

Introduction

CHAPTER I

The book of Revelation, located at the end of the New Testament, contains a series of dramatic apocalyptic visions that a man named John claims God reveals to him during his stay on Patmos, a small island off the west coast of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). Probably writing sometime between the beginning of the Jewish wars with Rome, which culminate in the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE, and the end of the first century CE, this otherwise unknown John addresses his text to seven churches located on the nearby mainland. He exhorts them to persevere in their faithful obedience, describing wildly violent tribulations and a divine judgment that is soon to come, all of which will end in the annihilation of the present world. In its place, God will create a new heaven, a new earth, and a new Jerusalem where he and his Christ will reign with their angels and saints forever.

Also known as the Apocalypse of John (from the Greek *apokalupsis*, “from hiding” or “covering”), Revelation does not so much present a vision or prediction of the end of the world as it unveils the *edge* of the world. It

is an ending that is also a beginning; it is an overwhelmingly violent, cosmopolitical end that is, in the same moment, an overwhelmingly extravagant new beginning in which death and suffering will be no more.¹ And all of it, all this shock and awe, is brought on as much by God, his Christ, and his angels as by God's monstrously diabolical enemies, the Satanic red dragon and his beasts. Dreadful and hopeful, dreamy and disgusting, Revelation is a sticky bit of biblical tradition: hard to grasp firmly and even harder to let go.

Indeed, no biblical book—perhaps no religious book—has been so simultaneously revered and reviled as Revelation. Many hail it as the pinnacle of prophetic vision and imagination, the cornerstone of the biblical canon, and, for those with eyes to see, the key to understanding the past, present, and future of the world and its creator. Others denounce it as downright diagnosable, the work of a highly disturbed individual whose highly disturbing dreams of inhumane and often misogynistic violence should never have been allowed into the Bible in the first place.

In fact, for as long as people have been reading this apocalyptic text, they have been arguing about its scriptural status and value. In the third century, Bishop Dionysius of Alexandria reported that many Christians reject it, “pronouncing it without sense and without reason . . . covered with such a dense and thick veil of ignorance.” In his *Ecclesiastical History* (325 CE), Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea placed it in two mutually incompatible categories: as “undisputed” for some (that is,

unquestionably belonging in the canon of Christian scriptures) and as “disputed” for others. And although Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, included it in his canonical list of New Testament scriptures in 367 CE, his contemporary, Cyril of Jerusalem, excluded it from his.

Over a millennium later, during the Reformation, the book of Revelation’s status was still in question. In his 1522 edition of the New Testament, for example, Martin Luther wrote that he saw no evidence of its inspiration, that no one knows what it means, and that “there are many far better books for us to keep.” Ironically, as we will see in chapter 6, Lucas Cranach the Elder’s wildly creative woodcut illustrations of Revelation made it one of the most popular books in Luther’s Bible.

Debates over the social and theological value of Revelation have chased it through history and continue to this day. Contemporary feminist biblical scholars, for example, disagree sharply as to its potential to contribute to social justice and liberation for women and nonheteronormative people. Some, notably Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, argue that when its androcentric language is recognized as the “conventional, generic” rhetoric of its social-historical context, the narrative can proclaim a promise of liberation for poor and oppressed people regardless of gender and sexual identity. Others, notably Tina Pippin and Caroline Vander Stichele, argue that its gendered language of sexual violence is irredeemable insofar as it not only reflects but reinforces and ordains patriarchal norms and misogynistic representations of women.²

We will return to these debates about Revelation's scriptural status and value in subsequent chapters. For now, suffice it to say that, despite its great host of critics, the book of Revelation has not only survived, but thrived. Whether or not you have ever read the text, you are probably familiar with many of its scenes, characters, and images: the seven seals, the four horsemen, the red dragon, the "woman clothed in the sun," the archangel Michael, the "grapes of wrath," the "mark of the beast," the "whore of Babylon," the Second Coming, the thousand-year or millennial reign, the resurrection of the dead, the Last Judgment, the "book of life," the new Jerusalem, and so on. For better or worse, this book's extremely provocative visions have kindled the apocalyptic imaginations of so many artists, writers, leaders, and movements throughout history that it is virtually impossible for most people to imagine the world, or its end, without conjuring it.

Multimedia Constellation

Revelation begins in a place of displacement. "I was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God," its otherwise unknown author writes, "and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, 'Write in a book what you see'" (Revelation 1:10–11). That sense of being out of place, never quite at home, has never left it. Revelation is an outsider, a fringy, apocalyptic weirdo. Even when it finds itself welcomed into the palaces and temples of

power and influence, as it often does, it remains a refugee and a stranger, an other within. As such, it never quite settles down. It continues to move, survive, and thrive by taking on different identities and adopting different forms in different times and places.

