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Project Title: Revelation: A Biography

Institution: Case Western Reserve University

Project Director: Timothy Beal

Grant Program: Public Scholar Program

REVELATION: A BIOGRAPHY

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Significance and Contribution

Revelation: A Biography offers a cultural history of the New Testament book of Revelation and the apocalyptic imaginations it has fueled. It explores the many, often wildly contradictory lives of this strangely familiar, sometimes horrifying, sometimes inspiring biblical vision. This book is under contract with Princeton University Press for its trade series, “Lives of Great Religious Books,” which publishes books by leading authors and scholars for general audiences.

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. Others denounce it as downright diagnosable, the work of a highly disturbed individual whose horrific dreams of inhumane, 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, Dionysius of Alexandria reported that many Christians refute the book, “pronouncing it without sense and without reason ... covered with such a dense and thick veil of ignorance.” In his *Ecclesiastical History* (325 CE), Eusebius of Caesarea placed it in two mutually incompatible categories: as “undisputed” for some 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, Lucas Cranach’s 21 woodcut illustrations of Revelation made it one of the most popular books in Luther’s Bible).

Despite its great host of critics, the book of Revelation has not only survived but has thrived, even to this day. 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 Book of Life, the Red Dragon, the Woman Clothed in the Sun, the Archangel Michael, the thousand-years reign, the New Jerusalem, the Grapes of Wrath, the Whore of Babylon, the Mark of the Beast, and so on. For better or worse, this book’s vision of cosmic war, final judgment, and the Second Coming have so kindled the apocalyptic imaginations of so many artists, writers, leaders, and movements throughout history that it is virtually impossible for most of us to imagine the world, or the end of the world, without conjuring it.

Revelation begins in exile: “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). And that exilic 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, the other within. And so it never quite settles down. It keeps moving, surviving and thriving by taking on different identities, adopting different forms, in different times and places. Its biography, then, is not about its *life* but its many

lives. It is the story of how Revelation keeps becoming something new, reinventing itself, taking on new forms of life in the hearts and minds and imaginations of those who become its hosts.

My primary approach to this “biography” of Revelation is that of cultural history. In the field of biblical studies, cultural history explores how biblical words, images, things, media, and ideas (including ideas of “the Bible” itself) take particular meaningful forms in particular cultural contexts. It is not about interpreting biblical texts so much as it is about interpreting biblical interpretations, paying particular attention to how such interpretations reveal historically particular cultural meanings (I have developed this approach in several articles, e.g., “Reception History and Beyond: Toward a Cultural History of Scriptures,” in *Biblical Interpretation* 19 [2011]: 357-72). From this perspective, Revelation is not a book in any narrow sense. It is, rather, a transmedial phenomenon, an ever-changing constellation of apocalyptic images, symbols, scenes, and narrative elements that embed and reconfigure themselves, in part or in whole, in different media within different cultural contexts.

Revelation: A Biography will appeal to a wide range of general readers – religious, non-religious, and anti-religious alike, especially those who are fascinated and/or perplexed by the pervasive cultural influence of the book of Revelation and the forms and movements of apocalypticism that it has spawned, but also those seeking a deeper understanding of the forms of fundamentalism and conservative evangelical Christianity within which interpretations of the book of Revelation have been central since the turn of the last century.

Work Plan

Below is a brief chapter outline, followed by my plan for bringing the book to successful completion. The seven chapters delve into significant episodes in the many lives of Revelation, encountering particular theologians, artists, or movements that host its reinvention in light of new horizons of meaning. By no means comprehensive (for which see the reception-historical commentary by Kovaks and Rowland), each chapter illustrates one of the primary ways Revelation has been conceived and brought to life throughout its history.

Introduction -- Monstrous Progeny: Birth and Early Years. In addition to outlining my cultural-historical approach, I introduce the text itself, including its obscure and unusual origins, its literary contents, and its early years as an apocalyptic outsider (all explored within the context of Jewish and early Christian apocalypticism). The scroll’s birth was unnatural, even monstrous: an amalgam of hundreds of bits and pieces from Jewish scriptures and other mythologies stitched together and brought to life as an account of an often terrifying revelation given to an otherwise unknown writer living in exile on the island of Patmos. Its original communal home and its early years of circulation in the informal networks of the Jesus movement are as obscure as its paternity. Yet, even in this early context, we begin to see what attracts so many to it, namely, its generative incomprehensibility: complex literary structures, lavish, often violent imagery, and dense intertextual relations with other scriptures which come together in ways that both inspire and frustrate imaginative engagement. It is a revelation of what remains encrypted, simultaneously compelling and defying interpretation.

