

# The History of a Delusion

*And I went unto the angel, and said unto him, Give me the little book.  
And he said unto me, Take it, and eat it up; and it shall make thy belly  
bitter, but it shall be in thy mouth sweet as honey.*

REVELATION 10:9

By a long and cherished tradition in Christianity, the author of the book of Revelation has been identified as John, son of Zebedee, the presumed author of the Fourth Gospel and, by yet another tradition, the so-called beloved disciple of Jesus. "The Apocalypse of the Apostle John the Evangelist" is one of several titles that appear on various ancient manuscripts of Revelation. Although the question of who actually wrote Revelation has been a matter of hot controversy since the book first began to circulate in the earliest Christian communities of the Roman empire, some otherwise secular scholars still piously refer to the author of Revelation as "Saint John."

As it turns out, we can discern a great deal more about the author of Revelation than most other biblical authors, Jewish or Christian. We know that he regarded himself as a special favorite of God—and, at the same time, a victim of persecution by a few of his fellow Christians and the whole of the pagan world in which he lived. He probably worked as a kind of freelance prophet, wandering from town to town throughout Asia Minor, delivering his strange visions and strict admonitions to whomever would gather and listen, and relying on their hospitality to fill his belly and to provide a place to lay his head at night. And he plainly nursed a bitter grudge against a couple of rival preachers whom he regarded as so unforgivably lax in their Christian

beliefs and practices that he condemned them not only for spiritual error but also for acts of apostasy and even harlotry.

Remarkably, we can come up with an even more detailed and nuanced profile of the man who wrote Revelation. He was probably born in Judea, and he may have been an eyewitness to one of the great and terrible moments in ancient history—the defeat of the Jewish partisans known as the Zealots by a Roman army in 70 C.E., the destruction of the Temple at Jerusalem, and the dispersion of the Jewish people. His native tongue was probably Aramaic, a Semitic language that replaced Hebrew as the lingua franca in the Jewish homeland in antiquity, and he never really mastered Greek, the international language of civilized men and women in the classical pagan world. And, perhaps most remarkable of all, he was almost surely a Jew by birth, upbringing, and education, a fact that casts an unaccustomed and ironic light on a text that has been embraced by the most zealous of Christians over the last two thousand years.

For many readers of Revelation, as we shall come to see, such biographical details are awkward, embarrassing, and wholly beside the point. The author's Jewish roots—and the linkages to Jewish texts and traditions that abound in the text of Revelation—are at odds with the crucial role the book has come to play in Christian fundamentalism. And, by the deepest of ironies, a great many readers over the ages have succeeded in convincing themselves that the author of Revelation was a benighted soul who failed to grasp the actual meanings of the visions that he beheld and described so vividly.

To the author himself, for example, the “beast” whose name is symbolized by the number 666 was almost surely a flesh-and-blood Roman emperor who lived and died in the first century of the Common Era—but generation upon generation of subsequent readers of Revelation insist that he was simply and flatly wrong. How else to explain the fact that the “beast” identified by the alphanumeric code 666 has been seen as one or another figure in a whole rogue's gallery of malefactors, ranging from Muhammad in the Middle Ages to Napoleon in the nineteenth century to Mussolini in the twentieth century, and countless others in between?

Yet Revelation is not quite as mysterious as it seems. Scholarship, both ancient and modern, allows us to catch a glimpse of the man who composed the strange text, the world in which he lived and worked, the passions that burned so hotly in his heart and mind, and the true beliefs that

he meant to instill in his first readers and hearers. Above all, it is possible to penetrate the enigmatic text and extract the coded meanings that are so deeply enciphered in the book of Revelation.

As we move forward in history, we will see that Revelation has been reread and reinterpreted in startling and even shocking ways over the centuries, and never more so than in our own times. If the author of Revelation had been granted an accurate vision of the distant future, surely he would have been appalled not only by the plain fact that the end of the world was *not* near but also by what would become of his “little book” in the hands of popes and kings, grand inquisitors and church reformers, messianic pretenders and self-appointed prophets—or, for that matter, best-selling novelists like the authors of the *Left Behind* series, televangelists like Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, or a president like Ronald Reagan.

To measure how far the book of Revelation has strayed from its original uses and meanings—and to appreciate how the text has been reinterpreted and misinterpreted over the last twenty centuries—we need a benchmark: Who actually composed the book of Revelation? Where did he come from, and where did he wander? What did he know, and what did he believe? And what did he hope to achieve by setting down the extraordinary visions that we find in the “little book” that he left behind?

One of the identifying characteristics of an apocalypse is what scholars call “pseudonymity.” That is, most apocalyptic texts are written by flesh-and-blood authors who conceal their own identities behind the names of revered biblical figures. Thus, for example, the “false writings” of the Pseudepigrapha include works ranging from *The Apocalypse of Adam* to *The Apocalypse of the Virgin Mary*, none of which were actually written by their named authors. From its first appearance, in fact, Revelation has been regarded with skepticism by some readers who have dared to wonder out loud whether it was really written by St. John the Evangelist.

Of course, the same question can be asked about all but a few books of the Bible, including both its Jewish and Christian versions. Some Bible readers, for example, are still shocked to learn that scholars no longer believe that Moses wrote the Five Books of Moses, as the first five books of the Hebrew Bible are known in Jewish usage, or that any of the Gospels were written by the apostles whose names appear in their titles. Indeed, the

bulk of the Jewish scriptures and a good deal of the Christian scriptures can be regarded as "false writings" in the sense that they were not actually written by the authors who are credited in their titles.

