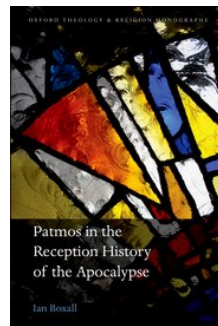


Patmos in the Reception History of the Apocalypse,
by Ian Boxall

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This book is, quite frankly, brilliant. What seems like a rather niche idea—the reception history of Rev 1:9’s reference to Patmos—in Ian Boxall’s hands becomes a masterly study of language, art, Christianity, empires, prejudices, manuscripts, and so much more; basically, an intelligent exploration of Christian history. Worth purchasing for the scholarly bibliographies alone, this book packs a punch in the realm of reception history, showing us what it can bring to the guild and most of all, how absorbing and inspiring it can be. The structure is simple and logical: the main bulk of the book moves chronologically through patristic, Latin, Eastern, Western, and visual receptions of Patmos. The book rewards careful reading, snowballing as it progresses and assimilates the traditions it encounters, turning into a study which is an undeniably riveting read.



The Introduction is brief, only thirteen pages, but covers a lot of ground, presenting the book's aims, content, method, limitations, and structure. Explanations for selections and ordering are given (these continue as the book progresses), and this opening section shows a high level of awareness regarding disciplinary questions and issues. The speed with which the text moves into the study proper means that maximum space is given over to the material in question, where these introductory issues will be further discussed *in situ*, facilitating a more active reflection.

Chapter 1 provides a close reading of Rev 1:9, revealing its textual "ambiguities and multivalency" (14). This sets the work within the familiar commentary format, and opens readers' minds to interpretations proffered, and the slippery nature of such a seemingly easy verse. After this the chronological study then commences: chapters 2–4 cover the Patmos traditions of the "Early Patristic Tradition (2nd–5th Centuries)," "Early Medieval Latin Tradition (6th–10th Centuries)," and "Later Medieval Tradition (1000–1516)."

The section on the patristic period allows for a careful examination of early voices such as Irenaeus, Jerome, and Hippolytus. This is very much a scene-setting chapter, and whilst there seems to be a lot of similarity, the early seeds of different views can be seen (e.g., Patmos as a place of exile or as a place of revelation). The chapter also examines the limited number of early surviving commentaries on Revelation (Victorinus's and Tyconius's) and the patristic concern with the person of John, rather than the text of Revelation. The material is, as it will be in each chapter, contextualized, the focus explained, and a clear conclusion presented.

Chapter 3 introduces a period that sees the "flowering of commentaries on Revelation" (56), and focuses on the Western traditions. An interest in Patmos as a place of exile and as a place of revelation continues, as we encounter the likes of Bede, Primasius, and Apocalypse Cycle compilers. A healthy(?) interest in the person of John and what his island conditions would have been also continues, while allegorical interpretations surrounding the notion of islands in general, and Patmos's name in particular, begin to surface.

Chapter 4 moves into a more thematic study, giving examples of interpretative types, rather than a more person/text-based approach. This is wholly appropriate for such a complex period, facilitating the comparison of interpretations, and demonstrating the need for organic approaches in order to best present material from different historical circumstances. Topics covered in this section include, as well as the now-familiar biographical and

revelatory strands, actualized readings of John's experience in the person of Francis of Assisi, mendicant interpretations, Patmos in Rev 10, and liturgical appearances. At this stage, it is patently obvious that the ways in which Christians have drawn on Patmos are complex, exciting, unpredictable, and interwoven with past and present circumstances.

With this newly found knowledge, chapter 5 moves to the Eastern Patmos traditions "from the 5th Century," mainly focusing on Greek traditions (although Syriac, Armenian, Coptic, and Ethiopic studies are also considered). Familiar works such as the commentaries of Oecumenius and Andreas of Caesarea make an appearance, but the real star of this chapter is the *Prochorus Acts*, a key contributor to many Eastern traditions. How this text reconfigures the island in comparison to Western imaginings, and the part it plays in later understandings of the geography of the place, including Christodoulos's founding of the monastery on Patmos, is a fascinating read.

Chapter 6 is the book's longest, covering the huge subject "Western Interpreters from 1517." Thematically arranged, this chapter is very much a collection of examples rather than an exhaustive study, taking us through poetry, sermons, essays, lectures, and post-1900 historical-critical commentaries. Luther, Ribera, Wordsworth, Napier, and a group of entrants to an 1863 Oxford poetry competition all vie to be heard. The multivalency is palpable, as is the way that material outlined in the previous chapters is drawn upon, reinterpreted, and refreshed for ever-changing circumstances.

Chapter 7 is on "Visual Interpretations" of Patmos. This material is reserved for the end, and rightly so, for after alerting the reader to the rich exegesis found in different textual genres, Boxall is able to show that art can provide some of the most generative readings of biblical traditions. With eight colour plates, the works of artists such as Botticelli, Bosch, and Hans Burgkmair the Elder are vividly brought to life, and it becomes clear that visual interpretation may be where the complexity of the Patmos motif is most effectively conveyed.

Chapter 8 returns to hermeneutics, and it packs a real punch as Boxall gathers together 2000 years of Revelation readings to reveal what is missing, missed, and misinformed in modern scholarship. Having carried out such a comprehensive reading of traditions, Boxall makes it clear that Patmos is many things to many people, and that historical-critical readings do not hold all the cards when it comes to interpretation. He reminds us that to read the text of Revelation is to step into a torrent of interpretations, showing the diverse potentials offered by such a seemingly paltry verse. He also moves into

more reflective questions such as how suitable the written commentary is for such a visionary book as Revelation (perhaps for biblical exegesis in general), and how much imagination plays a part in more “objective” commentary writing (quite a lot, it turns out).

Boxall’s writing style is erudite, never verbose, and always warmly self-aware. He speaks in a language which flatters both the historical-critical and reception history ends of the readerly spectrum, and he is honest that he cannot cover everything, this being very much the tip of the iceberg (e.g., there are limited references to Russia, post-1500s non-European uses, and female interpreters—although Rossetti makes a welcome appearance). However, what he does cover is fascinating: from the desolate islandscapes of Irish ascetic imaginings, to the populated conversion-hungry island presented by the *Prochorus Acts*, as well as the growth of palms on Patmos, and the use of caves in Byzantine iconography. Reading such a complex history reveals that Patmos is many things to many people, showing the diverse potentials offered by such a seemingly paltry verse.

If there was one thing that this book would benefit from, it would be the dates of the people/texts in question being beside their names in headings. A small detail, yes, but one that would facilitate the use of the text as a reference work. Also, it is worth noting that for those seeking heavy methodology and long essays on the theory of, for example, *Wirkungsgeschichte*, this study may not provide everything desired, although such subjects are most certainly discussed. Instead, this book’s strength lies in the practical way it demonstrates the concepts of reception, interweaving discussions with real material and the practicalities of “doing reception history.”

So, should we limit ourselves to post-1900 reception and split the pre-critical from the “critical”? In this study Boxall actively shows “the narrow set of questions historical critics pose to Rev 1:9, and the unimaginative character of their responses, by comparison with many of their predecessors” (133). Indeed, reading such a comprehensive and engaging history certainly made this reader aware that not to step fully into the rich fabric of interpretations we inherit is to do an injustice to the power of the past, and also to maintain the blind spots of the present. Therefore, this volume is a rewarding read that can genuinely alter the way we approach the biblical text (and how many monographs actually do that?) Highly recommended.

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