Chapter 1 – Into the Fold: The Rise of Symbolic Interpretation. This chapter explores the controversies around Revelation’s status as scripture, and its ultimate inclusion within

the New Testament canon, thanks especially to the shift away from anti-imperial interpretations and the rise of symbolic approaches. Central here are Athanasius' use of it to demonize his ecclesiastical opponents (instead of Rome) and Augustine's millennial reading (indebted to the lesser known Tyconius), which liberated it from disappointed expectations of Christ's imminent return. Augustine argued that it did not predict the Second Coming that would inaugurate the thousand-year reign in the near future; rather, revealed that the church of his time was already living through the new millennium. This interpretive tradition would dominate understandings of the book until the end of the first millennium, which came and went without any sign of Christ's return.

Chapter 2 – *YIK: Reinventing Revelation for a New Millennium.* In the aftermath of Christ's millennial no-show, Revelation's meaning and scriptural status were once again uncertain. This chapter traces its reinventions by two very different twelfth-century radical visionaries: the Benedictine mystic Hildegard of Bingen and the Franciscan monk Joachim de Fiori. Whereas Hildegard absorbed whole passages and images from Revelation into her illustrated *Scivias* (c. 1151) as a means of claiming divine authority for her visions, Joachim interpreted the monsters of Revelation as contemporary historical figures (the two beasts, e.g., as Popes Boniface VIII and Benedict XI) in his illustrated *Expositio in Apocalipsim* (c. 1196). Whereas Hildegard drew Revelation into her literary and visual accounts of otherworldly mystical experience, Joachim reinvented it as a polemical lens for disclosing this-worldly opponents as diabolical enemies of God. His mode of interpretation grew more prominent during the Reformation, thanks to representations of the beasts and the Whore of Babylon as figures of the Roman Church.

Chapter 3 – *Other Religions: Colonialism and the New World of Gods and Monsters.* Thanks to Revelation, one culture's gods have often become another's monsters. This chapter shows how western explorers and Christian missionaries drew from Revelation – as both text and repertoire of visual images of the monstrous and the diabolical – in their representations of the unfamiliar religious practices and religious visual cultures of newly discovered religions, especially Hinduism and Buddhism. While touching on several examples, from editions of Marco Polo's text to nineteenth-century travel narratives, this chapter focuses on Ludovico de Varthema's popular Revelation-inspired description and visual depiction of "the God of Calicut," first published in his *Itinerario* (1510) and republished and illustrated in many different editions over the next century.

Chapter 4 – *Where the Grapes of Wrath Are Stored: American Nightmares of War and Visions of Glory.* From Julia Ward Howe's vision of the Second Coming in "Battle Hymn of the Republic," to the nightmare of wartime atrocity in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, to contemporary beliefs among many that the war in Iraq (ancient Babylon) and other US conflicts in the Middle East are the beginnings of Armageddon, Revelation has given voice to American experiences of the horrors of war, even as it has inspired American wartime visions of glory. Speaking to the NEH's "Standing Together" focus on scholarship that helps us explore the history and experience of war, this chapter examines the role of Revelation in the formation of wartime national identity, especially the recurring American dream of a war to end all war and usher in world peace.

Chapter 5 – End Times: Fundamentalism and Other Dispensations. This chapter delves into the life of Revelation within nineteenth- and twentieth-century fundamentalism, which found in it the key to understanding past and future “dispensations” of history. Central to this Dispensationalist understanding of Revelation was the *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909), whose elaborate charts became core curricula for new fundamentalist schools like Dallas Theological Seminary. This chapter contextualizes the fundamentalist reinvention of Revelation vis-à-vis two other very different movements: (1) biblical higher-criticism, against which fundamentalism defined itself, especially Herman Gunkel’s *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit* (1895), which argued that Revelation borrows from Babylonian mythology and that its Christ figure is more Marduk than Jesus; and (2) the theosophy movement, especially Helena Blavatsky’s deciphering in *The Secret Doctrine* (1888) of the Woman Clothed in the Sun in Revelation 12 as “the great mother ... who is called Jehovah,” her child as “the Universe,” and the dragon who seeks to devour the child as “the Dragon of Wisdom ... recognizing the non-separateness of the Universe.”

