

“Mystically Called”: A Reception-Historical Perspective on Apocalyptic Place Names in the Book of Revelation

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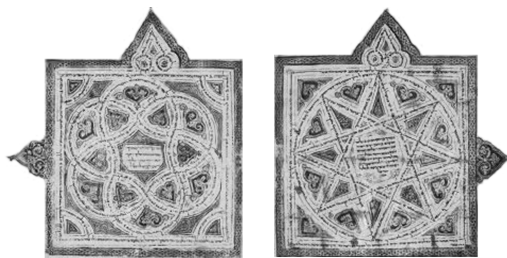
Abstract: Biblical scholars have long acknowledged the symbolic significance of specific place names in the Book of Revelation (e.g., Sodom, Egypt, Babylon, the New Jerusalem). But scholars are divided over the extent of such symbolic geography. This article explores the treatment of place names in patristic and early medieval reception of Revelation as one contribution to the scholarly discussion. Attention is paid to “the great city” (variously interpreted as “Sodom,” “Egypt,” and “Babylon,” Rev 11: 8; 17: 5), Armageddon (Rev 16: 16), the cities of the seven churches (Rev 2-3), and John’s island of Patmos (Rev 1: 9). Interpreters are found to have responded to different prompts in the biblical text in interpreting these place names: exploring possible etymologies in either Hebrew (following Rev 16: 16) or Greek; the use of gematria in the case of Patmos (see Rev 13: 18); consideration of how names convey a place’s character or significance (as in Rev 11: 8).

Key Words: The Book of Revelation, Apocalyptic Place Name, The Great City, Reception History

I. Introduction

Biblical scholars have long acknowledged the symbolic significance of

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specific place names in the Book of Revelation. Not only does the climactic vision (Rev 21: 9-22: 5) reveal a celestial city, “the new Jerusalem,” which cannot be straightforwardly identified with historical Jerusalem in Judaea. The great city “Babylon” (Rev 14: 8; 16: 19; 17: 5; 18: 2, 10, 21) is clearly symbolic, variously interpreted as a cipher for Rome^①, or, in a minority view, as degenerate Jerusalem. The latter interpretation takes its cue from Rev 11: 8, where “the great city” is identified as the city “where also their Lord was crucified.” More importantly for our subject, Rev 11: 8 provides the great city with two additional names, “Sodom” and “Egypt,” both of which are to be understood *πνευματικῶς*. This already poses a stark exegetical question, the answer to which is disputed in Revelation scholarship: can “the great city” be so precisely pinned to a specific terrestrial city, whether Jerusalem or Rome?

Rev 11: 8 also raises further questions for exegetes. What other place names besides “Babylon,” “Sodom” and “Egypt” might function symbolically or figuratively (*πνευματικῶς*) in Revelation’s visionary universe? If Babylon, Sodom and Egypt can shift geographical location, such that they can no longer be easily plotted on a terrestrial map, what of other identifiable places mentioned in the book?^② Do the locations of the River Euphrates (Rev 9: 14; 16: 12) or Mount Zion (Rev 14: 1) also shift? What of that puzzling reference to Armageddon (Rev 16: 16), whose etymology and location is hotly debated? Does Revelation, like 1 Enoch, presuppose a more expansive, mythic geography in which the relationship between terrestrial topography and its

^① John’s Apocalypse would not be alone in viewing “Babylon” as a cipher for Rome: cf. 4 Ezra 3: 1-2; 1 Pet 5: 13.

^② On Revelation’s cosmology, see e.g., P. S. Minear, “The Cosmology of the Apocalypse,” in *Current Issues in New Testament Interpretation*, eds. W. Klassen and G.F. Snyder (London: SCM, 1962), 23-37; S. M. McDonough, “Revelation: The Climax of Cosmology,” in *Cosmology and New Testament Theology*, eds. J. T. Pennington and S. M. McDonough, LNTS 355 (London and New York: T. & T. Clark, 2008), 178-188; S. M. Ryan, *Hearing at the Boundaries of Vision*, LNTS 448 (London and New York: T. & T. Clark, 2012). For the use of critical spatiality in Revelation studies, see e.g., J. Økland, “Carnelian and Caryatids: Stone and Statuary in the Heavenly Sanctuary,” in *Constructions of Space III: Biblical Spatiality and the Sacred*, eds. J. Økland, J. Cornelis de Vos, and K. Wenell, LHBOTS 540 (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 184-214; T. M. Rucker, *The Temple Keys of Isaiah 22: 22, Revelation 3: 7, and Matthew 16: 19*, WUNT 2.559 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021), 124-129.

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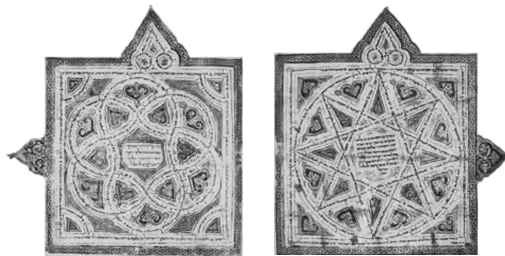
visionary counterpart is far from straightforward?^① And, if so, what is the significance of the place names it contains?

