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Patmos in the Reception History of the Apocalypse

IAN BOXALL

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*For Chris Rowland
teacher, mentor, friend*

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Abbreviations

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|--------------------|---|
| <i>Adv. Haer.</i> | Irenaeus, <i>Adversus Haereses</i> |
| <i>Ant.</i> | Josephus, <i>Antiquitates Judaicae</i> |
| AV | Authorized Version |
| <i>De Praescr.</i> | Tertullian, <i>De Praescriptione Haereticorum</i> |
| <i>Geog.</i> | Strabo, <i>The Geography</i> |
| <i>H.E.</i> | Eusebius, <i>Historia Ecclesiastica</i> |
| NAS | New American Standard Bible |
| <i>N.H.</i> | Pliny the Elder, <i>Natural History</i> |
| NIV | New International Version |
| NJB | New Jerusalem Bible |
| NRSV | New Revised Standard Version |
| <i>Pel. War</i> | Thucydides, <i>History of the Peloponnesian War</i> |
| RSV | Revised Standard Version |

Introduction

John's island of Patmos (Rev. 1:9) has left a deep impression on the Christian imagination, disproportionate to its physical size and its significance in antiquity.¹ In Eastern Christianity, the island has become an important place of pilgrimage and provided the geographical setting for a popular set of apocryphal Acts, the *Acts of John by Prochorus*. More widely, travellers and explorers have considered the possible implications of the topography of the island for the interpretation of the Apocalypse,² and travel books continue to extol its virtues as 'the Jerusalem of the Aegean'.³ In the West, Patmos has provided the backdrop, and sometimes the foreground, to a significant number of paintings of St John, whilst Martin Luther, despite his well-known suspicion of the Apocalypse, interpreted his time in the Wartburg as 'my Patmos'.⁴ Meanwhile, such are the associations of this island location that the scholarly literature regularly describes the author of Revelation simply as 'John of Patmos'.

Yet little sense of this rich and diverse cultural impact would be gained from reading modern scholarship on the Book of Revelation. On the contrary, the treatment of Patmos in recent critical commentaries is bewilderingly brief. This fact is especially puzzling given that one key concern of the historical-critical method is the recovery of authorial context. When read through a historical-critical lens, the Apocalypse appears to be one of those rare New Testament writings which locate their author geographically.⁵ John's presence 'on the island called Patmos' (Rev. 1:9), whether that describes the actual place

¹ On the history, geography and topography of Patmos, see Georgirenes 1677; Guérin 1856; Tozer 1890; Geil 1897; Haussoullier 1902; Volonakis 1922; Schmidt 1949; Hope Simpson and Lazenby 1970; Saffrey 1975; Stone 1981.

² Guérin 1856; Stanley 1863; Bidez and Parmentier n.d.; Tozer 1890: 189; Runciman 1989.

³ E.g. Bowman et al. 2008: 16.

⁴ Bainton 1950: 197.

⁵ Other texts whose place of writing may be located with some degree of certainty are Romans (Rom. 16:1, 23; cf. 1 Cor. 1:14), 1 Corinthians (1 Cor. 16:8), 1 Thessalonians (1 Thess. 3:1; Acts 17:1–18:1), and 1 Peter (1 Pet. 5:13).

of writing, simply the location of his inaugural vision,⁶ or the fictional location of the implied author,⁷ roots the text explicitly in a specific geographical and social setting.⁸

Moreover, the set of questions posed to the text by historical-critical commentators is surprisingly limited, with the exegesis often getting side-tracked into background issues of geography and authorial identity rather than consideration of what Patmos might *mean*, and discouraging reader participation in favour of ‘detached’ historical reconstruction. Most commentators will locate the island in the wider geography of the Aegean, and conclude that John was present on the island as an exile; they may also debate Patmos’s purported status as a recognized place of banishment or penal colony, and the implications of this for John’s social status.⁹ Few stray beyond these narrow parameters to consider questions of significance. By way of illustration, I offer in *Appendix 1* the results of a survey of post-1900 commentaries on Rev. 1:9.

