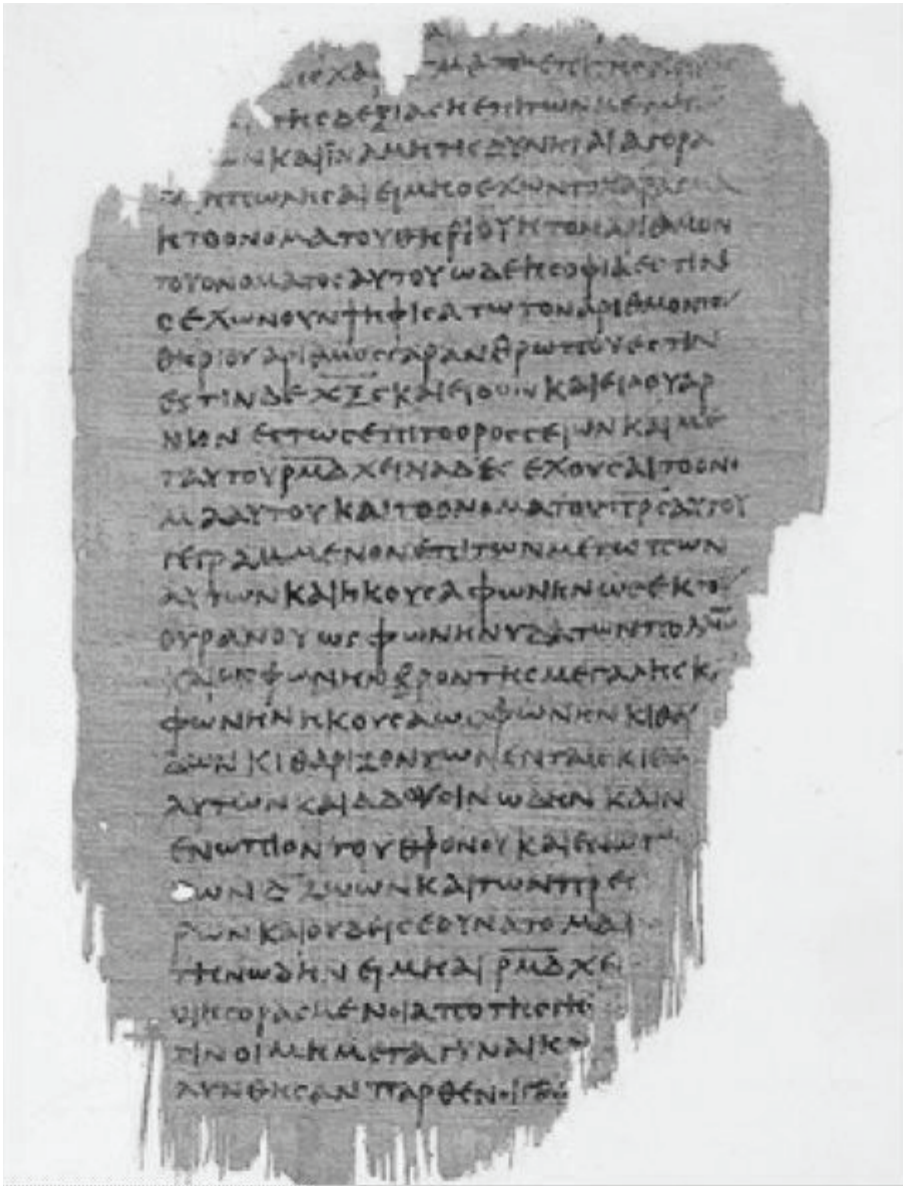
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**JOHN'S BOOK OF REVELATION
GREEK PAPYRUS MANUSCRIPT, C. AD 250**

This photo is of a papyrus page from the earliest manuscript [p⁴⁷] that we have of John's *Book of Revelation*. It is from the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin, Ireland, and contains verses 9:10–11:3; 11:5–16:15; 16:17–17:2.

