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# Apocalypse recalled: the Book of Revelation after Christendom

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## **Apocalypse Recalled: The Book of Revelation after Christendom**

Harry Maier

Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002

240 pages, \$20.64 Softcover

“In the Apocalypse [of John] one testifies one’s way into the end of the world,” wrote Harry Maier in a 2000 issue of *Consensus* (41). His recent book, *Apocalypse Recalled: the Book of Revelation after Christendom*, for which the article in *Consensus* appears to have been a template, shows that for Maier, the Biblical principle is truer than ever. In this, our own apocalyptic time, he is testifying his way into the end of the world.

Maier is both an ordained pastor of the ELCIC and Assistant Professor of New Testament Studies at the Vancouver School of Theology. As expected of an accomplished Biblical exegete, he takes all the steps required to make his book a scholarly contribution to our understanding of Revelation. I found his integration of rhetorical analyses particularly enjoyable. He is constantly noting the individual rhetorical techniques of Revelation, such devices as irony and vituperation. At the same time, following Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, Maier seems more interested in the overall hortatory strategies John uses to create a world and invite the reader to live in it. He brings literary theory alive and applies it clearly to the many critical debates about Revelation, concluding that John’s work is not so much a book of comfort to the oppressed as a letter of challenge to the comfortable.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of apocalyptic writing is that readers are accompanied by an enigmatic guide as they witness bizarre images of heaven and earth. Maier is just such a guide on this rewarding journey. Blake, Augustine, Jung, Nazism and the movie *The Matrix* are all symbols that flash before our eyes. Chapter after chapter, Maier makes it hard for us to tell in which role our guide will next appear: the biblical scholar, the critic of pop culture, the mystic, the journalist, or the preacher. But it is John’s image of a warrior whose tongue is a double-edged sword that is the most powerful key not only to Revelation, but also to this present book.

Maier, the preacher, knows his audience, and the book is aimed squarely at first-world Christians. It is we Laodiceans who, to our various degrees, watch, drink, and wear the products of a secular,

consumerist globe whom Maier wishes to trouble. Our culture is the new, American Rome, he says, and we, like Revelation's first audience, are at least indirectly Rome's citizens. We are the ones who more often than not are unconscious of the blood spilled to keep us in our sheltered alcoves of lukewarm faith.

Perhaps, in a small way, preaching has coloured exegesis here. At times *Apocalypse Recalled* makes it seem as if John's Revelation was a political commentary for a mass public, rather than a vision intended for what was essentially a first-century sect, and a small one at that. Maier rightly points out Revelation's critique of an empire built on injustice and oppression (the blood that cries out from under the altar). But was Rome found unworthy by John's God because of its bloodlust, or because — as Maier so clearly shows in his discussion of the dualism — the Empire set itself up as the alternative to Christ?

Maier's writing is almost always delightfully vivid and crisp. Revelation is "a visual feast" (65), and "the New Testament's noisiest book" (91), while traditional scholarship on the Apocalypse suffers from "exegetical myopia" (30). At times the work even waxes poetic: "There are moments that hang over a life...to which one returns again and again to make sense of things" (159). In a field justly infamous for its unpronounceable jargon, it is a pleasure just to sit and read exegesis like this.

Like John, Maier consciously makes his story personal. His autobiographical starting point is the rubble of "greater" Germany at the end of WW II. He vividly describes the broken world of death and defeat his parents fled as refugees. This is a story every Canadian Lutheran parish pastor has heard many times. It was in this "post-apocalyptic environment" that Harry was taught to think, dress, and play — Canada where his family's German-ness was both a source of pride and shame, and where his own grandmother spoke a foreign and subversive mélange of speech he would later find reminiscent of John's eloquently awkward Greek.

"The Apocalypse," writes Maier, "is a journey of discovery ... under God's watchful eye one sees oneself in the larger-than-life performances of Revelation's characters" (78). There is a whole system of rhetorical theory underlying this observation, a theory Maier notes and employs in virtually the same breath. Like the mystic of Patmos, he provokes us to see strange sights, hear voices, experience time and success differently from anyone else, and see in

the grotesqueness of the last book of the New Testament images that can at times be almost funny. Maier challenges us to respond to Revelation by practicing “cruciform irony” (203). Only in this way, says the preacher, can we first-world Christians, sidelined citizens of a global culture increasingly hostile to our Lord and faith, take up the task — not of transforming that culture, but of troubling it.

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### **Hearing Mark: A Listener’s Guide**

Elizabeth Struthers Malbon  
 Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press, 2002  
 114 pages, \$14.90 Softcover

Elizabeth Struthers Malbon’s book, *Hearing Mark: A Listener’s Guide*, is a work intended to enrich the experience of being an “audience” to the gospel of Mark. Malbon, who directs the Religious Studies program at Virginia Tech, is an internationally-recognized expert on Mark. Her previous books include *Narrative Space and Mythic Meaning in Mark* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986) and *In the Company of Jesus: Characters on Mark’s Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000).

She assesses Mark using four themes: kingdom, community, discipleship, and suffering. “Kingdom” (1:1-4:34) describes Mark’s establishment of Jesus’ special character. “Community” (4:35-8:26) explores the boundaries and content of the initial Christian community. “Discipleship” (8:22-10:52) investigates the three passion predictions. Suffering (11:1-16:8) details Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion. The goal of the book is to place the passages within a larger historical, cultural, and linguistic context than is given in the NRSV.

The use of the word “audience” is in keeping with Malbon’s goal of returning the Markan narrative to a narration. The notion of