

Reading the Apocalypse on the Island of Patmos

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Using the Imagination

The ruined Greek and Roman cities of Asia Minor have played a crucial role in the scholarly interpretation of the Apocalypse for well over a century. No serious commentator on the book can afford to ignore the monumental studies of Sir William Ramsay¹ and Colin Hemer,² even if one wishes to dissent from aspects of their readings. Nor is the usefulness of the seven cities confined to stones, artifacts and inscriptions. What one might call the 'imaginative landscape' also comes into play: the ability to visualise, for example, the sheer magnificence of Pergamum's acropolis, looming like Satan's throne over the surrounding plain, or the gleaming white marble of Ephesus' Temple of Artemis, dominating the approach from the sea. Or in more recent writing, use of the imagination has also been called for to appreciate the symbolic world such cities evoke (Steven Friesen's splendid book *John's Apocalypse and the Imperial Cults*, significantly subtitled 'Reading Revelation among the Ruins', is a fine example of the latter).³

Yet in all this fascination with the context of Revelation's first recipients, few scholars have paid much attention the context in which its author claims to have experienced at least some of his visions, and the possible place of writing, the island of Patmos. Yet if the physical surroundings of Asia, their history, traditions and cultural artefacts, have left their mark on the Apocalypse, then why not also John's Patmos context?⁴ After all, attention to the context of the human author has been a mainstay of historical-critical study of other New Testament books.

¹ W.M. Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1904).

² C.J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in their Local Setting* (JSNTS 11; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1986).

³ S.J. Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁴ This holds whether John is still on the island when he writes the Apocalypse, or Patmos was simply the location for his visions and he has now returned to the mainland.

The following reflections, drawing especially on an article by H.D. Saffrey O.P. (one of the few authors to take the Patmos setting seriously),⁵ attempt some tentative suggestions as to how to restore the balance. Their more immediate context, however, is the experience of reading the Apocalypse on Patmos itself. Local tradition has even identified a precise location for John's visions: the Cave of the Apocalypse, situated halfway up the imposing hill crowned by the fortress-like Monastery of St John the Theologian, with the mountains of Samos and the islands of Arki and Agathonisi in the distance. It is difficult sitting on Patmos, with islands in clear view and the Turkish coast just out of hazy sight, not to sense something of John's proximity to yet physical separation from the seven churches on the mainline.

However, this is no mere exercise in historical imagination. For reading the Apocalypse on Patmos in the twenty-first century is to be drawn into the interpretative world of Greek Orthodoxy, with its highly imaginative approach to the Apocalypse.⁶ The Orthodox identification of the Cave of the Apocalypse claims a physical link with John: even to the extent of identifying a niche in the cave's wall where the elderly seer laid his head, a grip to aid him in levering himself up, and a natural ledge which it is claimed supported the scroll of John's scribe as he dictated both the Apocalypse and the Fourth Gospel. Moreover, it tells a highly imaginative story of John's sojourn on the island, blending popular legends with written accounts, and especially the fifth century text known as the *Acts of the Holy Apostle and Evangelist John the Theologian by his disciple Prochorus*. In this embellished tradition John is not alone on his island retreat; he is accompanied by a disciple and scribe named Prochorus, one of the seven deacons of Acts 6 (a regular figure in Byzantine icons depicting John the Evangelist). Moreover, as the tradition develops, a sizeable Christian community emerges on the island around John.

This may not be the picture of John the solitary seer that many of us bring to our reading of the book, perhaps influenced by Western artists such as Diego Velázquez, Hans Memling and Hieronymus Bosch. However, it as

⁵ H.D. Saffrey, O.P., 'Relire l'Apocalypse à Patmos', *Revue Biblique* (1975) 385-417. See also B. Haussoullier, 'Les îles milésiennes: Léros, Lepsia, Patmos, les Korsiaes,' *Revue de Philologie* 26 (January 1902), pp. 124-43, on which Saffrey draws. J.T. Bent, 'What St John Saw on Patmos,' *Nineteenth Century* 24 (1888) 813-21, puts forward the intriguing though speculative theory that the events accompanying the opening of the sixth seal at Rev. 6:12-17 are due to John's having witnessed the eruption of the volcanic island of Thera or Santorini which began in 60 CE.