The Catechist & The Book of Revelation

“No man ever believes
that the Bible means what it says.
He is always convinced
that it says what he means.”

—GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

Can John’s book of *Revelation* still serve as a helpful guide for Christians who are struggling to live as Christians in our modern world today? Yes, if we know how to read, understand and apply it to our needs. The challenge is to find some way to connect the Christian experience of John and his first-century audience with our Christian lives today. That is the goal of this book.

Approaching the Biblical Text

Whether as catechists or just Christians, our aim is to become better, more respectful and more skilled Bible readers. In particular we want to learn what we need to know about how to approach, read, understand and apply the book of *Revelation*. If you are familiar with previous books in the *Catechist’s Guide Reading Series*, (see especially *The Catechist’s Guide to Reading Your Bible: A Catholic View*, ch 3–4, 10–11), then you have a basic grasp of the ABC method that I have suggested and explained as the basic foundation for a helpful approach to scriptural interpretation.

“The study of the sacred Scriptures must be a door opened to every believer. It is essential that the revealed word radically enrich our catechesis and all our efforts to pass on the faith. Evangelization demands familiarity with God’s word which calls for a serious, ongoing study of the Bible, while encouraging its prayerful individual and communal reading. Let us receive the sublime treasure of the revealed word.”

—POPE FRANCIS

The Joy of the Gospel (2013), #175

As we know so well, the Bible can be read and interpreted in many ways and for many reasons. All of these different readings are necessary to explore the depths of its meaning and discover its application to our lives.

But first we must pay attention to the original meaning that the authors intended. Since this meaning alone is the meaning inspired by God, we must use every resource that we can to make sure we understand it.

Remember too that the Bible is not only God’s word but is also the church’s book. There was divine revelation long before the Bible was ever written down, and even today God’s self-revelation to us is not limited to the pages of the printed book. The Bible is one special way that God reveals God’s self and comes to meet us. But what we get out of it will depend on how attentive, careful and skillful we are at discovering what it contains.

John’s *Revelation* must also be read and interpreted through human effort. It does not work magically, without our effort, nor does it give us all the answers for every problem we face. But it does reveal the God who invites us into a relationship and leads us deeper into that relationship.

John’s *Revelation* is a biblical book (i.e., a sacred text for Christian believers and thus unlike most other texts that we read). As such, it conveys divine revelation, i.e., truths about who God is and how God is dealing with us and our world that we can only know because God freely reveals it. Other things that we might learn from reading John’s book might be important, but they should never be confused with the divine revelation that makes his book sacred.

Reading the words of *Revelation* is not the problem. The problem is understanding their meaning, which usually requires some help. But this task is not as difficult as we might at first think. John wrote to be understood, and when his *Revelation* book was read aloud in his communities, I don’t think the audience was frightened by it but rather—a bit like going to see a *Star Wars* movie with its spectacular special effects—enjoyed it.

“Imagination represents a different mode of participatory perception—a different way of being in the world.”

—WILLIAM IRWIN THOMPSON
Imaginary Landscape: Making Worlds of Myth & Science (1989)

If we learn to read *Revelation* as it ought to be read, i.e., as John intended it for his first-century Christian communities, this will help us avoid (and not be misled by) the many wrong readings that lead to inadequate understandings of John’s theology and many sensationalistic

claims (e.g., that its symbols hold the hidden key to the timetable to the end of the world itself, which John himself had no interest in at all).

We must remember that John (and every other New Testament writer) was primarily a pastoral theologian who wrote not to be obscure but to help his audience become better Christians. Thus *Revelation's* form, content and function (once properly understood in the way John intended) can still help us discover who we are as Christians today and how we can share with God in the challenge of eradicating evil from the systems and structures of our society—not to mention from our own lives.