Exactly how the books of the Bible came to be written and named has always been the subject of much argument and speculation. One theory, for example, is that the author was followed around by a dutiful secretary who took notes and then polished up what the great man said, or that the author actually sat down and dictated to the secretary. That's exactly how the book of Jeremiah supposedly came into existence according to an explanation that we find in the Hebrew Bible itself: "Then Jeremiah called Baruch the son of Neriah, and Baruch wrote from the mouth of Jeremiah all the words of the Lord, which He had spoken unto him, upon a roll of a book."<sup>1</sup>

Another theory holds that all but a few books of the Bible are composed of writings from several different sources, all of which were collected and compiled at some point in history by one or more editors or "redactors." The raw material consists of myths, legends, folktales, poems, prayers, and songs—the so-called oral tradition—but also chronicles, genealogies, law codes, and works of biography and autobiography. But the received text of the Bible is the work product of the editors who stitched them together and polished them up. A variant of the same theory is that some or all of these redactions were actually composed by several individuals, or even several generations, all working together in what scholars loosely call a "school" or a "circle" or a "tradition."

Of course, a few scholars are still willing to argue that some biblical writings were authored by a single gifted human being, man or woman, who put pen to paper (or, perhaps more accurately, a goose quill to a sheet of papyrus) and composed an immortal work of literature in exactly the same manner as Dante or Shakespeare, Mark Twain or Isaac Bashevis Singer. The biblical life story of David as we find it in the book of Samuel may be the work of a writer of genius known in biblical scholarship as the Court Historian, or so it has been suggested, and many of the most beloved and compelling stories in the book of Genesis may have been written by an even more accomplished author known as "J." And, famously, it has been suggested that J was a woman, first by Richard Elliott Friedman in *Who Wrote the Bible?* and later by Harold Bloom and David Rosenberg in *The Book of J*.

All of these theories of biblical authorship have been applied to the book of Revelation, and with some very curious results. Some scholars, for example, argue that Revelation as we know it is actually the work of "a Johanine circle, school or community."<sup>2</sup> Others see Revelation as a composite of several different and unrelated texts, each one written in a different time and place by a different author—or by various "schools"—and all of them cobbled together at some later date by a pious editor who struggled to impose some kind of order on the chaos of words and images.

But, thrillingly, most modern scholars agree that the book of Revelation is the work of a single author who was a mystic and a visionary, a charismatic preacher and a poet of unexcelled and enduring genius. Whether Revelation is read as Holy Writ or a work of literature, one of the great enterprises of biblical scholarship has been the effort to extract the biography of its author from the text itself and the traditions that have grown up around it. As we begin to glimpse the details of his life and work, however obliquely and speculatively, we will be able to read the book of Revelation in new and illuminating ways.

## Ω

Not unlike the book of Jeremiah, Revelation opens with a straightforward claim of divine authorship with the assistance of a few celestial go-betweens and a human secretary. The text passes from God to Jesus to an angel and finally to a human being whose name is given as John: "The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants what must soon take place," according to the opening lines of text, "and he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John."<sup>3</sup> On the strength of these assertions, pious Christians have embraced the book of Revelation as "the only biblical book authored by Christ."<sup>4</sup>

The claim of divine authorship is not so clear in the rest of the text itself. Revelation is written in the first person, but more than one narrator is speaking to us. Sometimes the voice we hear belongs to the human author who calls himself John, and sometimes John is merely quoting the various celestial figures whom he encounters—God, Jesus, and a series of angelic emissaries. Still, John clearly presents himself as the human being whose visions are recorded in the text, and he is commonly credited as its author. But we are still left with a nagging question: Is he the apostle whose name is given in the New Testament as John, son of Zebedee?

By way of self-introduction, John describes himself to the seven churches in Asia Minor for which the book of Revelation was originally intended: "I, John, your brother and comrade in tribulation and patient endurance in Jesus."<sup>5</sup> The fact that the author of Revelation calls himself "John," however, hardly means that he is the same John who is mentioned in the Gospels. The Hebrew name "Yohanan" and its Greek equivalent, "Ioannes," both of which are rendered in English translation as "John," had been in common usage among both Jews and Christians long before the Gospels or Revelation were first composed. Indeed, the New Testament itself knows of several men called John, including not only the apostle John but also John the Baptist, a wandering preacher who is among the first to proclaim Jesus to be the Messiah.