Moreover, how far should this quest for symbolic place names extend? Should it include the geographical locations mentioned in the first part of the book, before the main visionary section of Rev 4: 1-22: 5, i.e., the cities where the seven churches were located? Though conventionally interpreted as purely literal locations, they too are named in a visionary context, as part of John's vision of the one like a human being while "in the spirit" on Patmos (Rev 1: 11; 2: 1, 8, 12, 18, 24; 3: 1, 4, 7, 14). Finally, are there any exegetical grounds for interpreting John's Patmos location in a more than literal sense? How expansive, in other words, is the mythic geography that Revelation describes?

This article will examine how geographical locations fare in the reception history of Revelation, especially its early reception, as one modest contribution to this cluster of questions. It does so not only to consider the potential range of interpretations the text can engender, and the particular circumstances and theological assumptions which may have provoked them. It also aims to open up the potential for reception-historical study of Revelation's placenames for historical-critical interest in original meanings, in light of recent scholarly shifts from authors to audiences, and the growing conviction that "the literal sense" or "authorial intention" is far from univocal.^② Particular attention will be given to earlier interpreters, who are historically and often culturally closer to the sources, and whose broader scriptural memory bank often attuned them

^① E.g., M. Himmelfarb, "The Temple and the Garden of Eden in Ezekiel, the Book of the Watchers, and the Wisdom of ben Sira," in *Sacred Places and Profane Spaces: Essays in the Geographics of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, eds. J. Scott and P. Simpson-Housley, Contributions to the Study of Religion 30 (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1991), 63-78; G.W. E. Nickelsburg, *1 Enoch 1*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 37-39; I. Boxall, *Patmos in the Reception History of the Apocalypse*, Oxford Theology & Religion Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 19-22, 24-25. In Revelation, this question is complicated by the fluidity of John's visions, which often blurs the boundary between heavenly and earthly locations.

^② On this see M. Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006); I. Boxall, "Reception History and the Interpretation of Revelation," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Book of Revelation*, ed. C.R. Koester (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 377-393.



to a wider range of potential scriptural allusions and echoes, utilizing patterns of exegesis which parallel Jewish exegetes of late antiquity.^①

II .The Great City: Sodom, Egypt, and Babylon

The key to reading place names symbolically rather than literally is provided by Rev 11: 8, which invites a non-geographical interpretation of “Sodom” and “Egypt” where the bodies of the two witnesses are laid:

καὶ τὸ πτώμα αὐτῶν ἐπὶ τῆς πλατείας τῆς πόλεως τῆς μεγάλης, ἣτις καλεῖται πνευματικῶς Σόδομα καὶ Αἴγυπτος, ὅπου καὶ ὁ κύριος αὐτῶν ἐσταυρώθη.

And their corpses [will lie] in the main street of the great city, which is mystically called “Sodom” and “Egypt,” where their Lord was also crucified.

Πνευματικῶς is variously translated as “spiritually” (Douai-Rheims, following the Vulgate *spiritaliter*, KJV, CEB), “prophetically” (NRSV), “figuratively” (NIV), “mystically” (NASB), “symbolically” (ESV), and “which has the symbolic names” (NABRE). This adverb presupposes an insight gifted by the Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 2: 14), perhaps accessible to John only while he is ἐν πνεύματι (Rev 1: 10; 4: 2; 17: 3; 21: 10). The identification of “the great city” as “Sodom” may recall its legendary wickedness or inhospitality (Gen 18: 16-33; Ezek 16: 49-50; cf. Matt 10: 14-15). As “Egypt,” it has become a place of slavery (Exod 1: 8-14; 2: 23-25), where God’s people are oppressed or persecuted.

But where is “the great city” in which Sodom, historically located by the Dead Sea, and the land of Egypt find a new home? The explanatory clause “where their Lord was also crucified” seems clear enough. As R.H. Charles

^① For a cautious use of the “history of interpretation” test for detecting intertextual allusions in NT texts, see R.B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 31. For a more robust defence of the value of patristic exegesis for modern scholarship, see D. C. Allison, *Studies in Matthew: Interpretation Past and Present* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 117-131.

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puts it: “As the text stands, ‘the great city’ can only be Jerusalem.”^① This would not be completely unexpected, given that both Judah and Zion are sometimes connected to Sodom in the prophets (Isa 1: 9-10; Ezek 16: 46-55). Yet matters are complicated by the explicit identification of “the great city” as “Babylon” later in the book (Rev 17: 18; 18: 10, 16, 18, 19, 21; cf. 16: 19), for many interpreters a cipher for the city of Rome.