How to Use This Book

This book is meant to be an aid to your own reading of John's book either on your own or with a group (you will find questions for reflection and/or group discussion in ch 12, pp. 221-224). Thus I focus on the basic things that every reader needs to know in order to read John's book intelligently and with profit. Most importantly, this book is not a substitute for reading John's *Revelation* because no amount of commentary can substitute for direct contact with his book. In fact, to get the most out of my book, I encourage you to do a quick reading of *Revelation* first.

“Just as the letters on a page are meaningless to a child who has not learned to read, so it is with the Christian mystery. Unbelievers are deaf to what they hear, whereas the experience of the Spirit empowers believers to perceive its hidden meaning. Something proclaimed everywhere without being understood by those lacking an upright spirit is undoubtedly a mystery. For to the extent that we are able to receive it, it is revealed not by human wisdom but by the Holy Spirit.”

—ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

For your initial reading, try to read, or better listen to, *Revelation* as John's early Christian community might have. We must remember that since very few of them could read, they heard the book read or performed aloud—as is evident in John's blessings for the reader and for the hearers: “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it” (1:3).

If you can listen to a recording of John's book, especially in a dark room with a few candles the way his first-century community might have done it during a Saturday night eucharistic gathering, just treat it like a

performance and don't pause or stop but let the story flow and the images roll over you as you enjoy using your imagination to picture the things that he describes. There are several audio versions available online at the website *BibleGateway.com*. A good one to listen to might be the *Good News Version* (GNV) or the *New International Version* (NIV).

The next best way to appreciate his text is to read it straight through, without pausing over any puzzling passages or reading any footnotes or being distracted by your ideas and responses. Just enjoy the book and get a sense of how's John's story unfolds. Then you can use my book to go back through and deepen your understanding of John's book.

Finally, since my book is not a full commentary discussing each section or verse and explaining difficulties in detail, when you are done with this brief initial introduction to John's book and you would like to learn more, in chapter 12 I suggest some further resources for study and some more detailed commentaries that you might consider.

“One who teaches how to understand is like a person who teaches reading. The task is to teach so that one who knows how to read has no need of another reader to tell what is written in a book. Similarly, the person who has accepted the principles which we are trying to propose, when obscurities do occur, observes certain rules, as in reading, and does not require another person as interpreter to lay open whatever is obscure. Rather, by following certain indications, one can arrive at the hidden meaning, without a false step, or, at least, will not fall into the foolishness of misguided thought.”

—*ST. AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO*
On Christian Doctrine, prologue, 9

How This Book Is Structured

Over my many years of teaching Scripture to adults, I developed a helpful ABC method for reading Scripture using three basic steps:

- **A**pproaching the text
- **B**reaking open the text
- **C**onnecting the text to our life

Following these three essential steps ensures that as readers we will pay attention to all the factors necessary to achieve an adequate interpretation of any text. I will also use them to shape the format for the three parts of this book.

Part A: Approaching John’s Scroll

Since we always come to a text with our own presuppositions and expectations, in this first section I offer helps to approach John’s text in a way that brings to consciousness something about why we want to read this particular biblical book today and what we hope to get out of it.

Part B: Breaking Open John’s Scroll

In this second section, I offer helps to break open the text of his scroll by examining the basic elements in the historical-critical method of scripture interpretation. Developed over the last hundred and fifty years by biblical scholars, this method examines first the basic **historical questions** (about the author, the original audience and their shared situation) and then the specifically **critical questions** (“critical” in the sense of making judgments about literary issues regarding the text’s form, content and function). These basic questions thus structure your journey through John’s book and provide you with an initial understanding of his four majestic and reassuring visions of Christ in the community, Christ in the cosmos, Christ in salvation history and Christ as the triumphant king who ushers in God’s new evil-free creation.

“Competency in reading a literary text is to some degree the reward of discipline, practice and desire, but the quality and depth of one’s insight and understanding are unpredictable. Biographical circumstances and psychological makeup, the occasion in which the text is encountered, other people with whom it is being discussed, familiarity with other literature of the kind, and so on, have a complex relevance to interpretation.”