This biography of Revelation, then, is not about its life, but rather its many lives and the apocalyptic imaginations it has fueled. It explores the legion of often wildly contradictory lives of strangely familiar—sometimes horrifying, sometimes inspiring—biblical visions. It is the story of how Revelation continues to become something new, reinventing itself and taking on new forms of life in the hearts, minds, and imaginations of those who become its hosts.

My approach to this biography is that of a cultural historian. In the field of biblical studies, cultural history explores how biblical words, images, things, and ideas (including ideas of “the Bible”) take particular meaningful forms in particular cultural contexts. A cultural-historical approach begins with the fact that there is no singular, fixed, original “Bible” or “book of the Bible” to be received across history. Rather, there are multiple, often competing, symbolic and material productions of the Bible—that is, biblical media—that are generated and generative in different cultural contexts.³ In this light, the “book” of Revelation is not a self-evident, original literary thing created once and for all in the past and then incarnated in various interpretations throughout history. It constantly changes, forever being made and remade in different cultural productions of meaning.

This, then, is a “life” in and of fragments, bits and pieces, traces of traces of traces—often almost entirely detached from their “original” contexts—that keep mutating and replicating, congealing and dissolving into new cultural gene pools. Revelation is not so much a literary text, let alone a book to be received in later works, as it is a *multimedia constellation* of images, stories, and story-shaped images; it expands and contracts, with parts of it attaching to and detaching from other cultural artifacts within different media ecologies throughout history. It becomes part of different cultural works in unanticipated ways—ways that biblical scholars would often judge to be misuses, abuses, poor receptions, or no receptions at all.⁴

Very often, as we will see, this constellation becomes so diffuse and scattered that its elements detach altogether from anything like a “book.” Unmoored from any kind of narrative whole, they circulate as snapshots that take on lives of their own, evolving, mutating, and reproducing in new contexts and combining with other cultural fragments of story and image.

Of course, floating somewhere near the dense middle of this multimedia constellation is a text, or rather a literary tradition, which, for the sake of convenience, we will call “the book of Revelation.” This, too, is a constellation, an intertextual field whose boundaries and subfields are difficult, if not impossible, to map. There is no single “original” text of Revelation, but rather a large variety of manuscripts and bits of manuscripts—over three hundred, in fact—written in Greek, Latin, and other ancient

languages and dated to the early centuries of Christianity. Biblical scholars sometimes call these various early manuscripts “witnesses” to a hypothetical original text. Whether such a singular original existed is a serious question. In any case, the oldest of these “witnesses” by far, Papyrus 98, a small fragment of papyrus scroll with nine verses from Revelation (1:13–2:1), dates to the second century CE. Even in its few surviving lines, its text does not entirely match later witnesses, including those that are primarily used to reconstruct the text of Revelation in most modern translations. Another early witness, Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 115, from the late third or early fourth century, gives the number of the beast in Revelation 13:18 as 616 rather than 666 (as do some other manuscripts).⁵

Surrounding this amalgamation of early manuscripts and manuscript fragments are the numerous critical scholarly editions and translations of Revelation. Some of these texts are translations of translations—early modern German and English translations from the Latin Vulgate (“common” or “popular”) translation, for example. Others are translations of the so-called *textus receptus*, that is, the “received” whole Greek text of the New Testament that was used by Erasmus, Martin Luther, and the translators of the Geneva Bible and Authorized or “King James Version” Bible. Still others, including most modern translations like the New Revised Standard Version or the New International Version, are based on a reconstruction of what scholars hypothesize to have most likely been the “original” text based on critical assessment of the various “witnesses” to it. This text is known as the

Nestle-Aland *Novum Testamentum Graece*, which is now in its twenty-eighth revision.

These days, moreover, many versions and translations of Revelation proliferate well beyond traditional print book media, taking the form of everything from memes on social media like Instagram to huge online interfaces like Bible.com, which provides access to thousands of translations and encourages interaction with them via sharing in various social media.

We could go on, tracing the many paths of this literary constellation that we are short-handing as the “book” of Revelation: countless sermons, commentaries, interpretations, critical analyses, and so on. We could also look deeper into the middle of this literary mass and find the Jewish scriptural traditions that were worked and re-worked into it. Indeed, much as John himself eats the scroll that the angel feeds him (Revelation 10:9–10), the text of Revelation itself is a voracious consumer of other texts. More than half of its verses are drawn from Jewish Scripture, especially prophetic texts like Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Daniel.

