

Review of Craig Koester (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Book of Revelation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

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Given the shifting trends and recent advancements on the scholarly study of the book of Revelation (a.k.a. John's Apocalypse), the time is ripe for an up-to-date and comprehensive survey that will orient readers to the major currents on this perplexing New Testament (NT) book. The aim of this handbook is to accomplish this task and Craig Koester is a very capable scholar and excellent choice as an editor for this project. He has published a well-received commentary on Revelation in the Anchor Yale Bible series along with several books and articles regarding various topics in Revelation. His team of thirty contributors include seasoned and young NT scholars, classicists, a medievalist, a few modern historians and theologians, and a church musician/scholar. Most of them have also published important scholarly material on Revelation in their respective disciplines. However, it is also pertinent to note that the volume primarily reflects an American vantage point (as nineteen of the thirty-one contributors are either American or affiliated with American universities and institutions).

Koester himself opens the volume with an elucidating general introduction to Revelation and then organizes the remaining contributions into five parts—(1) Literary Features; (2) Social Setting; (3) Theology and Ethics; (4) History of Reception and Influence; and (5) Currents in Interpretation. Mitchell Reddish begins Part 1 with a survey of the scholarly perspectives on Revelation's relationship to the literary genres of "apocalypse," "letter," and "prophecy" and ultimately concludes (rightly in this reviewer's opinion) that it bears the strongest resemblance to an apocalypse. James Resseguie in his article views Revelation's master plot as a story about the quest of the people of God in search of a new promised land, the New Jerusalem. Konrad Huber examines how John uses imagery such as word-pictures, symbols, and metaphors to convey his theological message. He carefully defines each category and does an insightful job of uncovering



some of the veiled meanings behind John's imagery. David deSilva argues persuasively that John wrote to persuade his audience to accept certain perspectives, allegiances, and calls to action, and to avoid others using rhetorical features such as *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*. Steve Moyise surveys John's use of the Old Testament. He suggests John may have favored a Hebrew/Aramaic text and demonstrates that the books he most commonly draws from are Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. Surprisingly, Moyise does not provide definitions for the terms "allusion," "echo," and "parallel," and sometimes seems to use them interchangeably. David Mathewson's article provides an excellent survey on the contemporary debates concerning John's notorious irregularities or solecisms in his use of the Greek language. He takes a minority (but growing) position amongst contemporary scholars by arguing that the solecisms are not that extensive and most of those that are often suggested have plausible explanations. Justin Jeffcoat Schedtler closes the section by guiding readers through the rich theology and functions of the hymns in Revelation. His article in particular is a very welcome contribution because (unfortunately) Revelation's hymns have not received the same amount of attention as other topics.

Part 2 opens with Warren Carter's careful presentation of a variety of scholarly views spanning the course of several centuries on Revelation's relationship to Roman rule in first-century Asia Minor. Carter concludes, along with the popular scholarly position, that there is a significant lack of evidence for situating Revelation in a setting of Christian persecution and forced participation in the imperial cult under Domitian (contra to Ascough, below, on the latter point). In his estimation, John "is the one experiencing a crisis, and he attempts to create a crisis among his audience" (138, *à la* Adela Yarbro Collins). Mikael Tellbe argues that there was significant conflict between early Christ-believers (Jews and gentiles) and non-Christ believing Jews and gentiles (i.e., those gentiles who lived like Jews). He finds that Revelation redefines the "people of God" in such a way that Christ-believers embody this title and can understand themselves as true Jews and future inhabitants of the New Jerusalem. From the opposite angle, Richard Ascough argues that John pulls together a variety of "pagan religions" (a phrase Ascough thinks should be avoided) and Judeans into one group in order to contrast them with the true people of God and the true vision for worship. (He seems correct about the pagan religions but not entirely about the Judeans.) He also concludes that although participation in the imperial cult was not required, there would have been significant social pressure to do so (which is something the author of Revelation urges his audience to strongly resist). Paul Trebilco closes the section and argues that the author of Revelation did have some knowledge of Pauline, Johannine (i.e., Christianity reflected from the Johannine epistles), and other forms of Christianity, but he was not directly influenced by them. He even suggests (reasonably in my opinion) that Revelation addresses all Christians (including those of the Pauline and Johannine traditions) in western Asia Minor.