—PATRICK GRANT
Reading the New Testament (1989)

Part C: Consuming John’s Scroll

And just as John had to eat his scroll (10:8-10), so we must also make it part of ourselves first by saying “yes” to its message and then by trying to put it into action in our lives. John’s reassuring visions and the Christian worldview they reveal challenge us to respond and so turn our current world upside down—a revolution that we associate with the Christian challenge of conversion. To see the world as John does means that we will have to abandon our old way of seeing and replace it with the truth that

he is revealing to us. This changed worldview will completely transform us and our whole lives if we assent to it and conform our lives to it.

How This Book Might Help You

Since the real reason we read the Bible is to live a better Christian life in our relationships with God and others, my book has a dual purpose: first as a guide for reading John's *Revelation*, and second for using *Revelation* to form our lives as followers of Christ. Just as John's book helped his community to see beyond the apparent hopelessness of their situation by offering them a new context to discover a new meaning for their lives, so I hope that my book will help you to do the same.

Like other New Testament books, John's reassuring visions reveal the fundamental outlines of the Christian worldview taught by Jesus which John organizes using the surprising revelation of the risen Christ's hidden presence with us in a Christ-centered community (ch 1–3), in a Christ-ordered universe (ch 4–11), in a Christ-dominated history (ch 12–19) and in a Christ-governed new creation (ch 19–22).

“To invite a reader to step across a threshold into a realm of thinking and experiencing that may mean a radical revision of his outlook on himself and his world is more than a little hazardous. Yet nothing less than this is at stake” [in *Revelation*].

—STANLEY R. HOPPER

Interpretation: The Poetry of Meaning (1967)

These four visions touch the deep longings of his troubled audience (and us too) for a new form of community, a new cosmos and a new age in which the bestial domination of human empires and the Satanic stranglehold on humanity will be broken once and for all and forever by God's transformative power acting in and through Jesus Christ.

Reading and studying John's reassuring visions, then, will be a fantastic voyage to the center of our Christian faith. Through his imaginative visions, John will orient us, disorient us and reorient us by revealing God present in our world for judgment and salvation. His visions remind us of the core theological truth that God alone is the ruler of the universe, eternally present and active and now transforming our world into one that contains no more evil. Enjoy your journey!

A. Approaching John's Scroll

“Few writings in all of literature have been so obsessively read with such generally disastrous results as the book of Revelation (= Apocalypse). Its history of interpretation is largely a story of tragic misinterpretation, resulting from a fundamental misapprehension of the work’s literary form and purpose.

Insofar as its arcane symbols have fed the treasury of poets, its influence has been benign. More often, these same symbols have nurtured delusionary systems, both private and public, to the destruction of their fashioners and the discredit of the writing.

Something more than historical curiosity or even moral and religious fervor is involved in such a process. Among some of its readers, this text is capable of eliciting an obsessive and sometimes paranoid need to know. To a remarkable extent, such readings leave aside completely what Revelation might have to say about how Christian existence should be lived. The point of the text is reduced to certainty about what is going to happen. The text is thereby given the status of a train schedule, and the motivation for the interpretive process is at the level of biorhythms and astrology.”

—LUKE TIMOTHY JOHNSON

The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation (1986)

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF JOHN'S VISIONS IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION

A. Prologue & Greeting (1:1-8)

B. John's Visions of Christ & Their Meanings for Our Lives (1:9–22:5)

1. Christ in the Christian Community (1:9–3:22)

Christ as Lord of the Christian Community

Christ Appears to John (1:9-20)

Christ's Imperial Directives (Letters) for 7 Communities (2:1–3:22)

2. Christ in the Cosmos (4:1–11:19)

Christ as Lord of All Creation

John's Mystic Journey to Heaven & God's Throne Room (4:1-11)

The Scroll & God's Plan for Final Judgment & Salvation (5:1-14)

Opening the Scroll with the 7 Seals (6:1–8:1)