This book is an attempt to redress the balance. It is written out of the conviction that attention to the diverse receptions of John’s visionary text throughout history will open up possibilities for interpretation long forgotten by the ‘received wisdom’ of the academy. Specifically, it sets out to identify the variety of ways in which interpreters of the Apocalypse over the centuries have invested John’s island with significance. The resulting catalogue of interpretations reveals a range of hermeneutical possibilities much richer than those suggested by the modern commentaries, thus posing challenging questions to the ways in which contemporary exegetes regularly approach their task.

The priority in this monograph is to provide as comprehensive a guide as possible to the significance accorded to Patmos by interpreters of John’s book. Thus space will not allow for close consideration of the milieu and motives of all the interpreters, although these have been borne in mind in the collation and interpretation of the material. Significant and particularly interesting exemplars will be examined in more detail, with explicit discussion of their contexts and concerns.

⁶ Several scholars interpret the aorist as evidence that John was no longer on Patmos: e.g. Charles 1920: I, 21; Bonsirven 1951: 95, n. 2; Beasley-Murray 1974: 64; Smalley 2005: 50. However, the tense is appropriate to John’s narration of a past event: Krodel 1989: 93.

⁷ For this scenario, see van Kooten 2007: 240. He considers the possibility that the author of Revelation has chosen Patmos as setting for the visions because of its proximity to Asia, or its location in the Rome-dominated sea, or because of the associative link between *νήσος* and *ἔρημος* (*νήσος ἔρημη* being well-attested in Greek literature).

⁸ See also the thesis of E. Lipiński, that the author writes pseudonymously as John the Apostle, and that in the narrative ‘John’ is on Patmos, not literally, but ‘in the spirit’ (as he also travels ‘in the spirit’ to heaven, the wilderness and the high mountain: Rev. 4:2; 17:3; 21:10): Lipiński 1969: 225.

⁹ A more detailed survey of such discussions will be offered at the appropriate chronological point, at the end of Chapter 6.

A second aim of this work is to reflect explicitly on the task undertaken, in order to illustrate the wider implications of what might appear a narrow reception-historical study for the interpretation of the Book of Revelation, and for New Testament interpretation more generally. In particular, I hope to justify the claim that attention to reception history is ‘an integral and indeed inescapable part’ of the quest for understanding New Testament texts,¹⁰ offering an account of the meaning(s) of a text which is more truly ‘diachronic’ than historical-critical attempts to get ‘behind the text’ in order to establish the ‘original meaning’.¹¹ Locating the discussion in the context of a broad reception-historical survey from the 2nd to the 21st centuries will, it is hoped, illustrate the extent to which recent historical-critical commentators are themselves part of that reception history, developing certain strands within it and neglecting others in the limited choice of questions they pose and the possibilities they are prepared to imagine.¹² In other words, what has been forgotten over the past century or so, and why, is as significant as those aspects of the text’s reception which modern commentators have remembered.

This study does not make any claim to be exhaustive. Rather, it acknowledges the provisionality of all reception-historical work, bearing in mind Ulrich Luz’s caveat that ‘the history of the influence of biblical texts is infinite; the knowledge of every commentator is finite’, and Markus Bockmuehl’s likening of the history of reception to ‘a vast iceberg of Christian experience which lies very largely submerged beneath the waves of history’.¹³ Thus the account provided of how the task of locating and categorizing material has been approached will be as important for future scholarship as the provisional evidence collated in this monograph.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

The first chapter of this monograph offers a close reading of the text of Rev. 1:9, in order to tease out the potential offered by what is only superficially a straightforward verse. As my analysis will reveal, the ‘plain sense’ of this apparently clear autobiographical statement (‘I, John, . . . was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus’) is in

¹⁰ Bockmuehl 2006: 65. One of the criticisms of the EKK series, at least in terms of its format, is that *Wirkungsgeschichte* remains secondary to the ‘main task’ of historical criticism.

¹¹ See Rowland 2009: 290–2 for this use of ‘diachronic’ to describe tracing a text’s reception ‘through time’, and the related term ‘synchronic’ for the study of a text at a particular time and place (in contrast to the typical usage in New Testament scholarship, where ‘diachronic’ and ‘synchronic’ describe historical-critical and literary-critical approaches respectively).

¹² See Roberts and Rowland 2010: 132; Lyons 2010: 213.

¹³ Luz 1989: 95; Bockmuehl 1995: 66.

fact highly ambiguous, offering interpretative space which diverse readers of Revelation have readily exploited.