The tradition that the apostle John wrote the book of Revelation began with its first appearance among the Christian communities of the Roman Empire. Irenaeus (ca. 120–ca. 200), an influential Christian bishop in what is now the city of Lyons in southern France, reports that Revelation "was seen not very long ago, almost in our generation, at the close of the reign of Domitian"—that is, no later than 96 C.E.<sup>6</sup> And Irenaeus is the very first commentator to attribute the authorship of Revelation to "John, the disciple of the Lord," a belief that was affirmed by several other early church fathers, including Justin Martyr and Origen. But a more cautious bishop, Dionysius of Alexandria (ca. 200–ca. 265), while conceding that Revelation is a work "of which many good Christians have a very high opinion," was the first to insist that Revelation and the Fourth Gospel "could not have been written by the same person."<sup>7</sup>

Dionysius, like countless other Bible critics to come, was alert to the obvious and disturbing contrasts between the Fourth Gospel and Revelation, including the marked differences in the fundamental theological stance of each work: the Gospel embraces what theologians call a "present" eschatology, while Revelation knows only a "futuristic" one.<sup>8</sup> According to certain passages in the Gospel of John, for example, Christians need not wait until the end-times to enjoy the blessing of eternal life; rather, they are saved in the here and now: "Whoever lives and believes in me shall never die," says Jesus. "He who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life."<sup>9</sup> By contrast, Revelation insists that salvation must await the end of the world—the Tribulation, the Resurrection, and the Day of Judgment—at some unknown moment in the future when

“the trumpet call is sounded by the seventh angel” and “the mystery of God is fulfilled.”<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps even more provocative, at least to expert readers of ancient Greek, are the differences in language and literary style between the Gospel of John and the book of Revelation. When scholars compare the words and phrases of Revelation and the Fourth Gospel in order to calculate the number of Greek terms that are used in both texts but nowhere else in the New Testament, they find only eight words in common.<sup>11</sup> An even more unsettling difference between the two texts is found in each author’s command of the common (or “Koine”) Greek in which the Christian scriptures are written. The Greek used in the Gospel is “correct and elegant,” while the Greek used in Revelation is “inaccurate and even barbarous,” according to Adela Yarbro Collins, a leading expert on the book of Revelation (and the spouse of John J. Collins, a fellow specialist in apocalyptic studies).<sup>12</sup>

Nowhere in Revelation, in fact, does the author claim to be the apostle John, nor does he refer to any experiences that might place him among the apostles during the lifetime of Jesus. Indeed, he appears to be uninterested in—and perhaps even unaware of—the life story of Jesus as it is described in such evocative detail in the Gospels. At one point in Revelation, he makes a passing reference to the twelve apostles in the third person, which strongly suggests that he was not claiming to be one of them. And when he mentions the apostles at all, it is only in his celebrated vision of the New Jerusalem that will descend from heaven after the end of the world: “And the wall of the city had twelve foundations,” he writes, “and on them the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.”<sup>13</sup>

Pious theologians and secular scholars alike have proposed some highly imaginative scenarios to explain how the same author might have written both Revelation and the Fourth Gospel. Perhaps, they suggest, the apostle John wrote Revelation when he was younger and wilder and only newly arrived in the Greek-speaking provinces of the Roman Empire—and he wrote the Gospel when he was older and wiser, and only after he had acquired a mastery of Greek over long years of practice. Or perhaps he dictated the text of each book to a different secretary or translator, one far more skilled than the other—and, if so, the Gospel is the work of the more accomplished secretary, while Revelation suffered at the hands of the incompetent one.

Yet another explanation is that the apostle died before finishing one or both of the books. According to one ancient tradition, John was martyred for his faith sometime before 70 C.E., which is earlier than the dates assigned to the Fourth Gospel *or* Revelation by contemporary scholars. Perhaps, then, one or both of the books were completed after John's death by two separate redactors, each with a different understanding of his theology and an unequal mastery of Greek. One modern Bible scholar strikes an even more provocative stance when he imagines that the text of Revelation fell into the hands of a posthumous ghostwriter who was not merely inept but intent on ruining the work of St. John the Evangelist—"an arch-heretic who betrays a depth of stupidity all but incomprehensible, and only matched by his ignorance."<sup>14</sup>

Dionysius himself read the two books with pious but discerning eyes and was forced to conclude that Revelation was written by "another John"—that is, someone named John but not St. John the Evangelist.<sup>15</sup> Modern scholars share the same conviction. Bart Ehrman, for example, points out that the apostle John is described in the Gospels as illiterate, and thus could not plausibly have written *any* of the biblical works that are attributed to him.<sup>16</sup> And the question of authorship is still being debated by scholars and theologians: "No subject of Biblical studies has provoked such elaborate and prolonged discussion," complains one scholar, "and no discussion has been so bewildering, disappointing and unprofitable."<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, readers of Revelation across the ages have never been able to resist asking the most daring and tantalizing question of all: If the author was not St. John the Evangelist, then who was the *other* John, the man who really wrote the book of Revelation?

## Ω

One early and intriguing candidate for the authorship of Revelation, for example, is an otherwise obscure elder (or "presbyter") of the early Christian church whose name was also John. He is first mentioned in the work of Papias, a bishop of the second century who is the earliest known commentator on the book of Revelation. The original writings of Papias are lost, but he is cited and quoted by other ancient sources who knew his work. According to a passage in the influential church history composed by Eusebius in the fourth century, for example, Papias was in the habit of seeking out elderly Christians of his acquaintance, the presbyter John

among them, in an earnest effort to learn about the life of Jesus from eyewitnesses to the events that are described in the Gospels.