Blowing the 7 Trumpets (8:2–11:19)

3. Christ in Human History (12:1–19:10)

Christ as Lord of Salvation History

The 7 Signs (12:1–14:20) [12:1, 3; 13:1, 11; 14:1, 6, 14]

The 7 Bowls (15:1–16:21)

The 7 Visions (17:1–19:10) [17:1, 3, 6; 18:1, 4; 19:1, 6]

4. Christ in Triumph over Evil (19:11–22:5)

Christ as Lord of the New Creation

7 Visions of God's Final Triumph (19:11–20:15) [19:11, 17, 19; 20:1, 4, 7, 11]

Visions of the New Heaven & the New Earth (21:1–22:5)

C. Epilogue (22:6-21)

Christ's Encouragement, Warning & Closing Promise (22:6-21)

Reading Revelation Today

There are many ways to approach John's *Revelation* and many ways to read it. Some of these ways are bizarre, others are fantastic and many are downright weird. But one way to focus our approach might be to ask: What would it be like if our daily request in the Lord's Prayer—"Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven"—were answered? What would our world look like if God's will were done? What is God's will for us and our world and how will God accomplish it? John's *Revelation* describes, through the images and symbols of his four reassuring visions, how he thinks this longed-for scenario might perhaps unfold.

For many Christians, especially those groups who think that their situation mirrors that of John's persecuted minority community who were being oppressed by an unjust empire and who ardently desired an end to their current situation that was dominated by evil, *Revelation* assumes a central role in their Christian lives.

"I am convinced that for a Christian today in this complex, difficult and secularized Western society it is practically impossible to persevere in the faith without drawing sustenance, even on one's own, from Scripture."

—CARDINAL CARLO MARTINI

"Teaching the Scriptures to a Diocese," *Priests & People* (June, 1992)

But for many mainline Christians, *Revelation* plays little or no role in their Christian lives. Yet because *Revelation* is part of the New Testament, we need to learn how to read it, to discover and digest its meanings, and apply its message to our lives—an important message that as we will see still remains relevant for us today.

Confronting Change & a New Creation

Like the community that first heard John's revealing visions in the nineties of the first century, we stand in this third Christian millennium on the

brink of a new age. Looking back we view two thousand years of God's forming, reforming and transforming our church into the community it now is. Looking forward we expect God's continuing help to further transform the familiar world we know into one whose shape we can now only dimly imagine.

“Prophetic proclamation is an effort to imagine the world as though YHWH, the creator of heaven and earth, the deliverer of Israel, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ whom we Christians name as Father, Son and Spirit, is a real character and the defining agent in the world.”

—WALTER BRUEGGEMANN

The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipating Word (2012)

For John and his community, *Revelation* was their guidebook into a new experience of Christian living. It provided both a perspective on their past—what they knew God had already done for them—and helped to prepare them to face their future—what they hoped God would do for them soon. Reassured by John's visions of God's abiding presence and active power in history, they were enabled to face their new situation with resolute courage and unwavering hope, knowing that whenever God is present, grace surely happens!

Focusing on Our Christian Identity

For almost two millennia, Christians have been reading John's *Revelation* and interpreting it in diverse and often conflicting ways. Some have, and still do, read it to discover the hidden key that will somehow unlock the timetable of the future, while others read it for clues about the first-century world out of which it came. Others read it as a guide for how to act in a world that persecutes them. Still others read it for stockpiling reasons to confirm why they and not others will be God's chosen ones.

As we approach *Revelation*, then, we need to find a connecting point that responds both to our situation today and to the situation of John and his community. I suggest that this point of connection is our basic Christian identity. First-century Christians, like us today, lived in a time of crisis when decisions had to be made about who they were, what they stood for and what kind of sign and example their community would offer to outsiders in order to encourage them to join.