This scene-setting chapter serves as a springboard for the major reception-historical survey which forms the substance of the book. My aim has been to bring together, for the first time in a systematic manner, a wide variety of interpretations of Patmos reflecting different chronological periods, cultural contexts, and interpretative traditions. In order to cast the net as widely as possible, I have not restricted myself to commentaries proper, but instead I explore interpretations of Patmos in a wide range of genres, including hagiographical traditions, liturgy, hymnody, poetry, sermons, and art. This breadth has allowed popular and marginal readings to be examined alongside more mainstream and magisterial interpretations.

Chronological, cultural-geographical, and hermeneutical considerations are reflected in the extent and organization of individual chapters, which collectively take the reader on a journey from the 2nd century through to the more familiar historical-critical interpretations which have dominated 20th- and 21st-century scholarship (Chapters 2–6).

Chapter 2 begins the story in the foundational early patristic period (2nd–5th centuries). Given the paucity of Apocalypse commentaries during this period, most of the sources are biographical and hagiographical texts, locating Patmos within the wider story of John, the seer, apostle, and evangelist. However, the interest of some early patristic authors in John's island sojourn is more than merely historical, given the perceived parallels between John's situation vis-à-vis a persecuting emperor and their own experience of dislocation and persecution.

Chapters 3 and 4 trace the ways in which Western interpretations build upon and develop this patristic foundation, treating material from c.500 (a starting-point justified by the relative explosion of Apocalypse commentaries in the 6th century) through to the eve of the Reformation. There is a major focus in these chapters on Latin Apocalypse commentaries, although liturgical and homiletic traditions are also considered. Interpretations during this period become more complex through a combination of literal, allegorical, and tropological (or moral) levels of meaning. Noteworthy is the increasing prominence given to Patmos as a place set apart, the necessary context for privileged access to the heavenly world (and therefore a place where actual and mythic geography merge).

Eastern interpretations from the 5th century onwards (encompassing Greek, Syriac, Armenian, Coptic, and Ethiopic traditions) are treated separately in Chapter 5, in recognition of their unique character. A significant percentage of this chapter is devoted to discussion of the *Acts of John by Prochorus*, which create a whole narrative world for Patmos, and are particularly memorable for their typological reading which connects John's experience on the island with that of Moses on Sinai. The chapter concludes with a

consideration of the foundation of the Patmos monastery by St Christodoulos in 1088, and the consequent importance of Patmos for the Eastern monastic tradition.

Chapter 6 continues the Western story through the Reformation and Counter-Reformation period up to the present, concluding with a survey of post-1900 commentaries. Unsurprisingly in this modern period, one finds renewed interest in the biography of John (prompted by the Renaissance return *ad fontes*, especially to the patristic and classical sources), as well as in the geography and topography of the island. Reformation historical-prophetic interpretation of the Apocalypse also opens up correspondences between John's exile and exile or persecution experienced by early Protestants, while Catholic interpreters continue to exploit the potential of the island as sacred place and monastic ideal. Particular attention is devoted to Martin Luther's description of his time in the Wartburg as 'my Patmos', a surprising designation given his ambivalence towards the Book of Revelation. There is also consideration of poetic apprehension of Patmos, most notably by Hölderlin, but also by a number of British Victorian poets. By comparison, the treatment of Patmos in the post-1900 commentaries with which Chapter 6 concludes is decidedly unimaginative.

Given the particular issues associated with what Paolo Berdini calls 'visual exegesis',¹⁴ the depiction of Patmos in art receives a separate treatment in Chapter 7. This chapter combines a broad discussion of the main strands of visual interpretation of John's island, across a range of chronological periods, geographical locations, and artistic genres (frescoes, icons, illuminated manuscripts, altarpieces), with more detailed consideration of specific art works. Integral to this chapter is the conviction that visual media may often function as better interpretative keys to the highly visual and symbolic Apocalypse than the verse-by-verse commentary.

The concluding chapter engages in more explicit reflection upon what has been achieved in the preceding chapters, urging a more positive attitude to reception-historical 'cataloguing' than is often the case. It offers an 'analogical' juxtaposition of different interpretations employing similar reading strategies. It also considers the extent to which possibilities raised in Chapter 1 have been explored in Revelation's reception history, and outlines the wider implications of the findings of this monograph—despite its narrow focus on one verse—for the contemporary interpretation of John's Book of Revelation, and for New Testament interpretation more broadly.