At least three solutions have suggested themselves to scholars who maintain that “the great city” has a single, terrestrial location. The first finds a distinction between Rev 11 and Rev 17. In the earlier passage, “the great city” is Jerusalem, whereas in John’s vision of the harlot Babylon, it is Rome.^② A second solution maintains consistency between the two visions in identifying the great city with Rome in both cases.^③ Finally, a growing minority of scholars take the clarity of ὅπου καὶ ὁ κύριος αὐτῶν ἐσταυρώθη as their starting point, and interpret Babylon in Rev 17-18 not as Rome but as Jerusalem.^④

There is an alternative solution to the identity of “the great city,” however. This acknowledges the echoes of both Jerusalem and Rome in Revelation’s “great city” passages, yet resists the temptation to restrict the great city to a single terrestrial city, or, in Sigve Tonstad’s words, taking “a metaphor hostage to geography.”^⑤ Rather it is a symbol of any city “where

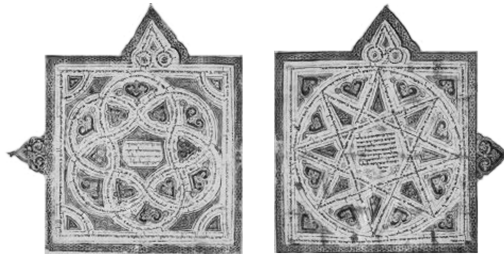
① R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1920), i. 287. Charles, who regards Rev 11: 3-13 as drawing upon an earlier apocalyptic document, concludes that the original also understood the “great city” to be Jerusalem.

② Charles, *Revelation of St. John*, i. 287, ii. 65; A. Feuillet, *The Apocalypse* (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1965), 60-62.

③ E.g., Spitta, *Offenbarung des Johannes* (Halle: Verlag der Buchhandlung des Waisenhauses, 1889), 113; J. Wellhausen, *Analyse der Offenbarung Johannis* (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1907), 16.

④ E.g., J. M. Ford, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 38 (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 276-293; E. Corsini, *The Apocalypse: The Perennial Revelation of Jesus Christ*, trans. F. J. Moloney (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1983), 330-335; M. Barker, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2000), 279-301; E. F. Lupieri, *A Commentary on the Apocalypse of John*, trans. M. P. Johnson and A. Kamesar (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 248-251; F. J. Moloney, *The Apocalypse of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 257-270. For Jerusalem as slayer of the prophets, see Matt 23:37-39.

⑤ S. K. Tonstad, *Revelation*, Paideia (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 165.



God's sanctuary is attacked, where the Church is giving faithful witness."^① Textual justification for this is threefold. First, the description of the two witnesses is prefaced by John being commanded to measure the sanctuary of God (Rev 11: 1-2). There are good grounds for interpreting this not as a literal measuring of the Jerusalem temple, but ecclesologically (paralleling "the camp of the saints" and the "beloved city" of Rev 20: 9 as symbols of the church). Second is the symbolic use of "Sodom" and "Egypt" in the current passage. While this does not require that "the great city" also be understood non-literally, it certainly raises that as a possibility, made stronger if one discerns features of Rome rather than Jerusalem in "the great city Babylon" of Rev 17. Third is the presence of the two witnesses, who are identified as "the two lampstands" (Rev 11: 4), in this great city. Hitherto, lampstands have functioned as symbols of the seven churches, only two of which—Smyrna and Philadelphia—received unqualified praise from "the one like a human being" for the strength of their testimony (Rev 2: 8-11; 3: 7-13). This observation expands the boundaries of "the great city" to incorporate any location, whether Rome, Jerusalem, London or New York, where faithful testimony is present.

III. The Great City in Early Reception History

How does the early reception history understand "the great city"? The interpretation of the great city in Rev 11: 8 as Jerusalem is certainly early. Victorinus of Pettau (d.c. 304), author of the earliest surviving Latin commentary, links it to the persecution of the Jerusalem church by Jewish authorities: "However, because of the deeds of a persecuting people, he calls Jerusalem 'Sodom' and 'Egypt'."^② Similarly, in the *Gospel of Nicodemus*

^① I. Boxall, *The Revelation of Saint John*, BNTC (London: Continuum, 2006), 166. See also, e.g., C. R. Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AYB 38A (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), 500-501; Tonstad, *Revelation*, 165-166.

^② "Sodoma" autem "et Aegyptum" dicit Hierosolymam; actus populi persecutoris effecit. R. Gryson ed., *Victorinus Poetovionensis Opera quae supersunt*, CCSL 5 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017), 215; English translation from W. C. Weinrich ed., *Latin Commentaries on Revelation*, Ancient Christian Texts (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011), 15. The twelfth-century commentaries of Richard of St Victor (PL 196: 793) and Martin of Leon (PL 209: 362) also identify "the great city" as Jerusalem.

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(4th or 5th century), the two witnesses of Rev 11 are identified as Enoch and Elijah, who will be slain by the Antichrist in the city of Jerusalem (Gos. Nic. 9 [25]).

But early commentators who make the Jerusalem connection often distinguish “the great city” of Rev 11: 8 from Babylon.^① For Victorinus Babylon symbolizes Rome, on the grounds that Rome similarly has persecuted Christians: “For all the saints have suffered martyrdom because of a decree of the Senate of this city.”^② The Roman identity of Babylon is also the view of Tertullian (160-240): “So again, Babylon, in our John, is a figure of the city of Rome, as being equally great and proud of her sway, and triumphant over the saints.”^③ The two influential Greek commentaries by Oecumenius (c. 500-550) and Andrew of Caesarea (d. 614) also distinguish between Rev 11 and 17.^④ Oecumenius offers the following explanation as to why Jerusalem is called “Sodom” and “Egypt” at Rev 11: 8:

He calls Jerusalem Sodom, not in a literal sense but in a spiritual sense on account of the licentiousness and ill repute it possessed at that time. And he calls it also Egypt because it had enslaved and abused the servants of Christ, just as the actual Egypt did to Israel.^⑤

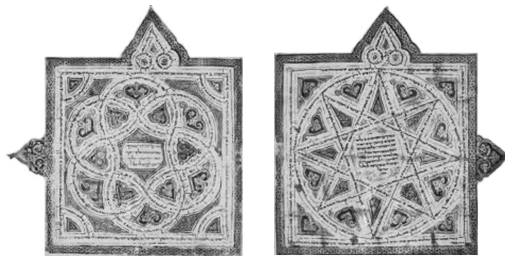
① On the wider reception history of Revelation’s Babylon, see e.g., I. Boxall, “The Many Faces of Babylon the Great: *Wirkungsgeschichte* and the Interpretation of Revelation 17,” in *Studies in the Book of Revelation*, ed. S. Moyise (Edinburgh and New York: T. & T. Clark, 2001), 51-68; J. Kovacs and C. Rowland, *Revelation*, BBC (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 178-189.

② *Ommes enim passionnes sanctorum ex decreto senatus illius semper consummata(e)*. Gryson, *Victorinus Poetovionensis Opera quae supersunt*, 244; English translation from Weinrich, *Latin Commentaries*, 19. For Rome as Babylon, see also e.g., Commodian, *Instr.* 1.41. Victorinus’s predecessor Hippolytus (*Antichrist* 36) implies an identification with Rome by stating that John was banished to Patmos by “Babylon” (καὶ γὰρ αὐτὴ σε ἐξώρισεν). Greek text from Ippolito, *L’Antichristo*, ed. E. Norelli, *Biblioteca Patristica* (Florence: Nardini, 1987), 106.

③ Tertullian, *Adv. Jud.*, 9. English translation from ANF 3: 162. So also Tertullian, *Scorp.* 12. 11; *Marc.* 3.13.10; Jerome, *Ep.* 46.12.

④ On Rev 11:8 as a reference to Jerusalem, see also Dionysius barṣalibī, *In Apocalypsim, Actus et Epistulas Catholicas*, ed. I. Sedlacek, CSCO Scriptorum Syri CI (Rome: Karolus de Luigi, 1910), 14.

⑤ W. C. Weinrich ed., *Greek Commentaries on Revelation*, Ancient Christian Texts (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011), 49.



By contrast, Rev 17 contains a vision of “what will befall Rome.”^① For Andrew, the great city of Rev 11: 8 “is Jerusalem, where Antichrist will establish his kingdom,”^② Jerusalem of the eschatological future. The great city Babylon is different, though Andrew is reluctant to identify it with either old Rome or new Rome (Constantinople), since the city that John sees is “she who bears the power of the earthly kingdom at the end of time.”^③

Other early exegetes resist a literal interpretation of “the great city,” however. In various homilies, Origen proposes that it symbolizes either the present age, which the godly have learned to despise (*Hom. Ex.* 8.1; cf. *Hom. Jer.* 9.2.3), or the synagogue in contrast to the church (*Hom. Jer.* 18.5). A similar aversion to a straightforwardly geographical literalism is found in the Latin translation of Origen’s *Commentary on Matthew*: “Either the whole world or Judaea is given the name Sodom and Egypt.”^④ Though an allegorical reading might be expected in Origen, given his preference for the spiritual sense, similar interpretations occur elsewhere. In a letter to Marcella, written in the name of Paula and Eustochium, Jerome also denies that “the great city” is Jerusalem, since the Lord loved and wept over that city. Surveying the references to Sodom and Egypt throughout Scripture, he maintains instead that it represents the present world (*Ep.* 46.6-7).^⑤

This universalizing interpretation of Rev 11: 8 will persist in some medieval Latin commentaries, as in the seventh-century Hiberno-Latin *Handbook on the Apocalypse of the Apostle John* (*Commemoratorium de Apocalypsi Iohannis apostoli*), which circulated under the name of Jerome:

① Weinrich, *Greek Commentaries*, 73.

② Weinrich, *Greek Commentaries*, 152.

③ Weinrich, *Greek Commentaries*, 177. See E. S. Constantinou, *Guiding to a Blessed End: Andrew of Caesarea and His Apocalypse Commentary in the Ancient Church* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2013), 238-244.

④ Origen, *Comm. ser. Matt.* 50; R. E. Heine trans., *The Commentary of Origen on the Gospel of St Matthew*, OECT (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), II.627.

⑤ “The great city” as the world is also implied in Ephrem the Syrian’s *Hymns on the Nativity* 4, which affirms that the divine Majesty “was not wearied with being in the womb nine months for us, and in being thirty years in Sodom among the madmen.” *NPNF* 2nd series, 13: 234.