The most basic and important personal question anyone faces is that of one's identity, *Who am I?* We spend a lifetime trying to answer this question. So, likewise, we spend our lifetime as Christians answering the question, *Who am I as a Christian?* Each of the New Testament books suggests answers to this most crucial question. In their various ways, they help Christians understand who they are by realizing who God is and what God is doing through Christ. By understanding their relation to God and their role in God's plan, Christians discover who they are as the community called by God to embody God's dream for a people living in right relationship both with God and one another.

Finding Identity Through Structure, Story, Situation

Discovering identity always requires attention to three factors—our structure, our temporal story and our spatial location or situation. These factors are directly connected to our awareness of ourselves as embodied persons. Since we are always located somewhere at some time, this space-time framework provides the fundamental elements of our identity.

First there is our structure or composition, i.e., the particular make-up of an individual or a group that sets it apart from other types of beings. We are embodied persons, with a specific genetic and structural composition—body, mind, emotions, intellect, will, feelings, etc.—distinguishing us from other living and non-living things. Groups also have their particular social, political and economic structures to express their different attitudes, activities, beliefs, behaviors, commitments and convictions.

Secondly, we have a unique temporal dimension or history. As we like to say, everyone has his or her own story, which is a way of describing an organized narrative—whether factual or fictional. A story is a narrative that has been organized by proceeding from a beginning, through various selected important events, to some kind of ending. If I ask you to tell me the story of your life, I don't expect you to make one up! I want you to select the most important elements and arrange them in an ordered way to show how you have arrived at your current situation.

Your personal story, then, will be one way to understand your own individuality. Even identical twins, no matter how genetically similar they might be, will from the time of their births each have a unique experience

of the many events of their lives and their responses to these events in their own ways will shape their particular lives. Since their different experiences and responses will mold them into the persons they become, each of them will ultimately have a unique life story.

“Our best text reading does not deny that these narratives might reference actual events, but merely recognizes that this dimension is ancillary to the most important truth they have to tell—the truth contained in the narrative’s rhetorical power to create and define a community’s identity. To put it somewhat differently, the objective of the narrative is not primarily an accurate reporting of events, but rather the sort of narrative shaping of those events which will lead the audience to believe it is their story, and so constitute their community based on it.”

—DALE PATRICK & ALLEN SCULT
Rhetoric & Biblical Interpretation (1990)

Thirdly, we have a unique spatial location where we are “placed” or situated. Embodied persons are always somewhere, which influences how we experience and understand our life because it creates a limited perspective (what one sees from a particular location) from which we perceive our world. So again, since identical twins can never occupy exactly the same place, their particular locations or situations will provide a perspective that influences their experiences and their understanding of themselves and their lives. To understand our identity, then, we must understand our unique structure, story and situation. So likewise, to understand our Christian identity, we must discover our Christian structure, Christian story and Christian situation.

John’s Revelation & Our Christian Identity

As you approach John’s *Revelation*, then, I suggest that you constantly focus on the answers that his book offers to the six most basic religious questions of the Christian worldview:

- *Who is God?*
- *What is God doing in relation to us and our world?*
- *Who are we in relation to God?*
- *Where are we in God’s plan?*
- *What is wrong with our situation?*
- *How can it be remedied?*

Answering these questions will reveal your basic worldview or understanding of the way things are. If they are answered with reference to a divine being or beings, then they will outline a general religious worldview. And if they are answered more specifically in relation to Christ, then they will articulate the basic Christian worldview—to see the world as Christ does, to value it as he does, and consequently to act in it as he did. Like every other book of the New Testament, *Revelation* expresses this basic Christian worldview. (See pp. 75-82. For a more detailed explanation of these six questions and the Christian worldview answers, see *So What's the Good News? The Catechist's Guide to Reading the Gospels*, pp. 60-69.)