All that is to say, even when we try to narrow our focus to Revelation as a literary text, we find ourselves lost in a process of dissemination that calls into question the very notion that there is an original “book” behind it all. The closer we look, the more it seems to resist our desire for an origin, an *arche* to its literary expansions and contractions. To borrow from biblical media scholar Michael Hemenway, Revelation possesses a kind of *anarchic* textuality, a dynamism without beginning or end.⁶

Bolts in the Neck

In many respects, the multimedia constellation that we call Revelation is very like the popular cultural phenomenon that we call Frankenstein. First and most obviously, like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Revelation is, at least in some sense, the monstrous creation of its writer, John of Patmos. Moreover, just as Shelley famously bid her "hideous progeny go forth and prosper" in the introduction of her 1831 republication of the novel, so John sent forth his own work into the world, where it has certainly prospered.

Yet John's text of Revelation is not only like Shelley's novel; it is also like the novel's monster, just as John is also like the monster's creator, Dr. Frankenstein. For, as we will see, the text of Revelation is not so much born from the mind of its creator as it is stitched together from pieces of other texts and then animated, given a life of its own.

Finally, like the Frankenstein phenomenon, Revelation is much more than its literary text. Just as many people know a lot about Frankenstein's monster without ever reading a word of the novel, so, too, many people know a lot about Revelation without ever having read a word of the biblical text.

What they know, moreover, often has little or nothing to do with that "original" text. How many think Frankenstein is the name of the monster, not its creator? How many believe he was brought to life by a lightening-gathering machine on a stormy night, when the novel describes no such dramatic scene? (Rather, Dr. Frankenstein

very briefly recalls that he had a few medical instruments to “infuse a spark of being” while rain “pattered dismally” on the window pain.) Why do so many imagine the monster was hugely tall, with green skin and bolts sticking out of its neck, when no such features are described in the novel? And why do we imagine him dull and nearly mute, when Shelley’s monster is exceptionally eloquent and deeply reflective about his existential predicament? Because the idea of Frankenstein is a multimedia cultural phenomenon that is far more than, and far different from, its “original” text. Like the monster itself, Frankenstein, as multimedia cultural phenomenon, has taken on a life—or rather many lives—of its own.

So, too, Revelation. How many think Revelation is where we learn about the Antichrist? Why do so many believe that Revelation claims believers will be taken up to heaven in the rapture? And why do so many believe it predicts the ultimate end of the world, when its final vision is of a renewed world—a new heaven and earth with a new Jerusalem? Because Revelation, too, is a multimedia cultural phenomenon that is far more than, and far different from, its “original” text tradition. The rapture and the Antichrist are like the bolts in the monster’s neck.

Reading Notes

And yet, one might justifiably point out, there it is at the end of the Christian Bible: Revelation, a text of about twelve thousand words, divided into twenty-two chapters

and 404 verses. Fair enough. It is as good a place to dive in as any.

If you have never read the book of Revelation, you are not alone. Many try but very few, Bible thumpers and Bible bashers alike, actually make it all the way through. Not because it has too many three-dollar words or difficult theological concepts. On the contrary, what drives the text is action: scenes of angels, gods, and monsters doing things, mostly violently ruinous things, to the earth and its human population, largely without any interpretation or explanation. Moreover, the main actors—the enthroned God, the image of the risen Christ as “the Lamb,” the red dragon “who is the Devil and Satan,” the beast, the beast’s deputy prophet, and the hosts of angels breaking seals, blowing trumpets, and pouring out bowls of wrath—seem to spring from John’s head out of nowhere, with little or no precedent in the rest of the New Testament. They simply do not seem like good “Bible.” In actions and in appearance, they do not match what most consider the biblical ideas of God, Jesus, angels, Satan, the Gospel, and how all of them relate to humans and the rest of the world. Thus, the experience of reading Revelation does not jibe with what most expect from the Christian Bible.

Granted, it is easy enough to outline this biblical book. Most commentaries break it down something like this:

I. Introduction and opening vision of “one like the Son of Man” (Revelation 1:1–20)

- II. Letters to seven churches in Asia (2:1–3:22)
- III. The throne room of heaven (4:1–5:14)
- IV. Tribulations, ending with the fall of Babylon, personified as a woman (5:1–18:24)
- V. The Second Coming and thousand-year reign of Christ, and the Last Judgment (19:1–20:15)
- VI. The new heaven, new earth, and new Jerusalem (21:1–22:21)

Looking at it in this big-picture way, it appears sensible enough. However, when we start actually reading it, from one word to the next, most of us quickly lose sight of the forest for the trees. If you have thirty minutes to spare, I suggest you try reading it before continuing to read this. Whether or not you do that, what follows is my best attempt at an abridged overview.