“I do not regard that which comes from books,” insists Papias in an intriguing aside, “as so valuable for myself as that which comes from a living and abiding voice.”<sup>18</sup>

Significantly, Papias was the bishop of Hierapolis, which was located in the vicinity of Laodicea, one of the cities in Asia Minor to whose churches the author of Revelation addresses himself. Since Papias was already at work on his commentaries in the first decades of the second century, it is plausible that his sources might have included an aging eyewitness who had known the historical Jesus or, at least, a living apostle. So Papias’s passing reference to the presbyter John was enough to catch the eye of Eusebius, an early and authoritative chronicler of the Christian church. “Eusebius concludes that if John the son of Zebedee did not see the Revelation,” explains Adela Yarbro Collins, “then John the presbyter probably did.”<sup>19</sup>

An entirely different John, and a much more famous one, has been proposed as the author of Revelation by Catholic scholar J. Massyngberde Ford, author of an idiosyncratic translation of Revelation that appears in the Anchor Bible series. Ford argues that the original author of Revelation is neither the apostle John nor the presbyter John but rather a third man—John the Baptist, the fiery Jewish prophet who is mentioned in the Gospels as well as the writings of the ancient Jewish historian Josephus. According to the Gospels, John the Baptist was beheaded before the crucifixion, a fact that may explain why the author of Revelation seems to know so little about the biblical life story of Jesus of Nazareth.

Ford suggests that Revelation includes “additions” that were written into text by Jewish followers of John the Baptist “who may or may not have converted to Christianity.” But she also points out that, when all the apocalyptic passages in the New Testament are compared, “Revelation is the only one in which Jesus is *not* the central figure.”<sup>20</sup> For that reason, she concludes that the core of the book of Revelation is “an essentially Jewish apocalypse” that was only later repurposed for a Christian readership and then, even later, admitted into the Christian canon.<sup>21</sup> Far from being a book written *by* Jesus Christ, the core text of Revelation may not have been originally written by a Christian at all.

Indeed, the author of Revelation seems far more familiar with the Hebrew Bible—and perhaps even such obscure apocalyptic writings as the book of

Enoch—than with the Christian texts that came to be collected in the New Testament.<sup>22</sup> Some 518 allusions to passages of the Hebrew Bible can be found in the book of Revelation, but only fourteen references to “Jesus” or “Jesus Christ,” most of which appear in the portions that she characterizes as “Christian additions.”<sup>23</sup> Even Austin Farrer, a gifted and revered Bible critic of the mid-twentieth century who piously assumes that the author of Revelation is John the Evangelist, readily concedes that he is working with ancient Jewish sources and refers to him as “the Christian rabbi.”<sup>24</sup>

Notably, Revelation is largely free of the anti-Jewish rhetoric that can be found in certain passages of the Gospels, and John proudly characterizes himself and his followers as authentic Jews. Above all, the author is plainly intrigued by such purely Jewish themes as the Temple and the Ark of the Covenant.<sup>25</sup> By contrast, Ford finds “practically no unambiguous references to the earthly life of Jesus,” and no interest at all in such basic Christian rituals and doctrines as baptism, communion, or the Trinity.<sup>26</sup> For these reasons, she searches for the original author of Revelation among the Jews of first-century Judea who did not live to see the crucifixion of Jesus or the birth of Christianity. “The candidate who seems most suitable,” she insists, “is John the Baptist.”<sup>27</sup>

Like Jesus, John the Baptist is depicted in the New Testament as an apocalyptic prophet. But the Baptist offers a far gloomier vision of the end-times than anything attributed to Jesus in the Gospels: “His message is radically different from that of Jesus,” Ford writes. “John’s is one of wrath and doom rather than salvation.”<sup>28</sup> And it is the fierce and frightening rhetoric of John the Baptist, rather than the kinder and gentler teachings of Jesus, that is echoed in the pages of Revelation. “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,” John the Baptist is depicted as saying in Matthew. “I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”<sup>29</sup>

None of the theorists, ancient or modern, have managed to convince a majority of modern Bible scholars that the man who calls himself John in the book of Revelation is John the Evangelist, John the Baptist, or the presbyter John. “Sound judgment leads to the conclusion,” urges Adela Yarbro Collins, “that it was written by a man named John who is otherwise

unknown to us.”<sup>30</sup> Yet, as we shall see, the identity of the author of Revelation is one mystery that *can* be solved. And the telling details of his life offer a key to decoding the secret meanings that he wrote into the remarkable text of Revelation.

## Ω

A close reading of Revelation, in fact, reveals a great deal more about its author than we know about the writers of most other biblical texts. Let's begin with the simple fact that his Greek is flawed by “gross errors in grammar and syntax,” a fact that has prompted some scholars to conclude that John was a Jewish man born in Judea, where he grew up speaking Aramaic and acquired a lifelong hatred for the Roman army of occupation under which he lived.<sup>31</sup> The evidence for such telling biographical details, which help to explain some of the most baffling mysteries of Revelation, is subtle and speculative, but also intriguing and illuminating.

John, for example, seems to avoid using syntax that is unique to Greek and prefers to use phrasings that have a counterpart in Hebrew or Aramaic.<sup>32</sup> And the precise wording of his allusions to the Jewish scriptures suggests that he knew the original Hebrew text of the Bible—or perhaps one of the ancient Aramaic translations—rather than the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Bible that was used by Jews in the Diaspora and by the authors of other books of the New Testament.<sup>33</sup> Such habits of language would have been characteristic of someone who was born and raised in Judea, studied the Jewish scripture in original Hebrew or an Aramaic translation, and emigrated to the Greek-speaking provincial towns of Asia Minor only late in life.