One implication of this reception-historical study is to illuminate the relationship between historical-critical commentators and their own interpretative predecessors. While this relationship is often unacknowledged, the former are heavily dependent on specific strands in the history of reception

¹⁴ Berdini 1997.

for their questions and conclusions, to the neglect of others. Thus, this present book invites a greater acknowledgement by scholars of the shoulders on which they stand, together with a greater openness to alternative readings of familiar texts, be they unknown, half-forgotten, or familiar but too swiftly rejected.

In the second place, this book argues for a greater sensitivity to the multivalency of biblical texts, and the possibility that, on occasion, even the human author (the focus of interest for many historical critics) may deliberately exploit ambiguity. What this means in the case of Revelation is that 'non-literal' readings may not be so readily dismissed as unscientific interpretations of the text, particularly granted its invitations elsewhere to employ alternative reading strategies (e.g. the non-literal interpretation of place names at Rev. 11:8, or the gematrial possibilities of words encouraged by Rev. 13:18).

A third characteristic of this book which has wider implications for New Testament scholarship is its plea for a broader vision of the exegetical task. Such a vision would include a reconsideration of the role of the imagination, which is found in rich supply in the earlier ('pre-critical') history of reception, but is no less necessary for contemporary historical criticism, especially in its reconstruction of plausible contexts for both authors and original audiences. It would also encourage reader participation rather than a detached historicism, and a broader concept of meaning than the focus on those historical *prolegomena* which is typical of critical commentaries (discussions of Patmos, for example, are regularly dominated by questions of identity, origins, and geographical location rather than consideration of what Patmos might *mean* or *signify*).

DEFINITION OF TERMS

As a preface to the book as a whole, the remainder of this introduction will provide a rationale for the approach taken, followed by an explanation of how the task has been executed. This current section therefore offers a definition of key terms, notably the interrelated 'reception history', 'history of interpretation', and *Wirkungsgeschichte*, in order to explain and justify the preference for a reception-historical approach. This will be followed by a preliminary sketch of the methodology employed, including an account of how the material was located, selected, and categorized.

Reception history, along with the closely related 'history of interpretation' and *Wirkungsgeschichte* (a phrase derived from Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode*¹⁵ and variously translated 'history of effects', 'history

¹⁵ Gadamer 1989 (first German edition 1960).

of influence', and 'effective history'), has become increasingly significant in contemporary biblical studies. In terms of New Testament studies, key figures have included commentators in the *Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament* (EKK), especially Ulrich Luz in his work on Matthew,¹⁶ Heikki Räisänen,¹⁷ Markus Bockmuehl,¹⁸ and the authors of the *Blackwell Bible Commentaries* (BBC).¹⁹

There has also been significant work on various aspects of the reception history of Revelation (though little so far on Patmos specifically). Pioneering work includes the monograph by Arthur Wainwright, the BBC volume by Judith Kovacs and Christopher Rowland, and the recent collection of articles edited by John Lyons and Jorunn Økland.²⁰ Earlier works which engage with 'pre-critical' interpretation of Revelation include Wilhelm Bousset's commentary, R. H. Charles's somewhat unsympathetic *Studies in the Apocalypse*, the extensive four-volume history by LeRoy Froom (from a Seventh-Day Adventist perspective), and the monographs by Gerhard Maier and Georg Kretschmar.²¹

There are also a number of studies focusing on the interpretation of the Apocalypse in specific periods, including the patristic period,²² the Middle Ages,²³ the Reformation²⁴ and the English Renaissance,²⁵ or on Revelation's influence on Christian art (notably Frederick van der Meer and Natasha O'Hear).²⁶ Other scholars have focused on particular commentators,²⁷ or the interpretation of specific passages from Revelation; e.g. Pierre Prigent on Rev. 12 and Seth Turner on Rev. 11:1–13.²⁸

Although the three terms 'reception history' (*Rezeptionsgeschichte*, following the literary critic and pupil of Gadamer, Hans Robert Jauss),²⁹

¹⁶ Luz 1989, 1994, 2005: 265–379 and 2006. See also Räisänen 2001: 263–82. For a recent critical consideration of Luz's contribution in this field, see Elliott 2010.