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“Here the great city is understood as the world.”^① The sixth-century senator and exegete Cassiodorus, though aware of interpretations which identify Babylon with Rome, also prefers a figurative interpretation which embraces the city’s cosmic scope, extrapolating from the height of the seven mountains on which the city sits (Rev 17: 9):

Some choose to interpret her as the Roman city that sits upon seven mountains and possesses the world with a singular authority. Others speak better about Babylon, [saying] that its position, not [literal] mountains, is conveyed, and they describe lofty powers.^②

Even some interpreters who permit a correlation between Babylon and Rome are reluctant to allow that this exhausts the text’s meaning. For Berengaudus, the prostitute Babylon is Rome in a specific sense (*specialiter*), but in general (*generaliter*) symbolizes the city of the devil.^③

A different line of interpretation is found in Latin exegetes influenced by Tyconius of Carthage (active 370–390), whose Apocalypse commentary would remain influential for centuries.^④ When commenting on Rev 11: 8, Tyconius appeals to one of his rules for interpreting Scripture, *Concerning the twofold body of the Lord (De Domini corpore bipertito)*, which understood the Church prior to the eschaton to be a *corpus mixtum*.^⑤ Thus the city in which

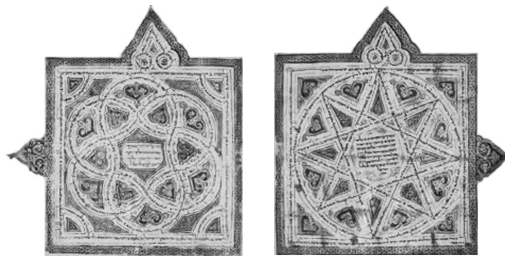
① *Hic ciuitas magna mundus intellegitur*. R. Gryson ed., *Variorum Auctorum Commentaria Minora in Apocalypsin Johannis*, CCSL 107 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2003), 218. English translation from F. X. Gumerlock ed., *Early Latin Commentaries on the Apocalypse*, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University, 2016), 31. See also, e.g., *Glossa* on Rev 11:8 in R. Gryson ed., *Incerti auctoris Glossa in Apocalypsin: e codice Bibliothecae Universitatis Cantabrigiensis Dd. X. 16*, CCSL 108G (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 97.

② Cassiodorus, *On the Apocalypse*, on Rev 17, in Cassiodorus, St. Gregory the Great, and Anonymous Greek Scholia, *Writings on the Apocalypse*, trans. F. X. Gumerlock, M. Delcogliano, and T. C. Schmidt, FC 144 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2022), 32.

③ *Meretrix ista in aliquibus locis Romam specialiter, quae tunc Ecclesiam Dei persequebatur: in quibusdam vero generaliter civitatem diaboli, id est, omne reproborum corpus demonstrat*. PL 17: 910.

④ See e.g., J. A. Hoover, “Exegeting the Apocalypse with the Donatist Communion,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Apocalyptic Literature*, ed. C. McAllister (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 79–96.

⑤ F. C. Burkitt ed., *The Book of Rules of Tyconius*, TS 3.1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1894).



the corpses of the two witnesses are displayed now functions as a symbol of the bipartite church, divided between those who give faithful witness and those who are the children of the devil:

...certainly in the church, because Jerusalem cannot be restored after the Lord said: “Jerusalem will have been trodden down, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.”

...utique in ecclesia, quia Ierusalem restaurari non potest dicente domino: *Erit Ierusalem conculcata, usque dum compleantur tempora gentium.*^①

Similarly, for Tyconius, the street in the middle of the great city is “in the midst of the church (*in medio ecclesiae*).” Tyconius’s reading is followed by Caesarius of Arles (c. 468-542), Primasius of Hadrumetum (d.c. 560), and Beatus of Liébana (c. 750-800). If “the great city” is the divided church, Babylon in Tyconian exegesis is the worldly city, the antithesis of the true church: “For there are two cities in the world, one of God and one of the devil, one originating from the abyss, the other from heaven.”^②

As for the meaning of “Sodom” and “Egypt,” Jerome’s etymologies from *On Hebrew Names (Liber interpretationis nominum hebraicorum)* also have some influence.^③ Jerome interprets Sodom as *pecori tacenti* (“for silent cattle”), and Egypt as *tribulatio* (“distress”), the latter perhaps drawn from the resemblance between מַצְרַיִם and מִצְרַיִם.^④ Bede knew a variant of the first (Sodom means “silent,” *muta*), but interprets Egypt as “dark” or “gloomy”

① English translation from Tyconius, *Exposition of the Apocalypse*, trans. F. X. Gumerlock, intro and notes D. C. Robinson, FC 134 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2017), 114; Latin text from R. Gryson, ed., *Tyconii Afri Expositio Apocalypseos*, CCSL 107A (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 169; the quotation is from Luke 21:24. Tyconius also references Rev 11: 8 when commenting on Rev 1: 15 and 2: 8.

② Tyconius, *Exposition*, 166.

③ Jerome draws on earlier sources, such as Origen and Eusebius’s *Onomasticon*, though has expanded these to include proper nouns in Revelation. G. Bardy, “Saint Jérôme et ses maîtres hébreux,” *RBén* 46 (1934): 145-164; T. E. Hunt, *Jerome of Stridon and the Ethics of Literary Production in Late Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 124-146; E. Poleg, “The Interpretations of Hebrew Names in Theory and Practice,” in *Form and Function in the Late Medieval Bible*, eds. E. Poleg and L. Light (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 217-236.