Martin Karrer begins Part 3 by examining Revelation's language about God in light of contemporary Jewish, Christian, and Graeco-Roman literary texts, papyri, etc., and concludes John heavily draws

upon Jewish traditions and language while also contrasting God with the foreign pagan gods of his time. Loren Johns argues convincingly that Revelation is not so much about the end of the world as it is about Jesus. In his analysis he shows that, of the NT writings, Revelation uses the richest imagery, metaphors, and symbols for Jesus (the lamb being chief). John Thomas examines the neglected subject of John's pneumatology. Mark Stephens examines the themes of "creation" and "new creation" in ancient Jewish literature and Revelation. He also shows how these themes directly relate to the depiction of the end of the Roman world in Revelation and the arrival of the New Jerusalem. Gregory Stevenson addresses various aspects of evil in Revelation, from the cosmic war of good and evil, to how John encourages his audience to endure evils such as suffering (what Stevenson calls evil without) while battling others that come from within. David Barr addresses a related but more sensitive topic by discussing the various issues and concerns scholars have raised with both (possible) literal and metaphorical depictions of violence. The problems are ultimately left unresolved, but Barr does attempt to help readers understand how John's culture greatly influenced his violent story. Lynn Huber examines Revelation's depictions of Babylon (i.e., Rome) as "whore" and the New Jerusalem as "bride" from the perspective of a "queer lesbian reader" (309). She introduces readers to the use of queer theory on Revelation's city-women imagery and examines literal and metaphorical readings of the texts. Her article also contains figures of several non-color photos of a relief and ancient coins in order to help visually guide readers. Peter Perry closes Part 3 by examining how Revelation was presented to an original audience that considered itself the "people of God" and interprets a variety of terms that are used for this identity.

Juan Hernández Jr.'s opening article in Part 4 surveys Revelation's complex Greek textual history and major scholarly contributions from the *Textus Receptus* to the present *Text und Textwert* series. (Unfortunately, we will be waiting some time for the *Editio Critica Maior*.) Based on the *Text und Textwert* data, he concludes that there are no distinct text forms (including Byzantine) in Revelation. Tobias Nicklas surveys the canonical rejection and acceptance of Revelation in the early church and concludes that it belongs in the NT canon despite some of its pitfalls. Ian Boxall provides a brief introduction to the study of "reception history" and broadly surveys Revelation's reception up until the modern period. Charles Hill surveys the history of interpretation on Revelation more specifically in the early eastern and western churches. Julia Wannemacher's† article helpfully guides readers through the less familiar medieval interpreters of Revelation. Paul Westermeyer provides a fascinating article that surveys the influence and use of Revelation in music and liturgy during the life of the modern church. (He also detects a few original liturgical elements within Revelation itself, and even those less musically inclined will appreciate and find his contribution informative). Joshua Searle and Kenneth Newport's joint article closes Part 4 by demonstrating that futurist interpretations of Revelation are not just confined to some eccentric

evangelicals and fundamentalist cults, but also had, and still have, an influence on the broader modern culture.

Part 5 closes the handbook with three entries on some less familiar trends (likely both to scholars and beginners alike) because they are relatively new. Susan Hylen discusses feminist interpretations of Revelation and highlights the major scholars and key texts. Thomas Slater shows that Revelation has been one of the most important NT books in different strands of African American theology and scholarship (from Black Liberation Theology advocates to those who lean more conservative). Lastly, Harry Maier offers an article on post-colonial interpretation of Revelation (which he incisively defines).

There are several positive features provided in this handbook. Every article offers an extensive bibliography, some also include additional suggestions for further reading, and a few include chapter endnotes. Only a few articles have no formal conclusion. Some of the authors skillfully interact with scholarly literature in languages other than English (mostly German, and some French and Italian). The volume contains mostly Greek transliterations of ancient texts, but a few Hebrew and Latin transliterations are also provided. These sometimes go untranslated, but the surrounding commentary still should prove helpful to those who have little experience with these languages.