The revelation [*apokalupsis*] of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants [*doulois*, “slaves”] what must soon take place; he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it; for the time is near. (1:1–3; New Revised Standard Version translation)⁷

So John begins, boldly introducing his text as a revelation, in Greek an *apokalupsis*, literally an “uncovering” or “unveiling,” from God to Jesus Christ to his angel to John.⁸

While on the island of Patmos “for the Word of the Lord and for the testimony of Jesus Christ” (in exile? by whom? in hiding? from whom? evangelizing? to whom?), John writes that he “was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day” (probably Sunday, the first day of the week, when Jesus was believed to have been resurrected) when he heard the voice of a trumpet command him to write down what he sees in a scroll and to send it to the seven churches in Asia (1:9–11).⁹

When he turns to see whose voice it is, “I saw one like the Son of Man” in the midst of seven lampstands holding seven stars in his right hand.¹⁰ He wears a white robe with a gold sash (Greek *zonē*, “girdle”) across his chest (*mastōis*, “breasts”), and his head and hair are white as wool, or snow. His eyes are fire, his feet are burnished bronze, and his voice is like many waters. His face shines like the sun. A double-edged sword protrudes from his mouth (1:12–16).

John collapses at his feet as if dead, but the terrifying figure touches John and says not to fear, revealing himself as the risen Christ. He tells John to write seven letters, one to each of the seven churches of Asia (Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea, all in modern-day western Turkey).

The text then proceeds straight into Christ’s dictation of the letters themselves, each introduced by “To the angel of the church of . . .” and then offering praise, criticism, or encouragement as the situation demands. Reading them now feels a little like listening in on one end of a phone call. Sometimes the issue is fairly clear, as when he

criticizes a church for assimilating to mainstream Roman civil religion. Other times he focuses on now unknown persons or movements that he decries as antithetical to the faith: “the doctrine of Balaam,” “the synagogue of Satan,” the “Nikolaitans,” and “that woman Jezebel” whom some are apparently tolerating or embracing.¹¹

Already here, we see misogyny emerging, as Christ declares to the church of Thyatira,

You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practice fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols. I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her fornication. Beware, I am throwing her on a bed, and those who commit adultery with her I am throwing into great distress, unless they repent of her doings; and I will strike her children dead. (2:20–23)

Here, someone who claims religious authority over John is represented as a woman who seduces others into illicit sex and religious syncretism. Her sexualized crime, John’s Christ declares, calls for a perversely sexualized punishment: repeated rape and the murder of her offspring.¹²

After the seventh and final letter, John is immediately taken up “in the spirit” into heaven, and soon we find ourselves rushing with him from one extravagant vision to the next, usually introduced with a simple transitional phrase like “and I saw” or “and I heard.” In heaven, John beholds a throne on a sea of glass with “one who looks like jasper and carnelian sitting in it.” In front of it is a sea of glass, and above it is “a rainbow that looks like a giant

emerald.” Surrounding it are twenty-four more thrones with elders wearing golden crowns and white robes, as well as four six-winged “living creatures” or “animals” (Greek *zoa*), each “full of eyes all around and inside,” front and back. One looks like a lion, one like an ox, one like an animal with a human face, and one like an eagle. Together these four creatures sing continually, “Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come.” Every time they sing these lines, the twenty-four elders fall on their faces before the central throne, throwing their crowns down before the one seated there, singing their own praise song (4:1–11).

The text continues, “And I saw,” just to the left of the main throne, a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals. A great angel shouts, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” (5:2). When John realizes that no one, in heaven or on earth, is able to open it, he weeps bitterly, but one of the twenty-four elders comforts him, saying that the conquering Lion of Judah, descendant of King David, can do it.

At this point “a Lamb standing as if slaughtered, having seven horns and seven eyes” (5:6), steps forth from between the throne and the elders. He takes the scroll from the hand of the one seated on the throne. The elders, holding harps and bowls of incense, begin singing praises to the Lamb:

You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals,
for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ran-
somed for God saints from every tribe and language

and people and nation; you have made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth. (5:9–10)

“And I saw and I heard” thousands and thousands of angels around the living creatures and the elders also singing, along with all creatures in heaven, on earth, under the earth, and in the sea.