This Christian worldview also helps to form our Christian identity because it recognizes that the fundamental composition of reality is not simply physical but also spiritual. For Christians, nothing is God-less, but everything is suffused and permeated by God's presence. It offers a *theological* perspective, i.e., nothing really makes sense or is logical until it is related to God's being and activity as an essential dimension of all reality. This is the bedrock foundation for our Christian understanding of reality and of ourselves as persons. We are filled with God's indwelling presence, which together with the relationship it generates, changes everything for us. John's *Revelation* adopts this Christian worldview and invites us to understand it and then make it our own.

Revelation also helps us understand the meaning of our story by seeing it in the wider context of Jesus' story, which in turn is understood in the context of the Old Testament story of God acting in our world for judgment and salvation. Our story will be shaped by Christ's story. His story is our story. What happened to him, as is most clearly brought out in the four New Testament Gospels, is that his birth, baptism, ministry, suffering, death and resurrection also form the pattern for our own lives. He is the model for understanding what is now happening to us. *Revelation* helps us find ourselves in Jesus' story and thus discover the deeper meaning of what our Christian lives are really about.

Finally, *Revelation* helps us understand our situation by knowing who we are in relation to God and where we are in God's plan and what is really going on in our world beyond the appearances. *Revelation* indicates

that the world is in crisis because human society has adopted a godless worldview that is hostile both to God and God's covenant community. Insofar as our present situation is similar, we can profit from the way that *Revelation* analyzes its crisis and offers ways to cope with it.

“The difficulty for those who would be historians is clear. Any proposed historical reconstruction is in no small degree the historian's story. Whenever we enquire concerning the intent of a text's author or how a text was originally used, it is we who imagine what the author intended or how the text was employed. We decide what questions to ask; which aspects of the ‘record’ are important; which ‘facts’ in the ‘record’ to connect with other ‘facts’ and how to connect them; we assess questions of probability and improbability from the vantage point of our worldviews.”

—ROY F. MELUGIN

“Prophetic Books & the Problem of Historical Reconstruction”
in *Prophets & Paradigms: Essays in Honor of Gene M. Tucker*, (1996)

If we read *Revelation*, then, to learn how to become Christians, John's visions will not only offer us ideas about our Christian identity but also remind us of the challenges we face if we are going to live up to this distinctive identity in a world that is neither shaped by nor influenced by nor even much interested in our Christian way of life. We must face the sobering fact that many other members of our culture neither share nor care about our Christian worldview.

The Next Step: Breaking Open John's Scroll

For centuries, readers who picked up John's text had fewer problems understanding it than we do now because the difference between John's world around AD 95 and the world of all readers until the nineteenth century was not perceived as being very different. So because most readers thought that they shared John's world, they did not feel much need for sophisticated procedures for interpreting the text.

But beginning in the nineteenth century, the difference between the ancient world and our modern world began to become increasingly apparent. A new realization that the past was not simply prior to us, but was also vastly different gripped our western intellectual tradition (this is often referred to as our “modern historical consciousness”). The world of the ancient texts was like a foreign country and getting to it demanded the development of better methods to traverse the ever-widening historical and

cultural gap separating the ancient world from ours.

The awareness of this historical gap also launched the modern development of the science of interpretation or hermeneutics, which attempts to close the gap between the ancient and the modern worlds for readers. We use these refined interpretative skills today to discover what the Bible meant to its original author and audience.

Reading for this original meaning challenges us to bridge the gap between the ancient world and ours by using the historical-critical method of interpretation, which recognizes that the primary aim of any interpretation must be to determine first, as best as we can, what the author who chose these particular words was trying to communicate to his audience.

Without an awareness of what the author wanted his text to mean, it becomes a springboard for any and all meanings that any reader wants to read into it. This is like someone completing your sentences for you in their own words. There is no respect for your choice of words and the specific insight that you wish to communicate. Discovering the author's intention and meaning must be our first priority because this original meaning is the basis of all other meanings. If we don't know what the author was trying to say to his original audience, then we won't have a clue about what the text might mean for us today.