“He writes as one who had spent many reflective years in the synagogue before his conversion,” proposes Austin Farrer in *A Rebirth of Images*, his masterwork on the book of Revelation. “So, if we put together his Jewish and his Christian periods, we may be wise to suppose that he is over fifty years old when we first hear of him.”<sup>34</sup>

Then, too, the book of Revelation betrays a hatred for the Roman empire of the kind that we might expect to find in someone whose birthplace was the Roman province of Judea. Rome, as we have seen, occupied the Jewish homeland throughout the first century, fought a long and bloody war to suppress the Jewish resistance movement, and finally destroyed the Temple of Yahweh in Jerusalem in 70 C.E., thus putting an end to the ancient

rituals of Judaism as they are described in the Hebrew Bible. The slaughter of the Jewish population, including the mass crucifixion of surviving defenders of Jerusalem, is characterized as “the Roman Shoah” by Jack Miles, an acclaimed Bible critic and Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer of God, in *Christ: A Crisis in the Life of God*.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps John saw such atrocities with his own eyes, and when he fled Judea to nearby Asia Minor as a war refugee, he carried a burning desire for revenge against Rome.

Some of the most lurid and disturbing imagery in the book of Revelation, in fact, amounts to an unsubtle attack on Roman imperialism. John, for example, conjures up the famous vision of “the great whore with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication,” a woman “arrayed in purple and scarlet, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication.”<sup>36</sup> John sees the great whore riding on a scarlet beast with seven heads, and an angel explains to him that “the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated.”<sup>37</sup> As his first readers and hearers would have understood without further explanation, Rome was commonly known in the arts and letters of the classical pagan world as “the city of seven hills.”<sup>38</sup> When they cracked the code of Revelation, they saw the Beast as the Roman conqueror of the Jewish homeland.

The poor Greek in which Revelation is written—“John’s language,” declares one scholar, “is a ghetto language”—may reveal more about John’s white-hot hatred for the Hellenistic civilization of ancient Rome than it does about his deficiencies in language and learning.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, Adela Yarbro Collins suggests that John was perfectly capable of writing in proper Greek but chose to intentionally “Semiticize” his work as “a kind of protest against the higher form of Hellenistic culture” and “an act of cultural pride of a Jewish Semite.”<sup>40</sup> To help the modern reader understand the significance of his choice of language, she likens it to the use of “Black English” as a badge of honor: “It is analogous to the refusal of some American blacks to ‘talk right.’”<sup>41</sup>

Here is the first, but hardly the last, example of why the author of Revelation can be seen as a propagandist on the front lines of a culture war. Like all apocalyptic authors since Daniel, the writer of Revelation sets himself against the alluring ways of Greco-Roman civilization as practiced in his own lifetime by the subjects of a superpower that he so memorably dubbed “the mother of harlots and abominations of the earth.”<sup>42</sup> He regarded any-

one, Christian or Jew, who collaborated with Roman authority, enjoyed the pleasures of Roman arts and letters, or earned a living in commerce with the Romans as a traitor to the one true God. Indeed, as we shall see, even the simple act of taking a Roman coin in hand was the moral equivalent of apostasy in John's eyes—an uncompromising stance that would endear him to the activists and ardent true believers in every generation that followed, including our own.

## Ω

Once John left the war-torn and bloodstained Jewish homeland, or so we might speculate, he made his way to the Roman province known as "Asia"—that is, an area of Asia Minor that is largely contained in what is now modern Turkey. From the vantage of the imperial capital at Rome, the province of Asia was only a backwater, full of unsophisticated and untutored yokels, but the cities that John visited were lively places where the local gentry aspired to make themselves over in the image of Roman civilization. And John, as we shall see, was as deeply troubled by the Roman way of life as he was by Roman imperialism or the religious practices of classical paganism.

John himself tells the reader that he was on "the isle that is called Patmos" when he was granted the strange and shattering visions that are described in the book of Revelation. Patmos is one of the so-called Dodecanese, a cluster of twelve Greek islands in the Aegean Sea, located along the southwestern coast of Asia Minor. Only eleven square miles in area, Patmos is a harsh and hilly volcanic island rising to about a thousand feet. And so it was proposed in the fourth century by Victorinus, author of the earliest commentary on Revelation to survive intact, that John had been sentenced to a term of hard labor on Patmos—"condemned to the mines by Caesar Domitian"—and released on the death of the emperor who sent him there. Like so much else in Revelation, the grain of speculation grew by accretion over the centuries: Austin Farrer, writing in the aftermath of World War II, provocatively refers to John's place of confinement as "the concentration-camp at Patmos."<sup>43</sup>

John himself is not entirely clear on the question of how or why he came to Patmos. Some translations suggest that he was on Patmos "for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ"—that is, for the purpose of preaching the Gospel to any Jews or pagans who might be willing to

listen. Other translations, however, render the same passage to suggest that he had been exiled to Patmos “*on account of* the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ”—that is, as punishment for his missionary work, which is the meaning favored by modern scholars.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, the New Living Translation, the work of contemporary evangelical scholars, takes the liberty of adding an explanatory phrase that appears nowhere in the original Greek text of the New Testament: “I was exiled to the island of Patmos for preaching the word of God and speaking about Jesus.”<sup>45</sup>

No ancient source other than Revelation itself suggests that the Romans used Patmos as a place of exile, although political prisoners were apparently banished to other nearby islands in the Dodecanese. Then, too, Adela Yarbro Collins wonders out loud whether *any* Christians would have been granted the relatively benign punishment of exile: “The odd thing about this hypothesis,” she asserts, “is that most condemned early Christians were executed, not deported.”<sup>46</sup> Still, it is hardly plausible that John would have gone to Patmos merely to preach the Gospel, given the scanty number of souls that would have been available in such a small and remote island. John looked for—and found—a much more promising place to deliver his startling message about the end of the world.