⁶ English examples of Orthodox interpretation include: C.G. Flegg, *An Introduction to Reading the Apocalypse* (Crestwood NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999); A. Taushev and S. Rose, *The Apocalypse in the Teachings of Ancient Christianity* (2nd edition; Platina, CA: St Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 1995).

arguably no less legitimate a reading of the text as their more individualistic images (see Rev. 1:9ff.). In the rest of this article I want to explore the following set of questions: what is the appropriate imaginative context for the writing of John's book? That is, how are we to envisage Patmos at the time of John, and the kind of impact its history and culture might have had on his visions? What evidence might the stones and rocks of Patmos yield? Moreover, how might the distinctive Orthodox context of twenty-first century Patmos challenge our imaginations to re-envisage the impact of John's time there on his Apocalypse?

The Stones of Patmos

When one turns to the available evidence for the island in the Roman period, one can understand why, with a few notable exceptions, the scholarly mind does not seem to have stretched to Patmos, and what we might call its 'imaginative landscape'.⁷ Classical references are relatively sparse, and either simply mention Patmos in passing (Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 3.33:3) or are concerned with its geographical location (Strabo, *Geography* 10.5.13; Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 4.12.69).⁸ Nor is John particularly forthcoming, devoting one ambiguous verse (Rev. 1:9) to his sojourn on the island. Moreover, there been very little archaeological exploration undertaken on the island, in sharp contrast to the massive archaeological projects at Ephesus, Pergamum or Sardis. That being said, the surviving stones and inscriptions of Patmos do provide some clues as to the 'imaginative landscape' of the island during John's time.

⁷ Ramsay's chapter 'the Education of St John in Patmos' is largely taken up with the reasons for John's sojourn on the island (Ramsay pp. 82-92); Hemer devotes a mere four pages to the subject (Hemer pp. 27-30. Swete, commenting on Rev. 6:14, suggests a reference to 'the rocky islands of the Aegean' (H.B. Swete, *The Apocalypse of St John*. Macmillan and Co., London 1906, p. 93), and makes the perceptive if generalised point that: 'The locality has doubtless shaped to some extent the scenery of the Apocalypse, into which the mountains and the sea enter largely...' (p. 12). James Sanders' promisingly-titled paper (J.N. Sanders, 'St John on Patmos', *New Testament Studies* 9 (1963) pp. 75-85), disappointingly has rather more to say about St John than about Patmos (his article is largely a discussion of authorship, and the legal technicalities of John's exile). Among recent critical commentators, David Aune devotes more attention than most to the Patmos context: D. Aune, *Revelation 1—5* (Word Biblical Commentary 52a; Dallas TX: Word, 1997), pp. 76-80.

⁸ Despite frequent scholarly assertions, Pliny makes no claim to Patmos having been a Roman penal colony: G.B. Caird, *A Commentary on the Revelation of St. John the Divine* (A. & C. Black, London 1966), p. 21, n. 2. The cited passage of Pliny simply lists the various islands in the region, without any comment as to their use, and gives the circumference of Patmos as 30 miles. This does not exclude Patmos being used as a place of banishment: no less than thirteen Aegean islands – including some relatively close to Patmos – were so used or considered, leading Juvenal to describe them as 'rocks crowded with our noble exiles' (on this see J.P.V.D. Balsdon, *Romans and Aliens* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1979, pp. 113-15).

As noted above, the Western artistic tradition (which impacts heavily upon the Western exegetical tradition, and vice versa) tends to imagine John sitting on a deserted island like a first century Robinson Crusoe. Alternatively, following some of the Latin traditions, we may envisage the seer sweating away in a lonely mine with only a Roman soldier for company. But this image of Patmos as a desolate isle is historically implausible. Rather, archaeological and inscriptional evidence points to the island having a thriving population by the time John arrived there. Archaeological ruins on the Ὀρος τοῦ Καστελλίου ('Castle Mountain') overlooking the port of Skala, and pottery sherds scattered around the area, attest that this part of the island was inhabited virtually continuously from the Middle Bronze Age to the Roman period, with fortifications built in the Hellenistic period.⁹ One surviving inscription, dated to 2nd century BCE, reveals that Patmos was large enough to support its own gymnasium, with an association of torch-runners (τῶν λαμπαδιστῶν) and one for athletic oil-users (μετεχόντων τοῦ ἀλείμματος).¹⁰