John continues, “And I saw” the Lamb open the scroll, one seal at a time, each followed by one of the creatures calling forth another portent. The first four seals unleash ominous horses and riders: first, a white horse whose rider carries a bow and wears a crown to conquer; second, a bright red horse whose rider wields a huge sword to steal peace from the earth so that people will slaughter one another; third, a black horse whose rider holds a pair of scales; and fourth, a pale green horse whose rider, named Death, is followed by Hades. These latter two bring death by sword, famine, pestilence, and wild animals.

When the Lamb opens the fifth seal, the souls of those “slaughtered for the word of God” (6:9) suddenly cry out from under an altar, asking God how long it will be before he will avenge their deaths. They are given white robes and told to wait a little longer.

When the sixth seal is opened, the earth quakes, the sun goes black, the moon turns blood-red, the stars fall from the sky like fruit from a tree, and the sky rolls up like a giant scroll. Terrified, all the earth’s inhabitants, from kings and generals to slaves, hide in caves and crags,

begging the rocks of the mountains to fall on them to hide them from the Lamb's wrath.

"After this I saw" four angels with the power to destroy the earth and sea. They hold the four corners of earth and are just about to shake it out like a dirty rug, when another angel comes down from the rising sun and forbids them from doing so until the 144,000 servants of God, 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes of Israel, have been sealed on their foreheads. Then multitudes of people from every tribe and nation, all dressed in robes washed white with the blood of the Lamb, gather before the throne and the Lamb, singing praises. Thousands upon thousands of angels, the twenty-four elders, and the four living creatures fall on their faces before the throne, singing more praises.

Then the Lamb opens the seventh and final seal, and there is silence in heaven "for about half an hour," followed by John's testimony: "And I saw" seven angels before the throne who were given trumpets. And another angel takes an incense bowl, fills it with fire and incense, offers it before the throne, and pours it out on the earth, which shakes with thunder and lightning and earthquakes.

Thus begins another sequence of seven portents, each inaugurated by an angel blowing a trumpet. First, hail and fire mixed with blood is poured on the earth, burning up one third of the land, one third of the trees, and one third of the green grass. Second, a mountain engulfed in flames is hurled into the sea, so that one third of the sea becomes blood, one third of all sea creatures are killed, and one third of all ships are destroyed. Third, a

star named Wormwood falls on one third of the rivers and springs, and one third of the waters become wormwood, poisoning many. Fourth, one third of the sun, moon, and stars are darkened, taking light away from both day and night.

At this point things begin to ramp up. When the fifth angel blows the fifth trumpet, a star descends from heaven to earth and is given the key to the shaft of the bottomless pit. When he opens it, there emerge swarms of locusts with human faces, women's hair, scales like iron breastplates, lion's teeth, and scorpion's tails. They wear golden crowns and armor like war horses, and "in their tails is their power to harm people for five months." Their king is the ruling angel of the bottomless pit, whose Hebrew name is Abaddon ("destruction" or "ruin," from the verb *'abad*). They were told not to hurt the grass or green plants but to torture any humans who do not have the seal of God on their foreheads.

The sixth trumpet signals the release of four angels from the river Euphrates. They lead 200 million cavalry with sulfur-breathing horses that have heads of lions and tails of serpents and riders with breastplates of fire, and they go forth to slaughter one third of all humankind.

Before the seventh trumpet can sound, another angel appears. Wrapped in clouds, with a rainbow above his head, his face is like the sun, and he has legs like pillars of fire. He holds a small scroll open in his hand. With one foot on the land and one on the sea, he shouts, and seven thunders reply. John is about to write down what the thunders say when the angel forbids him to do so, explaining,

“In the days when the seventh angel is to blow his trumpet, the mystery of God will be fulfilled.”

The trumpet voice from heaven then tells John to take the little scroll from the giant angel and, when he does, the angel tells him to eat it, which he does. It tastes as sweet as honey but makes him sick to his stomach. Both the trumpet voice and the angel tell him to prophesy and also to take a measuring rod and measure the temple of God, its altar, and the people who worship there—but not to measure its courtyard, because it has been given over to foreign nations, who will trample Jerusalem for forty-two months.

At this point, things get a little confusing. An unidentified voice declares that “I” will give “my two witnesses” (*martursin*, “martyrs” or “witnesses”) the authority to prophesy for 1,260 days and that they are the two olive trees and lampstands, mentioned for the first time here, that stand before the Lord (11:3). They will have the power to shut up the sky, turn water to blood, and start plagues at will, and anyone who tries to harm them while they are prophesying will be consumed by fire from their mouths. When the two witnesses have finished their prophesying, the beast of the bottomless pit will rise up and kill them. Their bodies will lie rotting in the street, and the people against whom they had prophesied will glare and gloat, celebrate and exchange gifts.