## Ω

John makes it clear that his missionary work was conducted not on the barren island of Patmos but in the bustling commercial centers of Asia Minor. The opening chapters of Revelation consist of a series of messages addressed by John to the Christian churches of seven cities in western Asia Minor—Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. These messages, or “letters” as they are often called, are the best evidence that John had spent enough time on the ground in these cities to gain an intimate knowledge of the politics and personalities of each place. Indeed, one of the keys to understanding the anger and resentment in the book of Revelation is the prickly relationship between John and the preachers, congregants, gentry, and provincial authorities, all of whom were far more comfortable than John himself with the good life that was available to the citizens of the Roman Empire, whether they were pagan, Christian, or Jewish.

Ephesus, for example, was a mercantile center that hummed with civic pride and ambition. The city lay at the mouth of a major river and at the

junction of three busy roads, and thus it served as a hub for all of western Asia Minor. Designated as a "free" city by Rome, Ephesus was governed by an assembly of its own citizens—an *ekklesia*, the same Greek word that is used to identify a church—and never suffered the indignity of occupation by the Roman army. Still, it was one of the so-called assize towns where the Roman governor routinely stopped to hear and decide important legal cases, a fact that only added to its stature among the provincial towns and cities of the far-flung Roman Empire. For all of these reasons, Ephesus was "a city where men might look on the pageant and panorama of Greco-Roman life at its most brilliant."<sup>47</sup>

Ephesus was also the site of the so-called Artemesium, a temple dedicated to the goddess of chastity and childbirth (as well as fauna, flora, and the hunt) who was known to the Greeks as Artemis and to the Romans as Diana. First erected by the famously rich King Croesus, the temple had been rebuilt several times over the centuries. The Artemesium as it existed during the lifetime of John—fashioned of marble and rare woods, adorned with gold and jewels, and featuring a statue of the goddess rendered in ebony and precious metals—was regarded as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

But for a true believer like John, the statue would have been properly called an idol, and the whole spectacle was yet another example of what the Bible condemns as an abomination. "We think of Diana as the loveliest of the goddesses," writes one exegete of the mid-twentieth century, reminding us of how *all* pagan art was regarded by the first Christians. "But the image was a black, squat, repulsive figure, covered with many breasts—a strange, unlovely, uncouth figure."<sup>48</sup> Perhaps it was the figure of Diana, or some other exotic work of pagan statuary on which his eye might have fallen, that John has in mind when he conjures up the Mother of Harlots, "decked with gold and precious stones, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication."<sup>49</sup>

A far less extravagant practice of paganism, however, was even more provocative to a strict monotheist like John. By the first century, a fashionable new cult had come to Rome from the Asiatic provinces, and patriotic Roman citizens began imagining the Roman emperor to be the symbol of the spirit (or *genius*) of the Roman Empire. For that reason, they saw praying for his well-being as a way of praying for the welfare of the empire. Here, too, was an opportunity for a provincial town to enhance its celebrity and stature; an

official sanction from Rome to raise a temple in honor of the emperor might be likened to the bestowal of an NFL franchise. In 26 C.E., for example, Sardis was among ten cities in competition for the privilege—and Smyrna was the ultimate winner. In fact, Ephesus, Pergamum, and Thyatira, along with Sardis and Smyrna, were all centers of the so-called emperor cult.

The veneration of the emperor, as we shall shortly see, was hardly the occasion for the heathenish excess that paganism was advertised to be in Jewish and Christian propaganda; nothing more was required of the worshipper than to spill a few drops of wine and cast a pinch of incense on the coals of a brazier placed before an image of the imperial *genius*. But John would have regarded the newfangled practice as even more offensive than the worship of the old gods and goddesses. When John conjures up the seat of Satan in his letter to the church in Pergamum—“where Satan’s throne is”—he may have been thinking of the temple that was erected there in 29 B.C.E. in honor of “divine Augustus and the goddess Roma.”<sup>50</sup> As a man raised and tutored in traditional Judaism, he would have found any gesture of worship toward a mere human being enough to put him in mind of another emperor who demanded worship—Antiochus the Madman—and thus to provoke his rage against the reigning Roman emperor.

The seven cities that John visited, however, were more notable for their political and cultural ambitions—and their mercantile accomplishments—than for their practices of pagan worship. Smyrna, for example, was an important seaport and a center of the wine trade, and its rich merchants supported a library, a stadium, and the largest public theater in Asia Minor. Pergamum, too, boasted of its library, and the name of the city is the root of the English word “parchment,” which was supposedly invented there. Ephesus hosted the gladiatorial games that provided a spectacular if also bloody form of popular entertainment. And, significantly, Thyatira quartered a great many of the guilds that figured so crucially in trade and commerce in the ancient world—the artisans and craftsmen, merchants and traders who were the makers and sellers of the beautiful and useful things that the Roman population found pleasurable or practical or both.