Second, two inscriptions reveal that the cult of the goddess Artemis was strong on the island. The most extensive (dated to the second century CE and preserved in the Monastery of St John the Theologian) refers to the ὑδροφόρος Bera, priestess of Artemis, mentions a temple of Artemis Scythia ([έν] ἀύλαις Ἀρτέμιδος Σκυθίης), and describes Patmos as νῆσος ἀγαυσάτη Λητωίδος, 'the most august island of the daughter of Leto'.¹¹ Saffrey proposes on the basis of this inscription that Patmos had its own local variant on the birth of Artemis, presenting itself as the birthplace of the goddess (the most famous claim for the location of her birthplace, Ortygia, is the island of Delos, the birthplace of her brother Apollo, though the island of Nasos and mainland Ephesus were rival claimants).

The other relevant inscription is an undated dedication on an altar to Artemis under her apparently local title of Artemis Patmia: [Ἄ]ρτέμιδι Πατμ[ίᾳ] [ἀ]νέθηκε Ζω[—] καθ' ὑπό[υ]ς.¹² This inscriptional evidence fits in with much later local traditions, which claim that St Christodoulos, the eleventh century founder of the monastery, constructed it on the site of the Temple of Artemis, and that he destroyed the great cult statue in the process. Thus Artemis and her shrine would have dominated the skyline of first century Patmos as powerfully as the Monastery of St John now

⁹ T. Stone, *Patmos* (Athens: Lycabettus Press 1981), p. 5.

¹⁰ D.F. McCabe and M.A. Plunkett, *Patmos Inscriptions: Texts and List* (Princeton: Institute for Advanced Study 1985), inscription 001. See discussion by Saffrey, pp. 393-97, and Haussoullier, pp. 138-140.

¹¹ McCabe and Plunkett, inscription 004. Saffrey, pp. 399-407; Haussoullier, p. 140.

¹² McCabe and Plunkett, inscription 003.

dominates the skyline of twenty-first century Patmos, and its approach from the sea.

Third, as Saffrey has shown, study of Patmos can be placed on a broader canvas. In the Hellenistic period and into the Roman period, Patmos was a district of the important port city of Miletos on the mainland. Although only mentioned in two New Testament passages (Acts 20:15, 17; 2 Tim. 4:20), Miletos was a strategically important sea-port, due to its excellent natural harbours, and its geographical location (south of both Smyrna and Ephesus) meant that it was better-positioned for Mediterranean trade routes. But it was also vulnerable to attack from the sea, hence its interest in the islands, a number of which came under Milesian control as φρούρια or ‘fortress islands’, protecting the city and its surrounding territory. According to one of the most recent studies of Miletos, these islands included Lade in the Gulf of Latmos, Leros, Ikaria (before it came under the control of Samos), Patmos, and possibly Lepsia (modern Lipsi), situated between Patmos and the mainland.¹³ Patmos would have been particularly useful for the Milesians because of its sheltered harbours on both east and west coasts. This means that Patmos was populated by citizens of Miletos who manned the garrison, and a commandant who was effectively resident governor.¹⁴ Culturally and administratively, therefore, Patmos looked to Miletos, and continued to do so into the Roman period, even if Miletos and its dependants came under the ultimate authority of the Roman governor of Asia.¹⁵

This connection with the mainland strengthens the link not only with Artemis but also with her brother Apollo and her mother Leto, all three of whom were prominent figures in Miletos. Indeed, the title given to the Bera, the priestess of Patmian Artemis, ‘water-bearer’ (ὕδροφόρος), is distinctive to the city and its territory. Her brother Apollo features regularly on Miletos’ coins,¹⁶ often standing with a bow in his left hand and a deer in the right; or with a bow, quiver, and a wreath (στέφανος) of

¹³ A.M. Greaves, *Miletos: A History* (Routledge, London and New York, 2002), pp. 3-4. See also Strabo, *Geography* 14.1.6 for the claim of Anaximenes of Lampsacus that the Milesians colonised Icaros and Leros. Although it is unclear precisely when Patmos came under Milesian control, it was certainly a district or *deme* of Miletos by the Hellenistic period.

¹⁴ See Aune p. 77.