Switching from future to past tense, the voice goes on to say that, after three and a half days, the breath of life from God entered their corpses. They stood up and rose to heaven in a cloud as the masses watched in dreaded

amazement. Then an earthquake destroyed one tenth of the city and killed seven thousand people. The survivors gave glory to God.

Finally, the seventh angel blows its trumpet. Immediately, loud voices in heaven declare, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever” (11:15). The twenty-four elders fall on their faces, singing praises and thanksgivings for God’s Last Judgment, and God’s temple in heaven is opened. Amid thunder, lightning, earthquakes, and hail, John sees the Ark of the Covenant inside the temple.

Whether what follows is a continuation of the same scene in heaven or a new scene is unclear. In any case, John sees a “great portent” in heaven: a woman in labor, clothed with the sun, with the moon beneath her feet and a crown of twelve stars. She is crying out in birthing pangs. This is followed by another portent: a great seven-headed, ten-horned red dragon, his tail sweeping down a third of the stars in heaven as he waits before the woman in order to eat the baby, who is to rule the world, the moment it is born. But the baby is immediately snatched up to God in heaven, and the woman flees to the wilderness where God has prepared a place for her to wait for 1,260 days (the same amount of time that the two witnesses are to prophesy before being killed by the beast of the bottomless pit).

Then a war erupts in heaven between the archangel Michael and his angels on the one hand and the dragon, “that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan,”

and his angels on the other. Michael's forces are victorious, as the devil dragon and his angels are thrown down to earth, where he chases the woman clothed in the sun, who is given wings to fly to the wilderness. From his mouth, the dragon spews a raging river of water to sweep her away, but Earth (Greek *Gaia*) comes to her rescue, swallowing the flood. Enraged, the dragon leaves the woman in the wilderness and instead attacks her children, who are the righteous ones of God.

As the dragon takes a stand on the seashore, John sees a beast rise out of the sea. It has ten horns and seven crowned heads, with each head bearing a blasphemous name. One of its heads has been healed from a mortal wound. It is like a leopard with bear's feet and a lion's mouth, and it curses and blasphemes God and all who dwell in heaven. The dragon gives the beast authority, and the whole earth worships it for forty-two months.

John continues, "And I saw" another beast, this one rising out of the earth, with two Lamb's horns and a dragon's voice. This beast acts as deputy, deceiving everyone into worshipping the first beast by performing signs and miracles. It creates an image of the first beast, gives it breath, and allows it to speak, killing anyone who does not worship it. It is in this context that John introduces the number 666:

Also it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, so that no one can buy or sell who does not have the mark, that is, the name of the

beast or the number of its name. This calls for wisdom: let anyone with understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a person. Its number is six hundred sixty-six. (13:16–18)

“And I saw” the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion accompanied by 144,000 righteous men, all virgins who have not “defiled themselves with a woman” and have never lied, bearing the names of the Lamb and God on their foreheads. At the same time, John hears a voice in heaven like the sound of many waters, of thunder, and of harps singing a new song before the throne, the four animals, and the twenty-four elders, but no one except the 144,000 can learn the song.

Three angels then appear in mid-heaven, each making a proclamation: the first carries an “eternal Gospel” and calls all to fear God, for judgment is coming; the second proclaims, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! She has made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication” (14:8); and the third declares that all who worship the beast and its image will drink the undiluted wine of God’s wrath through relentless torment with fire and sulfur so that the smoke of their endless suffering will rise forever.

“And I saw” a white cloud with one like the Son of Man sitting on it, wearing a golden crown and holding a sharp sickle. An angel comes out of the temple and tells him to reap, because it is harvest time for the earth. So he swings his sickle across the earth. Then another angel comes out of the temple, and he too holds a sickle. He is

followed by yet another, who has authority over fire, and who tells the sickle-wielding angel to use his sickle to gather the grape clusters of the earth, because they are ripe. That angel does so and throws the vintage of the earth into the “great wine press of the wrath of God.” The wine press is trampled outside the city, and the blood flows, high as a horse’s bridle, for two hundred miles.

Seven angels dressed in bright robes with gold sashes come out of the temple in heaven, and the four creatures give each one of them a bowl of divine wrath in the form of a plague. The first pours his bowl on the earth, and it causes painful sores on those who have taken the mark of the beast and worshiped him. The second pours his bowl on the sea, and it becomes like the blood of a corpse; everything in it dies. The third pours his into the rivers, and they become as blood. The fourth pours his on the sun, and it scorches the people of the earth, yet they still refuse to repent. The fifth pours his on the beast’s throne so that his kingdom is cast into darkness, yet the people do not repent, even as they gnaw their own tongues off and curse God in agony. The sixth pours his bowl on the river Euphrates, and it dries up to prepare the way of the kings from the East.