Unfortunately, the handbook suffers from several significant weaknesses and errors. The editor's or publisher's decision not to include an index for biblical citations and other ancient sources significantly hinders scholarly investigation. The only index that is included appears to be a general index of authors and subjects. Sadly, it is very inconsistent. Far too many authors and important subjects that are discussed in various articles are excluded or missing: e.g., Augustine/Augustinian(s) (115, 299, 366, 369, 378, 383–84, 398, 418, 421, 423–24, 426–27, 437, 501; Augustine is incorrectly listed on 407 in the index), the European Union/EU (384, 458–60), Martin Luther (54, 294, 299, 339, 383, 387, 423, 427), Martin Luther King, Jr. (450), Reformed tradition/interpretation (383, 450, 460), and even Donald Trump (460)! The exclusion of an abbreviations list for primary and ancient sources/authors is disappointing, especially given that several contributors use different citation conventions. Also disappointing is the lack of visual art (such as color photos of illuminated manuscripts, frescoes, etc.) given that, of the NT writings, Revelation has had the richest reception history in such areas. (Readers will have to consult Boxall's article and his bibliography for further guidance.) This reviewer was quite surprised that Part 4 did not include an article specifically devoted to the reception of Revelation during and shortly after the Protestant Reformation, given that it was often used in debates about eschatology and the Pope's identity as the antichrist. Part 5 seems underserved with only three contributions, and it is quite disappointing that other currents and cultural studies (e.g., African, Asian, Latin American, etc.) were excluded. There are many typographical errors (including inconsistencies with formatting, references, and punctuation) and several factual errors. Most are minor, but a few are major. To highlight some examples:

misspellings, missing words, etc. (“Sources Chrétienne” (on xx); it is unclear if Karrer’s reference to QShirShabb (on 216) should refer specifically to 4QShirShabb<sup>a-h</sup> (4Q400–7) or 11QShirShabb (11Q17), if both, perhaps Mas1k should have been included; transliteration (on 96, Moyise’s transliterations for Rev 15:3 should read “*alēthinai*” instead of “*alēthina*,” and “*dikaiai*” instead of “*dikaios*”; Karrer (205) incorrectly transliterates Philo, *Spec.* 1.30 as “*heis esti ho theos*” which should read “*hoti theos heis esti*”); other factual errors, etc. (Hernández contains some errors and inconsistencies that could confuse readers. For example, he departs from the standard Gregory-Aland (GA) manuscript symbols in a few places: S 01 (on 344ff.) is normally given the GA symbol **Ⲑ**, and the GA symbol S belongs to 028; Q 046 (on 346ff.) is normally only identified by the GA number, and the GA symbol Q belongs to 026; on the one hand he does not use the standard blackletter font for the papyri P98 and P115 (on 352), but on the other it is provided for **Ⲕ**<sup>47</sup>. Also, Hernández’s claim that “there are no consistent Majority Text readings for the book of Revelation” (353) is not entirely true. The Byzantine text(s) of the Apocalypse do “diverge more often than they converge,” however, it also holds true that there are essentially two competing types, Av and Q.<sup>1</sup> Fact checking information cited in other books and articles is difficult because he does not provide specific page numbers. Maier (on 503) erroneously connects Revelation to Cotton Mather’s “postmillennial colonialism” and states that he composed his *Magnalia Christi Americana* in 1792 and was the first minister of Boston’s “First Church.” Mather is better described as an “eager millenarian,” was ordained in Boston’s North Church (a.k.a. Second Church), published the *Magnalia* in 1702 (rightly listed in Maier’s bibliography), and died in 1728 (ODNB).

These criticisms and disappointments are included in sincere hopes of helping to improve this otherwise impressive work of scholarship. Scholars and beginners alike from a variety of disciplines will still learn new and important information and become better acquainted with the *Status quaestionis* regarding most subjects. Therefore, this volume should be welcomed to the academic discussion. Given the prestigious nature of the Oxford Handbook series, it will come at a steep price. The volume will certainly populate many academic libraries soon, but one suspects most individual readers will wait until the various errata have been corrected before they shell out money from their own pockets.

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<sup>1</sup> So, Maurice Robinson, (in private conversation) and his well-known article, “The Case for Byzantine Priority,” *TC: A Journal of Biblical Textual Criticism* 6 (2001): quote in note 92, <http://jbt.org/v06/Robinson2001.html>; also see his, “Scribal Habits Among Manuscripts of the Apocalypse,” (PhD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1982); and his latest edition with William Pierpont† of the Byzantine text of Revelation in *The New Testament in the Original Greek: Byzantine Textform 2018* (Nürnberg: VTR, 2018), which is also updated according to the data in *Text und Textwert*. (Astonishingly, Hernández does not even mention Robinson’s works.) Darius Müller’s dissertation has yet to be seen.