¹⁵ According to Strabo (14.16), Miletos had four harbours, three of which have been identified by archaeology. The most impressive seems to have been the so-called ‘Lion Harbour’, whose entrance was dominated by two enormous statues of lions (weighing 23 tons each). This, and the Sacred Way to the South Market, remained the focus of the Roman city which Paul and possibly John would have known. The Roman period also witnessed the enlargement of the theatre to seat 15,000 people. There is inscriptional evidence for a Jewish community in the city. For further information on Miletos, see Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 5.

¹⁶ J. Fontenrose, *Didyma: Apollo’s Oracle, Cult, and Companions* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press 1998), pp. 112-16.

bay leaves; other coins from the imperial period depict the flight of Leto, pregnant with Apollo, from the dragon Python.¹⁷ There are even hints that the local mythology about the family of Leto had begun to be linked with imperial cult. Steven Friesen notes what appears to be an altar to the imperial cult in the courtyard of Miletos' *bouleuterion* (meeting hall of the city council), which bears a sculptural relief of Leto, seated on a throne, with Apollos and Artemis, integrating the worship of Augustus into local myths and thereby indigenizing Roman rule.¹⁸

Nor did Miletos stand alone. The second most important site in its territory was the shrine and oracle of Apollo at Didyma, 10 miles to the south, which was connected to the city by a Sacred Way, lined with fine sculptures (some of which are now in the British Museum). Didyma's oracle had been revitalised under Alexander the Great, and its temple rebuilt,¹⁹ such that by the first century it was a rival to the more famous oracle at Delphi. For citizens of Miletos, then, including those living over the water on Patmos, Apollo was pre-eminently the god of prophecy.²⁰ It is also possible that the cult of Apollo was established on Patmos. The version of the *Acts of John* attributed to Prochorus refers frequently to a temple and priests of Apollo, and a number of scholarly visitors to Patmos have suggested that Apollo's temple was located on the acropolis.²¹

Imagining John's Stay on Patmos

What implications might all this have for sensing something of John's own imaginative landscape? I take it as read that John offers us a symbolic world which the reader/hearer is encouraged to adopt and enter into (born of his own visionary experience and meditation upon the scriptures of Israel). But I also take it as read that John's symbolic world is formed in dialogue with, and reaction to, rival world-views in the surrounding culture. What aspects of the competing worlds confronting a Christian on first century Patmos are likely to have left their mark on John's Apocalypse?

The dominance of Apollo and Artemis, and hints that in local tradition Patmos was regarded as the island sacred to Artemis, makes it highly likely that these two were prominent in the rival symbolic world with which John's apocalyptic world would have to engage and which it

¹⁷ Fontenrose p. 135.

¹⁸ Friesen p. 70; p. 168.

¹⁹ Greaves p. 135f.

²⁰ Greaves p. 123. For a comprehensive discussion of the shrine and its history, see Fontenrose.

²¹ E.g. V. Guérin, *Description de l'île de Patmos et de l'île de Samos* (Paris: Auguste Durand, 1856), p. 13.

attempted to subvert. Just as it is impossible on Patmos today to be unaware of the presence and significance of the Monastery of St John the Theologian, so one could not have been oblivious to the cults of Artemis and Apollo, especially if their temples were in the prominent locations proposed. This strengthens the case for there being echoes of the Apollo and Artemis myths in Revelation's visions, echoes independently detected by a number of commentators on Revelation.

First, Allen Kerkeslager has already argued that the Rider on the white horse of Rev. 6 carrying a bow is an Apollo figure, a symbol not only of false christs but also of false prophecy, a kind of parody of the true prophetic word symbolised by a sword from the mouth (see Rev. 19).²² To a person living in the territory of Miletos or its islands in the first century, one of the primary resonances of a figure carrying a bow would be the figure of Apollo. Moreover, the prominence of Didyma would associate Apollo first and foremost with prophetic utterance.