Nothing in the picture of the seven cities that is preserved outside the pages of Revelation suggests that they were “seats of Satan.” Rather, they appear to be places where ordinary men and women—Christians, Jews, and pagans alike—could and did lead prosperous, safe, pleasurable, and

decent lives. But the picture is distorted when viewed through the eyes of true belief. For the author of Revelation, the unremarkable compromises that a man or woman might be willing to make in order to live the good life in a cosmopolitan city were just as sinful as the veneration of the Roman emperor or the offering of prayer to the many-breasted Diana. To him, as to religious fundamentalists in every age, from the Maccabees of the late biblical era to the strict and self-denying Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the modern world, the seeking and getting of the good things in life was something demonic.

## Ω

Indeed, what really troubles John is the fact that the seven cities offered so many opportunities for Christians to embrace the Roman ways of life and rewarded them so richly for doing so. And nothing is more contemptible in his eyes than the simple and unremarkable act of buying and selling. Of all the satanic excesses that John condemns with such fury and disgust, he seems to regard commerce as the cardinal sin.

Perhaps the best evidence is found in the punishments that John envisions for the enemies of God in the end-times. John begins by introducing his readers and hearers to the "beast" who symbolizes Rome as the earthly agent of Satan. Anyone who "worships the beast and its image," he insists, will be identifiable by "a mark on his forehead or on his hand"—a symbol, as we shall see, that can be best explained as a reference to the most fundamental tool of commerce, the coin of the realm. And then he warns that a special punishment is reserved for anyone who is so marked.<sup>51</sup>

"He shall drink the wine of God's wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger, and he shall be tormented with fire and sulphur in the presence of holy angels and the presence of the Lamb," says one of the angels who appear in John's visions. "And the smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever; and they have no rest, no day or night, these worshippers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name."<sup>52</sup>

Indeed, the very first sinners to be punished in the end-times will be those who bear the mark of the Beast. Seven angels will pour out seven vials containing "the wrath of God"—and the first vial poured by the first angel will cause "foul and evil sores" to come upon those "who bore the mark of the beast and worshiped its image."<sup>53</sup> And, at the end of the long ordeal that is described in such harrowing detail in Revelation, all of those

who bear the mark of the Beast will be “cast alive in a lake of fire burning with brimstone.”<sup>54</sup>

The mark of the Beast is apparently a name, presumably the name of a Roman emperor, or perhaps the numerical equivalent of the letters in his name. Elsewhere in Revelation, as we shall shortly see, John famously reduces the name of the Beast to the number 666, a kind of alphanumeric code that is possible only in languages (including both Hebrew and Greek) in which letters also serve as numbers. Here, too, is evidence of his Jewish roots: the extraction of mystical meanings from the biblical text by calculating and manipulating the numerical values of letters, a practice known as *gematria*, was favored by Jewish mystics. And John gives us an important and illuminating clue to what he has in mind about the thoroughly mundane function of “the mark of the beast”:

“[The beast] causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the head,” explains John, “so that no one can buy or sell unless he has the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name.”<sup>55</sup>

Buying and selling, as we have seen, were among the principal occupations of the seven cities where John preached, a source of wealth and the pleasurable things that wealth can bring. Wealth, of course, is measured in money. And the money in circulation throughout the Roman Empire was prominently marked with the name and image of the Roman emperor in whose reign it was minted. Some coinage, in fact, plainly identified the emperor with the Latin word *divus* or the Greek word *theos*, both of which mean “god.”<sup>56</sup> Significantly, the Greek word in Revelation that is translated as “mark” is also “a technical term for the imperial stamp on commercial documents and for the royal impression on Roman coins.”<sup>57</sup> When a coin crosses the palm of a Christian, John seems to say, he or she is marked by the Beast.

John is seldom content with using a word or a phrase to express just one thing, and the mark of the Beast fairly shimmers with deeper meanings. The Greek word for “mark,” for example, is also used to refer to the brand that was burned into the flesh of cattle to identify their owner. A few ancient sources suggest that slaves and soldiers were similarly branded (or tattooed) as a deterrent to escape or desertion. One source insists that prostitutes, too, were branded with the mark of the man who owned or employed them. And the third book of Maccabees recalls one hateful

Egyptian pharaoh of the Hellenistic era who orders a few of his Jewish subjects to be branded with the figure of an ivy leaf, the mark of the god Dionysius.<sup>58</sup>

Another ancient practice that might explain John's curious reference is the mark that was applied to the forehead, neck, or hand of someone who had been granted membership in a craft or trade guild or initiated into the cult of a pagan deity. Since the guilds invoked the patronage of a god or goddess, membership in a guild and initiation into a cult may have been one and the same thing. And the marking of guild and cult members is explained as a conscious imitation of the branding of slaves: the initiate acknowledges his or her bondage to the deity "by indentures not written on pieces of parchment," as first-century Jewish philosopher Philo puts it, "but, as is the custom of slaves, branded on their bodies with a red-hot iron."<sup>59</sup>

Still, the root meaning of "the mark of the beast" may be best understood as the names, numbers, and symbols that appeared on Roman coinage. For John, coinage is the ultimate and ubiquitous symbol of imperial authority graven in gold and silver—and a symbol, too, of the comforts and luxuries that some Christians buy at the price of their souls when they make the compromises that he so hotly condemns. To a culture warrior like John, a coin fashioned of gold or silver and bearing the profile of the emperor is an example of exactly what the God of Israel condemns in the Ten Commandments. Indeed, John's fear and loathing of Roman coinage is yet another clue to his Jewish identity and yet another example of the Jewish values that suffuse the book of Revelation.