Then, before the seventh angel can pour his bowl, four spirits come out of the mouths of the dragon, the beast, and his false prophet, who station them for battle at the place called Armageddon. The seventh angel then pours his bowl into the air, and a voice declares, “It is finished,” as lightning flashes, thunder booms, and the earth shakes. The great city is split into three parts, the islands and

mountains run away and hide, and hundred-pound hailstones crush the population, which continues to curse God in their misery.

At this point, one of the angels carries John into the wilderness to see the judgment on the “great whore” of Babylon, “with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and with the wine of whose fornication the inhabitants of the earth have become drunk” (17:2). Adorned in purple and scarlet and fine jewels, riding a scarlet beast with seven heads and ten horns above many waters, she holds a golden cup of abominations and impurities, and is drunk on the blood of saints and witnesses to Jesus. On her forehead is written, “Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth’s abominations” (17:5). As John stands in stunned amazement, the angel explains to him the mysteries of the woman and the beast:

“The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to ascend from the bottomless pit and go to destruction. And the inhabitants of the earth, whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, will be amazed when they see the beast, because it was and is not and is to come.

“This calls for a mind that has wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; also, they are seven kings, of whom five have fallen, one is living, and the other has not yet come; and when he comes, he must remain only a little while. As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to

destruction. And the ten horns that you saw are ten kings who have not yet received a kingdom, but they are to receive authority as kings for one hour, together with the beast. These are united in yielding their power and authority to the beast; they will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful.”

And he said to me, “The waters that you saw, where the whore is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages. And the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the whore; they will make her desolate and naked; they will devour her flesh and burn her up with fire. For God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by agreeing to give their kingdom to the beast, until the words of God will be fulfilled. The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth.” (17:8–18)

With that mystery cleared up, John turns to see another angel, bright with splendor, proclaiming in song (much of it drawn from the Hebrew biblical prophets) the downfall of Babylon, still personified as the “great whore,” as the kings and merchants of the earth who followed after and fornicating with her cry out in lamentation over her violent end.

After this the voice of a great multitude in heaven, and the voice of the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures, the voice of the throne, and finally the voice with the sound of many waters and thunder peals, sing

hallelujahs to God, declaring that the time of the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride is ready. The angel says to John, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb” (19:9). John bows down to worship the angel, and the angel reprimands him, saying that he should only worship God.

As heaven opens, John sees a white horse whose crowned rider, Christ, leads all the armies of heaven. He has eyes like fire and wears a robe dipped in blood. A sword comes forth from his mouth to smite the nations, whom he will rule with an iron rod. His name is “Faithful and True,” and he has a name inscribed that no one knows but himself. He is named “the Word of God,” and on his robe and thigh is inscribed the name “King of kings and Lord of lords” (19:11–16). Another angel, standing in the sun, commands all the birds of mid-heaven to gather for the “great supper of God,” feasting on the flesh of the warriors, captains, horses, and riders—free and slave, great and small alike—as the beast and the kings of the earth make war against the crowned horseman and the armies of heaven.

Finally, the beast is captured, along with his deputy beast, and they are thrown into the lake of fire. The rest are slain by the sword coming from the mouth of Christ, and the birds sate themselves on the flesh of the fallen.

John continues describing his vision: “And I saw” another angel, holding a chain and a key to the bottomless pit, who seizes the dragon, “that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan,” and locks him up for a thousand years. After that time, John says, he will be released for a

little while. “And I saw” those seated on thrones given authority to judge, and all the souls of those beheaded for the sake of Jesus and the word of God come back to life and reign as priests with Christ for a thousand years. John calls this the “first resurrection” and says that the rest of the dead will not be resurrected until after the thousand-year reign. At that time, he continues, Satan will be released and will be allowed to deceive the nations once again. He will gather armies “at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog” (20:8).

Then the great army surrounds the camp of the saints in the holy city, preparing to annihilate them, but fire comes down from heaven and swallows them up. Their leader, the devil dragon, is thrown into the lake of fire where he joins the beast and his false prophet in eternal torture and torment. “And I saw” the great white throne and the one seated upon it, and the whole earth flees from his presence. “And I saw” all the dead come back to life. The sea gives up its dead, and so do Death and Hades, after which they, too, are thrown into the lake of fire. John explains that this is “the second death.” The newly raised dead are gathered before the throne and are judged according to their works. Anyone whose name is found in “the book of life” is also thrown into the lake of fire.