Second, commentators have often noted how, in his description of the apocalyptic woman and the dragon (Revelation 12), John is utilising, and to some extent subverting, the Ancient Near Eastern 'combat myth'.²³ However, there is disagreement as to the primary form of the myth to which he is responding. The context of Patmos and its relationship with Miletos increases the probability that he is consciously evoking the story of pregnant Leto, the dragon Python, and the birth of Apollo. Indirectly, Artemis may also be evoked, for at least in the iconography of Ephesus she is associated with the moon and the stars (cf. Rev. 12:1). Moreover, the evidence from Miletos' *bouleuterion* of the interweaving of traditions about Leto and her children with the imperial cult heightens the hunch of many that there is also here a subversion of stories told about emperors such as Augustus and Nero, both closely associated with Apollo. In the alternative story that John tells, it is not Rome or her imperial sons who have established peace out of chaos, but one who was the victim of that empire. Shockingly, the emperor is identified not with the male child, but on the wrong side of the equation with the destroying dragon.

A third point may also be made about the influence of the Apollo-Artemis myth on the interpretation of Revelation. In the popular imagination, the exercise of prophecy was particularly associated with Apollo. Indeed, the distinctive title of the high priest of the oracle at Didyma was ὁ προφήτης, 'the Prophet'. While the 'false prophet' or 'beast from the earth' in

²² A. Kerkeslager, 'Apollo, Greco-Roman Prophecy, and the Rider on the White Horse in Rev. 6.2,' *Journal of Biblical Literature* 112 (1993) 116-21.

²³ A.Y. Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1976).

Revelation 13 probably symbolises local promoters of the imperial cult, we cannot rule out the possibility that this local rival prophet, the priest of the god of prophecy, has fed into the equation. John the prophet of the true God wants his audiences to imagine a very different world to that painted by the false prophets of the locale, including surely those of Apollo.

Reasons for John's Sojourn

If Apollo and Artemis represent the 'imaginative hinterland' of John's Patmos experience, what was that rival symbolic world that the prophet John juxtaposed to it? A tentative suggestion is to return to the autobiographical passage in which John speaks of his time on the island. Rev. 1:9 is notoriously ambiguous: 'I, John,... was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus' (διὰ τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τὴν μαρτυρίαν Ἰησοῦ). From this one verse, four main interpretations have been proposed:

1. *evangelistic*: John went to Patmos in order to preach the gospel (διὰ = 'for the sake of [proclaiming] the word of God and bearing testimony to Jesus').²⁴ This seems to be ruled out on grammatical grounds: διὰ + accusative is used elsewhere in the Apocalypse to denote the cause rather than the purpose of an action: 'as a result of' (Rev. 2:3; 4:11; 6:9; 7:15; 12:11, 12; 13:14; 17:7; 18:8, 10, 15; 20:4). Moreover, the tiny island of Patmos, while far from uninhabited, would seem an odd choice for a concerted evangelistic campaign, particularly given the rich pickings on mainland Asia Minor.
2. *visionary*: John was either a) impelled to go to the island with a view to receiving the 'word of God' (διὰ = 'for the sake of', which falls on the same grounds as interpretation 1), or b) commanded by the 'word of God' to retreat there in order to receive a vision (διὰ = 'as a result of hearing of God's word').²⁵
3. *flight*: John fled to the island to escape the ire of the authorities. This is a solution worthy of serious consideration: it would explain the wider context of verse 9, in which John presents himself as sharing in the 'tribulation (θλίψις)'. A variant of this is that John, sentenced to death, opted for voluntary exile instead (though this presupposes that he was one of the *honestiores*, i.e. of high social status).

²⁴ E.g. P. Trudinger, 'The Ephesus Milieu,' *Downside Review* 106 (October 1988) 365, pp. 286-296; W.J. Harrington, *Revelation* (Sacra Pagina 16; Collegeville, Minnesota: Michael Glazier 1993), p. 50.

²⁵ E.g. L. Thompson, 'A Sociological Analysis of Tribulation in the Apocalypse of John,' *Semeia* 36 (1986), p. 150; J. Knight, *Revelation* (Readings; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1999), p. 38.