Chapter 6 – The Horror: Revelation as the Monster Maker’s Bible. Revelation has been a veritable monster-making manual for modern writers and directors of horror. (Note, moreover, that the roots of this use of Revelation in modern horror coincide with early colonial representations of non-western gods as monsters explored in chapter 3.) This chapter explores Revelation’s life in cinematic horror culture. On the one hand, it tells the story of what I call apocalyptic “evangelical horror” in the Christian film industry, beginning with the Scripture Visualized Institute’s short film, *The Rapture* (1941), and culminating with the church basement classic, *Thief in the Night* (1971/2) and its sequels, which were never shown in commercial theaters and yet were seen by an estimated 100-300 million people. This chapter also explores the role of Revelation in ostensibly non-religious horror blockbusters, especially the award-winning 1976 film, *The Omen*, and related cultural productions.

Chapter 7 – Left Behind Again: Revelation after the Apocalypse. Futurist movements have often used Revelation as an encoded end-times survival guide. The diabolical beast who rules by deceit in Revelation 13 is deciphered as the Roman emperor, or the United Nations; the invading locusts in chapter 9 are Soviet helicopters, or Islamic terrorists; and the Whore of Babylon is the Pope, or Saddam Hussein. And so on. This chapter focuses on two recent incarnations of Revelation-inspired eschatology: Tim LaHaye’s bestselling *Left Behind* novels and related media (as well as its 1970s precursor, Hal Lindsay’s *The Late, Great Planet Earth* series); and David Koresh’s messianic Branch Davidian movement in Waco, Texas. Here again, it is Revelation’s complex, richly detailed incomprehensibility that compels imaginative interpretation and puts it in the center of religious and so many conflicts – none of which have ended in glory, and some of which have ended very tragically.

At this point, I have completed my analyses of the Greek text and most of my research into its literary and cultural history, especially those “episodes” that are central in my chapters. I have also given two public lectures on Revelation and apocalyptic horror culture, and will give another in Wittenberg, Germany in June of 2015.

During the spring semester of 2015, I am teaching an upper-level seminar, “Revelation and the Apocalyptic Imagination,” whose syllabus is essentially my book’s chapter outline. This course is providing excellent opportunities to discuss my initial work with a small group of bright, thoughtfully engaged students, and to outline and draft my chapters.

I plan to complete a full rough draft of the manuscript by late winter or spring of 2016. With support from the Public Scholars program, I would be able to finish that initial full draft and then complete the serious work of revising the book, in light of editorial and peer reviews, by August 2016. I have learned from past experiences in trade publishing, especially with a university press, that some of the greatest challenges begin once I have completed the first full draft, as I endeavor to revise and rewrite the book in such a way as to make its overall arc and its line-by-line prose engaging and accessible while maintaining high scholarly standards.

Competencies, Skills, and Access

Trained in the languages and methods of academic biblical studies, my research and writing focuses on cultural histories of the Bible. In this field, I have a strong record of publications for general audiences, including *The Rise and Fall of the Bible: The Unexpected History of an Accidental Book* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011; Mariner paperback, 2012), which earned starred reviews from *Publishers Weekly* and *Booklist*, and *Roadside Religion: In Search of the Sacred, the Strange, and the Substance of Faith* (Beacon, 2005), which was one of *Publishers Weekly*’s ten “Best Religion Books of 2005” and a *New York Times* “Editor’s Choice.” I have, moreover, written specifically on the cultural history of Revelation in my *Religion and Its Monsters* (Routledge, 2001), exploring its influence on early Christian ideas of Satan, on colonial discourses about non-Christian religions, and on contemporary horror culture.

I have written many essays for general audiences on religion, the Bible, and culture for publications with wide circulation, including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, CNN.com, and *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (including two cover articles). I also write occasionally for *The Huffington Post*, where I developed a series called “BibliFact” to fact-check political Bible-talk during the 2012 presidential elections. Interviews with me have run on several radio shows, including NPR’s *All Things Considered*, *The Bob Edwards Show*, and *On Point*. I serve on the editorial board of the Society of Biblical Literature’s NEH-funded BibleOdyssey.com, which seeks to make biblical scholarship accessible to the broader public.

Final Product and Dissemination

I look forward to working the marketing team at Princeton University Press to promote the book to general audiences. The Office of Media Relations at my university will be eager collaborate with them. I have good working relationships with editors and producers in national media (see above), and will reach out to them for ways to feature the book. Around the time of publication, I plan to publish a first serial or related essay in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, which is an excellent platform for reaching general readers of serious narrative nonfiction.

Popular media seems ever eager to address apocalyptic hopes and fears, which inevitably implicate Revelation and its place in religion and culture, past and present. Such media interest will provide opportunities for promoting the book’s sober yet enlightening perspective.

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