¹⁷ Räisänen 2001.

¹⁸ Bockmuehl 1995 and 2006. He places emphasis on the early reception history of the New Testament, as a corrective to later reconstructions of early Christianity or authorial intent.

¹⁹ For a discussion of the rationale for the BBC series, see Sawyer 2000.

²⁰ Wainwright 1993; Kovacs and Rowland 2004; Lyons and Økland 2009. Shorter studies on the reception of Revelation include Kyrtatas 1989 and Kovacs 2005. By way of comparison, see the study of Matthew's account of the walking on the water: Nicholls 2008.

²¹ Bousset 1896; Charles 1913; Froom 1946–1952; Maier 1981; Kretschmar 1985.

²² Helms 1991.

²³ Emmerson and McGinn (eds) 1992.

²⁴ Bauckham 1978; Firth 1979; Backus 2000.

²⁵ Patrides and Wittreich 1984.

²⁶ van der Meer 1978; O'Hear 2011.

²⁷ Bibliographical references will be provided in the appropriate places below, when individual interpreters are discussed.

²⁸ Prigent 1959; Turner 2005. Unlike Turner, Prigent pays little attention to pre-1700 exegesis, and his main focus in the post-1700 period is on historical-critical exegesis of the chapter. See also Boxall 2001 on Rev. 17.

²⁹ Jauss 1982; Parris 2009: 116–47.

Wirkungsgeschichte, and ‘the history of interpretation’ are often used almost interchangeably,³⁰ it is possible to draw theoretical distinctions between them. Before embarking on the reception-historical survey, therefore, some clarification of terminology is called for, together with an explanation of my preference for the term ‘reception history’.

By ‘history of interpretation’, following Luz’s distinction between *Auslegungsgeschichte* and *Wirkungsgeschichte*, I understand the narrower history of how biblical texts have been interpreted in commentaries and other theological writings and scholarly monographs;³¹ i.e. a subcategory of wider reception history. The ‘history of interpretation’ includes the exegesis of classic interpreters (in the case of the Apocalypse, figures such as Victorinus, Tyconius, Andreas of Caesarea, Bede, Beatus, Nicholas of Lyra, and Luis de Alcázar). The scope of this study, however, is broader than the ‘history of interpretation’ in this sense, encompassing interpretations in visual art, poetry, liturgy, and hagiography as well as the commentary proper. It does not restrict itself to ‘normative ecclesial-dogmatic tradition’,³² but incorporates diverse, including marginal, and maverick voices.

The logical distinction between the remaining two terms, as I use them here, is more one of focus than of content. *Wirkungsgeschichte* (particularly when translated as ‘history of effects’) can be understood as prioritizing the *effects* or consequences (both good *and* bad) of particular readings of the biblical text, i.e. the text as ‘effective agent’,³³ while reception history is arguably more interested in the *interpreters* themselves and how they receive the text in diverse contexts.

In practice, however, it is not always easy to differentiate the two. The distinction between them is not as sharp as that posited by Heikki Räisänen: namely, the contrast between ‘the actual “effectiveness” of a text and such “reception” as does not let it be effective’.³⁴ Räisänen’s distinction arguably underestimates the dynamic interplay between text and reader, effect and use. Attention to reception history in no way excludes receptions of the biblical text in which the text itself can be shown to have had an effect on those receiving it. Rather, although not ignoring how readings of the text have influenced human lives and communities, nor indeed the theological claims for the text a more *wirkungsgeschichtliche* approach might

³⁰ ‘Reception history, history of interpretation, call it what you will, is a subject whose time has come’: Roberts and Rowland 2010: 132.

³¹ Luz 1989: 95; 2002: 107; see also Räisänen 2001.

³² Räisänen 2001: 266. In practice, different Christian communities have their own normative traditions, and therefore may recount the history of interpretation rather differently.

³³ Rowland 2008:11.

³⁴ Räisänen 2001: 269.

prioritize,³⁵ my preference for the term ‘reception history’ reflects the main thrust of the exploration on the range of readers/interpreters and what they have taken the text to mean.