With the former earth and sea now passed away, John proclaims, “I saw a new heaven and a new earth” with the holy city of Jerusalem coming down from heaven “like a bride adorned for her husband” (21:1–2). “And I heard” the voice from the throne declare,

See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them as their God;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away. (21:3–4)

This voice continues speaking to John, telling him that he makes all things new, that he is “the Alpha and the Omega,” that he will quench the thirsty with the water of life and they will be his children. “But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death” (21:8).

Then one of the angels who poured out one of the bowls of wrath shows John the bride betrothed to the Lamb, that is, the new Jerusalem. John writes that she bears divine radiance and looks like a gigantic rare gem of jasper or crystal. Its (Her?) high walls have twelve gates, each one a giant pearl that bears one of the names of the twelve tribes of Israel, and twelve foundations, each adorned with jewels and bearing of the names of the twelve disciples of Jesus. The angel measures the city with a golden rod. It is a perfect cube, measuring 1,500 miles deep, 1,500 miles wide, and 1,500 miles high, and its wall measures 144 cubits (over two hundred feet). The wall is made of jasper and the city of pure gold.

“And I saw” no temple in the new city, “for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.” Nor is there sun or moon, for God is its sun, and the Lamb is its moon. There will never be night, the gates will never be shut, and all the kings and nations of the earth will bring their glory and honor into it. Yet, John adds, nothing unclean and no one who practices abominations or lies will be permitted to enter it—only those whose names are in the book of life.

The angel also shows him “the river of the water of life,” which flows from the thrones of God and of the Lamb. It runs down the street in the middle of the city, and the tree of life grows on either side of it, producing twelve fruits and leaves that will be used to heal the nations. The righteous will worship God and the Lamb, face to face, wearing his name on their foreheads.

Then he (the angel? God? the Lamb? At this point it is more difficult than ever to know who is speaking) tells John that all John has seen and heard is true, that he is coming soon, and that anyone who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book, which John has written, will be blessed. John once again falls before the angel to worship him, and the angel once again reprimands him, promising judgment to come that will include blessings for the righteous and eternal torment for evildoers.

Jesus confirms everything: “It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star” (22:16). Then he (still Jesus? John?) offers a warning that if anyone adds to the words of the prophecy

of this book, the plagues described herein will be heaped upon them, and if anyone removes anything from this book, their names will be removed from the book of life.

Finally, “The one who testifies to these things says, ‘Surely I am coming soon.’ Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen” (22:20–21).

Generative Incomprehensibility

So ends John’s Revelation, or rather his barrage of revelations, scenes of fantastic violence and brilliant extravagances, piled one on top of another without pause or transition except “and I saw” or “and I heard.”

It is indeed an overwhelming experience to read all at once, even in the abridged form I have offered here. The first time I taught a college course on Revelation, I had my students read the entire book on their own in preparation for our discussion. That turned out to be a mistake. One student was so traumatized by the experience that she did not return to class for over a week in hopes of avoiding any further encounter with the text. Another fell asleep while reading it on the beach and awoke an hour later in the middle of a violent thunderstorm, fearing that John’s vision of divine wrath was coming true.

These days when I teach Revelation, we start by reading it out loud, together, in class. That, too, is an overwhelming, even exhausting experience, but sharing it helps maintain some critical distance.

When we are finished, I will often ask students to get out a piece of scratch paper and try to draw one of its wilder scenes—the first vision of “one like the Son of Man,” for example, or the four many-winged creatures “with eyes all around and inside,” or the twenty-four elders repeatedly bowing and throwing down their crowns before the throne *and* singing a new song to the victorious Lamb, who stands “as if slaughtered,” *and* talking to John about the scroll while the four creatures sing.

These literary images remind us that texts can do things that pictures cannot, and vice versa. They are written descriptions that defy visual depiction. Time and space unfold in John’s descriptions of his visions in ways that, paradoxically, simply cannot be translated into visual images. As such, John’s literary images simultaneously provoke and resist our capacities of reason and imagination, eliciting what Maia Kotrosits aptly calls “affective hyper-saturation,” a volatile mix of feelings and resonances that resist any singular interpretation or representation and instead invite readers and hearers into “impressionistic imagination.”¹³

It is this *generative incomprehensibility*, I suggest, that is key to the many lives of Revelation. It is a revelation, an uncovering, of things that remain hidden, a seeing of things that remain unseeable. They simultaneously demand and refuse visualization. They cannot stay put on the page but inevitably spill over into other media, morphing as they attach to other narratives and apocalyptic imaginaries quite foreign to John’s own.