④ P. de Lagarde, ed., “Liber interpretationis hebraicorum nominum: De apocalypsi Johannis,” in *S. Hieronymi Presbyteri Opera. Pars I*, 1, CCSL 72 (Brepols: Turnhout, 1959), 159, 160.

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(*tenebrosa*). These two interpretations are appropriate since the great city has “neither the light of faith nor the voice of confession.”^① Interpreting Egypt as “dark” or “darkness (*tenebrae*)” is probably more exegetical than etymological, recalling the darkness which engulfed the land (Exod 10: 21-23).^② The eighth-century Reference Bible’s *On the Mysteries of the Apocalypse of John (De enigmatibus ex Apocalypsi Johannis)*, offering a more tropological or moral reading, proposes that Egypt is so called “because of the “darkness” of their sins and because of their ignorance.”^③ Similarly, the city of Sodom is not named *secundum istoriam*, “according to the literal sense.” Rather, the world is called Sodom “for a similitude to the evil deeds of the residents of Sodom, and *Egypt* because of the ‘darkness’ of their sins and because of their ignorance.”^④ Pseudo-Alcuin (ninth century?) simply combines both place names in an allegorical reading: “By Egypt and Sodom is meant the wickedness of the persecutors.”^⑤

IV. Armageddon

Another location in Revelation’s mythic geography is the site of, or gathering place for^⑥, the final battle, identified by John as a Hebrew name^⑦, though transliterated into Greek characters:

Καὶ συνήγαγεν αὐτοὺς εἰς τὸν τόπον τὸν καλούμενον Ἑβραϊστὶ Ἀρμαγεδών

And he gathered them together at the place which is called in Hebrew

① Bede, *Commentary on Revelation*, 183. Latin from R. Gryson ed., *Bedae Presbyteri Expositio Apocalypseos*, CCSL 121A (Turnhout: Brepols, 2001), 375. So also e.g., Martin of Leon (PL 209: 362); Richard of St Victor (PL 196: 793).

② See also, e.g., *Glossa* on Rev 11: 8 in Gryson, *Incerti auctoris Glossa in Apocalypsin*, 97.

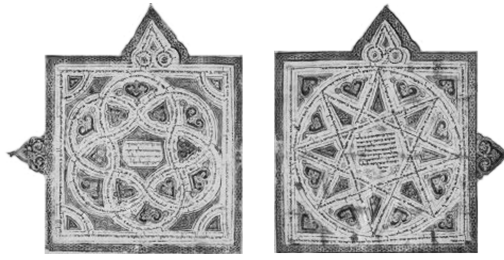
③ *propter tenebras peccatorum et ignorantiam*. Gryson, *Variorum Auctorum Commentaria Minora*, 270. English translation from Gumerlock, *Early Latin Commentaries*, 64.

④ Gryson, *Variorum Auctorum Commentaria Minora*, 270; English translation from Gumerlock, *Early Latin Commentaries*, 64.

⑤ *Per Aegyptum et Sodoma persecutorum iniquitas designatur*. PL 100: 1149.

⑥ For this interpretation of Rev 16: 16, see R. Bauckham, “Armageddon I: New Testament,” in *EBR* 2.770.

⑦ In contrast to Rev 9: 11, where the Hebrew name Abaddon is also given the Greek equivalent Ἀπολλύων.



“Harmageddon” (Rev 16: 16).

The cultural impact of Armageddon far outweighs its prominence in the Apocalypse of John, where it is referenced only once (Rev 16: 16).^① A recent Google search produced over 47 million websites^②, a reflection of the name’s broad cultural recognition.^③

The etymology of the name is disputed.^④ Perhaps most straightforward, and preferred by many commentators, is הַר מְגִדּוֹ (הַר מְגִדּוֹ), “the mountain of Megiddo.”^⑤ Megiddo, transcribed in Greek as Μαγεδδων in 4 Kgdms 9:27 and Μαγεδων in Josh 12: 21, was the site of several significant battles, including Deborah and Barak’s victory over the Canaanites (Judg 5: 19), Gideon’s defeat of the Midianites (Judg 7), and the place where both Kings Ahaziah and Josiah died (2 Kgs 9: 27; 23: 29). Hence it would be an appropriate location for the final battle. Yet the city of Megiddo was not built on a mountain. Some therefore interpret it as “the Megiddo range,”^⑥ with a specific reference to Mount Carmel several miles to the northwest (1 Kgs 18).^⑦ Others would make

① It is likely, however, that Armageddon is the implied location of two subsequent battle scenes, at Rev 19: 19-21 and 20: 7-10. See e.g., T. R. Schreiner, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023), 559, who argues that the Armageddon scene describes the same battle as at 6: 15-17 and 19: 11-21, though maintains that 20: 7-10 presents a different scenario.

② Accessed 04/02/2024.

③ For examples of the reception history of Armageddon, see e.g., G. W. Wainwright, *Mysterious Apocalypse: Interpreting the Book of Revelation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 121-123; Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, 174-175; Tonstad, *Revelation*, 234-237.