There is, however, a second way of understanding the distinction. In arguing for ‘effective history’ as the more appropriate English translation of Gadamer’s term *Wirkungsgeschichte*, Ulrich Luz emphasizes the extent to which the interpreter, far from being a detached observer of the history he or she studies, is part of that history:

History is ‘effective’, because we owe to it almost everything we are: our culture, our language, our questions and our worldviews.³⁶

Wirkungsgeschichte is thus an important tool for enabling reading communities and individuals to relearn where they have come from. Luz sees this as the appropriate goal of reception history. Although emphasizing the ‘reception’/‘receiver’ aspect of the process, therefore, I will attempt to keep in mind the question of the interpreter’s relationship to history.³⁷

METHOD

The term ‘history’ within the phrase ‘reception history’ implies some kind of analytical process: the need to make decisions both about the material to include, and how to organize this selected material into an interpretative narrative.³⁸ Prior even to this are strategies for identifying where such material might be located. What follows is a brief account of the method employed in the research for and the writing of this book, which will hopefully be of assistance to those engaged in reception-historical study in the future.

In line with the definition of ‘reception history’ given above, the focus of this book has been as wide-ranging as possible. There is a small body of Patmos scholarship, mainly in articles, which has provided initial encouragement that closer attention to the history and significance of John’s island would be a fruitful exercise. An important 1975 article by H. D. Saffrey flags up the historical, cultural, and mythological potential of attention to Patmos within the classical world, notably its close connections with Miletus, and its associations with the cult of Artemis (for the ‘pre-Johannine reception’ of Patmos,

³⁵ For the proposal that a preference for reception history over *Wirkungsgeschichte* reflects the increasing secularization of biblical studies, see Morgan 2010: 175–6.

³⁶ Luz 2006: 125.

³⁷ Nicholls 2005: 6; Roberts 2011: 1–2.

³⁸ ‘The term “history” implies a focus on what has already happened and evokes the sense of an ordered and descriptive account’: Nicholls 2005: 4.

see *Appendix 2*).³⁹ Friedrich Wilhelm Horn's essay in the Festschrift for Otto Böcher offers an in-depth analysis of Rev. 1:9 and its ambiguity about the reasons for John's presence on Patmos, with particular consideration of early patristic evidence.⁴⁰

Finally, Eve-Marie Becker's recent article overlaps significantly with the interests of my own work in exploring the potential of both a 'history of interpretation' (*auslegungsgeschichtlich*) and a broader 'cultural-historical' (*kulturgeschichtlich*) approach to understanding Patmos.⁴¹ She considers the potential for viewing Patmos as *locus visionis* as well as place of exile, a possibility highlighted by the foundation of the monastery by Christodoulos in the 11th century, discusses some depictions of Patmos in Christian art, and examines the cultural impact of the island for figures as diverse as Luther, Herder, and Hölderlin.

Broader work already done on the history of interpretation and reception of the Apocalypse (notably the studies already mentioned in this introduction) have also served as useful starting-points, as have standard bibliographical resources on biblical interpretation in particular historical periods, such as (for the patristic age) *Biblia Patristica*, and collections of texts such as Migne. These resources have suggested key interpreters and influential commentaries and other writings to be followed up.

Particular mention should be made of works which have been regularly mined in the research for this monograph. Seth Turner's doctoral thesis has been an excellent guide to key patristic and medieval commentaries, while the BBC commentary by Judith Kovacs and Christopher Rowland has been equally invaluable in ensuring that later centuries are also covered.⁴² In the case of commentaries, discussions of Patmos have been relatively easy to locate, given that these generally (although not always) occur in comments on Rev. 1:9. Since Patmos functions as a location in the wider biography of John, apocryphal lives and other hagiographical texts have also been examined. Although not exhaustive, Alan Culpepper's study *John the Son of Zebedee* has therefore been an important resource, particularly for identifying more obscure traditions and interpreters from the patristic and early medieval periods.⁴³

Nevertheless, given the much broader interest of this monograph, incorporating visual as well as verbal interpretations, and the reception of Patmos in liturgical contexts and wider culture, much of the material has been stumbled across by chance, or through searches in library catalogues or online resources

³⁹ Saffrey 1975.

⁴⁰ Horn 2005.

⁴¹ Becker 2008.

⁴² Turner 2005; Kovacs and Rowland 2004; for the patristic period, see also Gumerlock 2003.

⁴³ Culpepper 2000.

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