But we must also realize that what the first audience understood does not necessarily exhaust all the possible meanings of the text. Once a text is written, it takes on life of its own because later readers always read it in new situations that are very different from that of the original readers. So throughout history, Christians have continued to read the biblical texts believing that these sacred texts remain relevant for leading a Christian life. John's *Revelation* was not only helpful for John's first-century Christians to use to discover their identity, but we believe that as our sacred text it still remains applicable to our Christian lives today.

Reading ancient texts like *Revelation* challenges us in other ways too. The difference between the ancient world of John and his original audience and our own world is not something that we usually understand very well. The social and cultural world of those ancient people is like a foreign country where life is organized differently. Unless we can gain some

knowledge about their world and how it worked, we can never hope to understand what they understood and were really trying to communicate. The danger is that without an awareness of the strangeness of their world, we tend to think their concerns are like ours and their solutions to problems are just like ours would be.

“The preservation of old writings and the habit of venerating them happen not primarily because they are witnesses to a merely historical state of affairs, but to a state of affairs that has a consuming relevance to later times; so that it is in their capacity to be applied, and the practice of applying them to situations other than the historical circumstances of their origin, that saves them.”

—FRANK KERMODE

“The Argument About Canon”
in *The Bible & the Narrative Tradition* (1986)

So as we begin interpreting John’s text, we must turn to the historical-critical method to discover the original meaning that he intended. This method involves a set of structured patterns of questions that help us understand what the text meant to John and his first-century readers. These questions will also serve as the guide for our examination of John’s text.

The first issues that we must examine about any text are the **historical** ones—who (the author) wrote to whom (the original audience) in what circumstances (the original situation). Answering these questions demands that we use all the tools of historical scholarship.

Since we are usually not prepared to do this historical scholarship ourselves, we need to rely on the best scholarship available. In any commentary on *Revelation*, the introductory material will usually suggest various alternative answers to these historical issues. We must also remember that issues like the identity of the author and of the original audience, their situation and problems are not primarily theological (i.e., concerning God’s divine self-revelation) but are rather historical concerns that must be answered by using the best methods of modern historical scholarship. So we can expect that our current answers will become more refined or might perhaps even change as our historical scholarship improves. So let us prepare for reading John’s text by understanding something about John and his first-century audience.

B. Breaking Open John's Scroll

“You know, Phaedrus, that’s the strange thing about writing, which makes it truly analogous to painting. The painter’s products stand before us as though they were alive, but if you question them, they maintain a most majestic silence.

It is the same with written words; they seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on telling you just the same thing forever.

And once a thing is put in writing, the composition, whatever it may be, drifts all over the place, getting into the hands not only of those who understand it, but equally of those who have no business with it.

It doesn’t know how to address the right people, and not address the wrong, and when it is ill-treated and unfairly abused it always needs its parent to come to its help, being unable to defend or help itself.”

—PLATO
Phaedrus (275.d-e)

COIN OF THE EMPEROR DOMITIAN



John's *Revelation* was most probably composed sometime during the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian (AD 81-96). This coin is a *denarius* (about equivalent to a day's wages for an unskilled laborer). In their media-deficient society, coins were important propaganda tools because even for those who could not read, their images and symbols conveyed a message to all who used them. On the front side (above) is the head of Domitian and the words (some abbreviated, reading counterclockwise from Domitian's neck) say:

IMP(ERATOR)	CAES(AR)	DOMITIANVS	AVG(USTUS)	P(ONTIFEX) M(AXIMUS)
Emperor	Caesar	Domitian	Revered	High Priest



On the reverse side appears Domitian's infant son shown as a young Jupiter seated on a globe with his hands raised toward seven stars that represent the Great Bear constellation whose seven brightest stars form what we call the Big Dipper (note John's vision of Jesus holding 7 stars in Rev. 1:16). The words (going counterclockwise from lower right) say:

DIVVS	CAESAR	IMP(ERATOR)	DOMITIANI	F(ILIVS)
Divine	Caesar	Emperor	Domitian's	Son