4. *enforced exile*: By far the most widespread view is that John was exiled to Patmos by the authorities, as a direct consequence of his preaching. Scholars, following the various patristic references and traditions in apocryphal Acts, debate the precise legal status of his exile (related to his social status): was it banishment (*relegatio*, either to a specific place or from a particular territory), which could be either temporary or permanent? Or was it the more serious *deportatio*, permanent deportation including the loss of Roman citizenship and other rights? Was he subjected to hard labour in the mines or the quarries? And who exiled him? the emperor, the Roman proconsul of Asia, or other local authorities?²⁶

Options 3 or 4 are the most probable (though 2b remains possible), with the balance tipping in favour of 4. The references to ‘tribulation’ and ‘patient endurance’ in 1:9 suggest that John is wanting to locate his presence on Patmos as related to the eschatological tribulations (see Dan. 12:1). Further, the phrases he uses here, ‘the word of God’ and ‘testimony’/‘the testimony of Jesus’, are both linked to suffering elsewhere in Revelation (6:9; 11:7; 12:11, 17; 20:4). The fourth option fits in most closely with the patristic traditions, and legends about John, which are virtually unanimous not only in regarding John as an exile but attributing his banishment to the Roman authorities.²⁷ Although some claim that John’s exile was from Rome, and on the direct orders of the emperor, more likely we should follow the tradition that he was exiled from Asia – either Ephesus or perhaps more likely Miletos²⁸ – by local authorities²⁹ (though we can’t rule out the possibility that he fled in order to escape punishment). Either *relegatio* (banishment, the preference of Tertullian and Jerome) or *deportatio* (permanent deportation), while restricting his activities to the island, would have given him a certain amount of freedom (as the *Acts of John by Prochorus* suggests), certainly more than imprisonment or even house-arrest.

John’s Self-Understanding

But John in Revelation does not concern himself with the technicalities of Roman law. His alternative worldview, shaped by his religious tradition

²⁶ For details, see Aune, *Revelation 1-5*, pp. 78-80.

²⁷ E.g. Clement of Alexandria, *Quis Dives* 42; Tertullian, *On Prescription against Heretics* 36; Jerome, *Comment. On Matt.* 20.23; Jerome, *Lives of Illustrious Men* 9; *Acts of John at Rome*; Origen, *Comment. in Matthaëum* 16.6; Victorinus, *In Apoc.* 10.11.

²⁸ One version of the *Acts of John* 18-19 and 37 connect John with Miletos as well as Ephesus.

²⁹ It is unlikely that the emperor would have concerned himself with a relatively minor person such as John. *Relegatio* was a decision that the proconsul could take (and may be implied by the proximity of Patmos to the mainland and its close associations with Miletos). Moreover, John’s sense of close attachment to the seven churches is also in its favour (implying that he is newly separated from them).

and sharpened in apocalyptic vision, gives us clues as to how he perceived his status on Patmos, and it seems to be one of an exiled prophet.

First, form-critical analysis of Rev. 1:9-20 stress how John evokes Old Testament and other Jewish antecedents in describing his inaugural Patmos vision. In particular, his most important antecedents seem to be Ezekiel 1 and Daniel 10. In other words, his inspiration is drawn from books believed to have been written by Jews suffering an enforced exile: Ezekiel receiving his vision while among the exiles down by the River Chebar (Ezek. 1:1); Daniel having a vision of ‘a man clothed in linen’ while standing by the River Tigris (Dan. 10:4-5).³⁰

Second, the great enemy of God’s people who emerges in the later part of Revelation bears the name ‘Babylon’. The focus on this as a clue to dating seems to me to work with too narrow definition of the symbol ‘Babylon’. Certainly Babylon’s role as destroyer of Solomon’s Temple loomed large in the Jewish consciousness (e.g. *4 Ezra*; *2 Baruch*), yet Babylon functions on a broader canvas than that. There are other aspects to Babylon’s significance: Babylon as arrogant oppressor is one motif found in prophetic oracles such as Isa. 47 (and picked up in Rev. 18); Babylon as both location and cause of exile (e.g. Ps. 147) fits well with John’s self-presentation here.