④ For summaries of scholarly proposals, see e.g., J. Jeremias, “Har Magedon (Apc 16: 16),” *ZNW* 31 (1932): 73-77; J. Paulien, “Armageddon,” in *ABD*, eds. D.N. Freedman et al. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 394-395; J. Day, “The Origin of Armageddon: Revelation 16: 16 as an Interpretation of Zechariah 12: 11,” in *Crossing the Boundaries: Essays in Biblical Interpretation in Honour of Michael D. Goulder*, eds. S. Porter and P. Joyce (Leiden: Brill, 1994) 315-326; D. E. Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, WBC 52B (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 898-899; Boxall, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 232-233; Koester, *Revelation*, 660-661.

⑤ E.g., Corsini, *The Apocalypse*, 306, 311-313; Koester, *Revelation*, 661.

⑥ E. Lohmeyer, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, HNT (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1953), 137.

⑦ E.g., W.H. Shea, “The Location and Significance of Armageddon in Rev 16: 16,” *AUSS* 18 (1980): 157-162; Beasley-Murray, *Revelation*, 245; R. Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 2002), 488-489.

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it plural: “the mountains of Megiddo,”^① reading Rev 16: 16 intertextually with Ezekiel 38-39, which describes the final battle “on the mountains of Israel” (Ezek 39: 4, 17).^②

Additional etymologies have also been proposed by modern scholars, including “City of Megiddo” (עַר מְגִדּוֹן), “his fertile mountain” (הַר מְגִדּוֹ),^③ and “the desirable city” (עַר הַמְּדֵה), the latter two interpretations understood as a reference to Jerusalem.^④ Others find the key in Zech 12:11, where the Hebrew “in the plain of Megiddo” (בְּבִקְעַת מְגִדּוֹן)^⑤ is translated in the LXX as ἐν πεδίῳ ἐκκαποτομένου, apparently interpreting מְגִדּוֹן as derived from נָדַר, “cut down.”^⑥ Finally, the proposal that Armageddon is derived from “mount of assembly” (הַר-מוֹעֵד, Isa 14: 13), the mountain of the gods, has garnered some support.^⑦ This is either viewed negatively, as a demonic rival to Mount Zion^⑧, or positively, as an alternative name for Zion/Jerusalem (cf. Ps 48:1, 2, 5).^⑨

Commentators are also divided over whether Armageddon should be interpreted as the literal site of the last battle (either Megiddo or another

① Charles, *Revelation of St. John*, ii.50.

② E.g., Day, “The Origin of Armageddon,” 323.

③ T. K. Cheyne, “Armageddon,” in *Encyclopaedia Biblica* 1 (London: A. & C. Black, 1899), 311.

④ Charles, *Revelation of St. John*, ii.50. For Megiddo as Jerusalem, see also A.J. Beagley, *The ‘Sitz im Leben’ of the Apocalypse: With Particular Reference to the Role of the Church’s Enemies*, BZNBW 50 (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1987), 87-89.

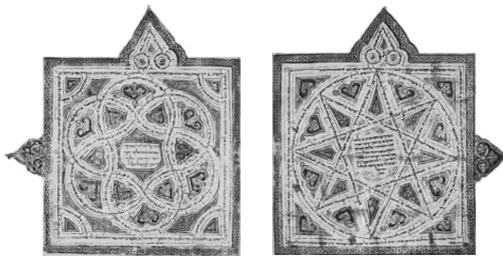
⑤ This is the only place in the Hebrew Bible where Megiddo is spelt with a final nun, paralleling the spelling of Armageddon. Koester, *Revelation*, 660.

⑥ Hence “the mountain of destruction/slaughter,” permitting another allusion to Jerusalem (cf. Zech 14:2). H. K. LaRondelle, “The Biblical Concept of Armageddon,” *JETS* 28 (1985): 21-31, at 23, n. 4; Ford, *Revelation*, 263.

⑦ F. Hommel, “Inchriftliche Glossen und Exkurse zur Genesis und zu Propheten,” *NKZ* 1 (1890): 393-412, at 406-407, n. 3. See also C.C. Torrey, “Armageddon,” *HTR* 31 (1938): 237-248; R. E. Loasby, “‘Har-Magedon’ according to the Hebrew in the Setting of the Seven Last Plagues of Revelation 16,” *AUSS* 27 (1989): 129-132; M. Rissi, *The Future of the World* (London: SCM Press, 1972), 15.

⑧ E.g., Lupieri, *Apocalypse of John*, 244.

⑨ Loasby, “Har-Magedon,” 132: “the place from which Christ will destroy the wicked, the ‘Mount of Assembly,’ that is, Mount Zion.”



location in Palestine)^①, as code for a different historical location entirely^②, or in a symbolic, non-geographic sense^③. David Aune expresses the latter view evocatively: “the mythical apocalyptic-world mountain where the forces hostile to God, assembled by demonic spirits, will gather for final battle against God and his people.”^④ If symbolic, the quest for a precise geographical location would be both unnecessary and inappropriate, with the place name permitting multiple scriptural and mythic allusions.^⑤

What does the early reception history make of Armageddon? Although some Greek manuscripts read simply *Μαγεδών* or *Μαγεδδών* at Rev 16: 16, i.e., Megiddo^⑥, it is striking that early commentators rarely mention the city. According to an Arabic commentary on Revelation, Hippolytus (d. 235) understood Armageddon to mean “the smooth (or: trodden) place,” which he took to be a reference to the Wadi Jehoshaphat outside Jerusalem, where according to Joel 4: 2 the Lord will gather the nations for judgment.^⑦

The Greek commentators Oecumenius and Andrew of Caesarea both

① See the Dispensationalist end-time scenarios of Cyrus I. Scofield and Hal Lindsey. C. I. Scofield, *The Scofield Reference Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1917); H. Lindsey and C. C. Carlson, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970). Cf. Wainwright, *Mysterious Apocalypse*, 132.