The idea that handling a Roman coin is an act of idolatry would have been an article of faith for a pious Jew from Judea. At the Temple of Yahweh in Jerusalem, for example, men and women on pilgrimage to the Jewish homeland from far-distant communities did not bring along the animals they would offer for sacrifice on the altar of God. Rather, they purchased what livestock they needed on arrival in Jerusalem. And, lest the pilgrims pollute the Temple by using coinage bearing the name and profile of some pagan emperor or some pagan deity, money changers were available along the approaches to the Temple to exchange pagan coins for temple currency on which no offensive names or figures were permitted to appear.

The money changers and the sellers of sacrificial animals who plied their trade at the Temple in Jerusalem are memorably featured in the Gospels, of course, but only in a tale that profoundly misrepresents why they

were there in the first place. "And [Jesus] entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple" goes the account in Mark, "and he overturned the tables of the money-changers, and the seats of those who sold pigeons."<sup>60</sup> Jesus condemns the money changers and the sellers of sacrificial animals for turning the Temple into a "den of thieves"—but the fact is that they were providing a service that *prevented* the Temple from being tainted by commerce with coinage bearing "the mark of the beast."<sup>61</sup>

The Gospel story is not mentioned at all in Revelation, whose author would have surely understood the pious function of the money changers. For him, the only coinage that a true believer must refuse to handle is the kind that bears the names and images of the Roman emperor and his divine patrons and patronesses—that is, money inscribed with the mark of the Beast. But John's contempt for money and his contempt for commerce are, so to speak, two sides of the same coin. When he describes the final destruction of "Babylon"—a code name for imperial Rome, not only in Revelation but also in other ancient apocalyptic writings such as the Sibylline Oracles and the Apocalypse of Baruch—John reserves some of his most wrought prose, and a certain bitter sarcasm, too, for those who profit from the buying and selling of luxuries.

"And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo anymore," writes John in his vision of the final destruction of Rome.<sup>62</sup> And he proceeds to provide a catalog of their wares in such sumptuous detail that it betrays both a certain envy as well as contempt: "Cargo of gold, silver, jewels and pearls, fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet, all kinds of scented wood, all articles of ivory, all articles of costly wood, bronze, iron and marble, cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, oil, fine flour and wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, and slaves, that is, human souls."<sup>63</sup>

Elsewhere in Revelation, John imagines that sinners will sizzle in a lake of fire for all eternity, a lake that "burneth with sulphur and brimstone."<sup>64</sup> Here, however, he contents himself with visions of merchants and shipmasters who suffer only from broken hearts at the loss of a lively trade in luxury goods as they witness the destruction of Babylon.

"The merchants of these wares, who gained wealth from her, will stand far off, in fear of her torment, weeping and mourning aloud," writes John. "And all shipmasters and seafaring men, sailors and all whose trade is on

the sea, stood far off and cried out as they saw the smoke of her burning, 'What city was like the great city?' And they threw dust on their heads, as they wept and mourned, crying out, 'Alas, alas, for the great city where all who had ships at sea grew rich by her wealth! In one hour she has been laid waste.' And a craftsman of any craft shall be found in thee no more, and the sound of the millstone shall be heard in thee no more."<sup>65</sup>

If John is seeking to scare his readers and hearers into shunning their pagan friends, neighbors, and kinfolk, the demonization of Roman coinage—and the condemnation of the “cargo” that it could buy—was a clever psychological tool. After all, Christian true believers could congratulate themselves on their own poverty, whether self-imposed or not, by reminding themselves that participating in pagan commerce was equivalent to bargaining with the Devil. They are encouraged by the book of Revelation to console themselves with dreams of the day when God will punish the collaborators who took the Devil's coin. And revenge, as we shall see, is among the core values of Revelation.

John's condemnation of coinage and cargo is also consistent with what we can discern about his own way of life. Nothing in Revelation states or implies that John himself practices a trade or engages in buying and selling, or even that he holds a clerical rank in any of the seven churches that he addresses. Rather, he appears to follow the example of Jeremiah and John the Baptist; he is purely a prophet, wholly self-announced and bearing no ordination or official title. Nor does he seem to have a home in any of the seven cities. John apparently wanders from town to town, relying on the people he meets to offer him a bite to eat and a place to bed down. In that sense, he would have lived and worked in conscious imitation of Jesus and the disciples as they are described in the Gospel of Matthew.

“Take no gold, nor silver, nor copper, no bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor a staff,” Jesus is shown to instruct the twelve disciples. “And whatever town or village you enter, find out who is worthy in it, and stay with him until you depart.”<sup>66</sup>

John's life as an itinerant preacher would have been an advertisement for the ideas that he embraces with such fervor in the pages of Revelation—“an enactment of the ascetic values of homelessness, lack of family ties, and the rejection of wealth and possessions,” as one scholar has explained.<sup>67</sup>

# A History of the End of the World

*How the Most Controversial Book  
in the Bible Changed the Course of  
Western Civilization*

Jonathan Kirsch



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