Third, Revelation presents John as a prophet, and his book as ‘words of prophecy’ (e.g. Rev. 1:3; 22:9). This fits in well with the models of Ezekiel and Daniel as exiled prophets. But there is also another prophetic narrative in the Apocalypse, that of Elijah (John’s prophetic rival in Thyatira is ‘Jezebel’, 2:20; one of the two prophetic witnesses of Revelation 11 is an Elijah figure). We cannot rule out the possibility that the model of ‘prophet on the run’ has also left its mark on John’s self-presentation.³¹

Finally, the physical location of Patmos is likely to have accentuated this self-perception of exile. On a clear day, the coast of Asia Minor is visible from the island’s high-points; even in hazy weather, the mountains of Samos, the last port of call before Ephesus, can be seen. This would be a constant reminder of the separation between John and the churches

³⁰ Roloff disputes that Rev. 1:9-20 is a prophetic call vision, akin to Ezek. 1 and Isa. 6, given that John is already a prophet, though accepts some similarities of motif. Formally, he sees the closest parallels to be Dan. 10 and similar revelatory scenes such as *Apoc. Abr.* 10. J. Roloff, *Revelation* (Continental Commentary; Minneapolis: Fortress Press 1993), p. 31.

³¹ I. Boxall, ‘Exile, Prophet, Visionary: Ezekiel’s Influence on the Book of Revelation,’ in H.J. de Jonge and J. Tromp, *The Book of Ezekiel and Its Influence* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 147-164.

(perhaps felt even more keenly that the actual separation of Ezekiel and the literary separation of Daniel from Palestine, which was at least hundreds of miles). This would help account for the prominence of the word ‘sea’ (θάλασσα) in Revelation, with all its mythological significance, and the ultimate hope for its disappearance (Rev. 21:1).³² But it may also have another significance. As David Barr has suggested, islands are ‘transitional’ places, neither fully land nor sea but participating in both. Hence they are appropriate locations for the transition from ‘ordinary reality’ to ‘transhistorical reality’.³³ This tiny island, on the fringes of Roman imperial power, becomes the place where (through visionary insight) the Kingdom of God breaks in.

The Apocalypse and Liturgy

Finally, we return to Patmos of the twenty-first century. There is another element in the Orthodox interpretative tradition as experienced on Patmos, which we might call the ‘mystical’ or ‘liturgical’. The Cave of the Apocalypse is also an Orthodox chapel, adorned with icons and silver lamps, the air pungent with incense no less than the damp of the cave. Here is a tradition which takes seriously the Apocalypse’s claim that its author was ‘in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day’ (Rev. 1:10), an exemplar of that rich stream of Jewish and Christian mysticism, rather than an early Christian scribe creating a literary fiction in his Patmos study. It also opens the possibility that John was not alone, but accompanied at least by a scribe, if not also by an incipient Christian community (the claim made strongly by local tradition, as well as in the fifth century *Acts of John by Prochorus*).

Moreover, at one end of the cave is a wooden iconostasis, that traditional barrier in Orthodox churches which marks the boundary – a division but also a point of entry – between heaven and earth. And here on the Lord’s Day the Cave ‘comes to life’ as the Divine Liturgy is celebrated. In one of those great ironies of history, while the Orthodox Church refrains from reading the Apocalypse publicly during its liturgy, the Apocalypse is lived out dramatically in the Liturgy. For the Orthodox, the Apocalypse, the unveiling of the mysteries of heaven, is a drama to be experienced rather than a cryptic book to be decoded.

For all the differences, there are some interesting parallels between this Orthodox imaginative apprehension of the book and recent scholarly

³² Θάλασσα occurs 26 times in Revelation, far more frequently than in any other New Testament book (apart from the gospel references to the Sea of Galilee).

³³ D. Barr, *Tales of the End: A Narrative Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 1998), p. 62.

readings of Revelation: literary readings which urge us to attend to the impact of hearing on the recipient, or interpretations which claim that its appropriate ‘theatre of reception’, and possible context of composition, is a liturgical one, or those which stress its connections with Jewish Merkavah mysticism and other visionary strands.³⁴ In their different ways they pose this question: what is the appropriate imaginative context for the reception of Revelation by John, as well as for its reception by its first audiences? Might it be that time spent sitting on the island of Patmos could open up unexplored possibilities for the interpreter of Revelation?

³⁴ Examples include C. Rowland, *The Open Heaven* (London: SPCK, 1982); D.L. Barr, ‘The Apocalypse of John and Oral Enactment,’ *Interpretation* (July 1986) 243-56; U. Vanni, ‘Liturgical Dialogue as a Literary Form in the Book of Revelation,’ *New Testament Studies* 37 (1991) 348-72; A.J.P. Garrow, *Revelation* (New Testament Readings; London and New York: Routledge, 1997).