② E.g., Hugo Grotius interprets Armageddon symbolically as a prophecy of Constantine’s victory over Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge in 312, based on the etymology *mons congregationis* (“mount of assembly”). H. Grotius, *Opera Theologicorum* 2:2 (London: Moses Pitt, 1679), 1213. J. B. Bossuet understands it to signify the defeat of the Roman emperor Valerian by Persian forces. J. B. Bossuet, *L’Apocalypse avec une explication* (La Haye: Marbre-Cramoisy, 1690), 14, 189-190. For Herder, it is a symbolic reference to the siege of Masada. J. G. Herder, *Johannesoffenbarung* (Tübingen and Stuttgart: Cotta, 1829), 134.

③ E.g., A. Farrer, *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 178; Tonstad, *Revelation*, 230-232.

④ Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 898.

⑤ See LaRondelle, “The Biblical Concept of Armageddon,” 30-31.

⑥ For further details, see B. M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd edn (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), 681; Aune, *Revelation 6-16*, 858-859. The shorter reading is also found in the older Syriac translation. J. Gwynn, *The Apocalypse of St. John, in a Syriac Version Hitherto Unknown* (Dublin: Dublin University Press, 1897).

⑦ Hippolytus, *Hippolytus Werke*, ed. H. Achelis and G.N. Bonwetsch, GCS 1.2 (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs’sche Buchhandlung, 1897), 236 [*der weiche (oder: getretene) Ort*]. Prigent and Stehly translate the phrase “lieu bien églisé.” P. Prigent and R. Stehly, “Les fragments du De Apocalypsi d’Hippolyte,” *TZ* 29 (1973): 313-333, at 330.

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propose an etymology similar to Zech 12: 11 LXX (ἐν πεδίῳ ἐκκοπτομένου).^① Oecumenius, although his biblical text reads Μαγεδών (i.e., Megiddo) at Rev 16:16, is more interested in the meaning of the place name. He observes that the name “means a cleft” or “deep wound (διακοπή)” or alternatively “a cleaving” or “being severely wounded (διακοπτομένη),” signifying the brutal slaughter which will take place there.^② Andrew simply repeats Oecumenius’s etymology.

In the West, several other etymologies appear in Latin commentaries, most derived from Jerome’s *On Hebrew Names*, which lists four:

Armageddon means either an uprising of the roof or an uprising of former things. But a better meaning might be a mountain from robbers or a spherical mountain.^③

Armageddon consurrectio tecti siue consurrectio in priora. Sed melius mons a latrunculis uel mons globosus.^④

All four seem to be etymological explanations derived from the Hebrew, as Rev 16: 16 demands, albeit transmitted via Jerome’s Greek source, which for the New Testament he believed was composed by Origen.^⑤ For example, *consurrectio in priora* is a Latin translation of εἰς τὰ ἔμπροσθεν ἐξέγερσις found in the pseudo-Origenist *Onomastica Vaticana*, apparently from the Hebrew עֲנַר and מִקְרָם.^⑥ Jerome’s two preferred interpretations—*mons a latrunculis* and *mons globosus*—probably translate הַר מְגִדוֹן and הַר מְגִדָּה respectively.^⑦ The

① E.g., E. Nestle, “Har-Magedon,” in *Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. J. Hastings (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1899), 2.304-305; P. Prigent, *Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John*, trans. W. Pradels (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 474, n. 23.

② The different English translations are from Oecumenius, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, trans. J. N. Suggit, FC 112 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2006), 142; Weinrich, *Greek Commentaries*, 71. Greek text from M. de Groote, ed., *Oecumenii Commentarius in Apocalypsin*, *Traditio Exegetica Graeca* 8 (Leuven: Peeters, 1999), 214.

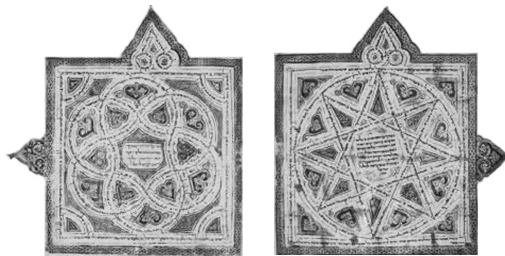
③ English translation from Weinrich, *Latin Commentaries*, 167, n. 21.

④ Lagarde, “Liber interpretationis,” 159.

⑤ L. L. Grabbe, *Etymology in Early Jewish Interpretation: The Hebrew Names in Philo*, BJS 115 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 16.

⑥ Jeremias, “Har Magedon (Apc 16:16),” 74, and n. 4.

⑦ Jeremias, “Har Magedon (Apc 16:16),” 75, nn. 4 and 5.



latter proposal is the result of Jerome's extensive knowledge of the holy land, since he identified Armageddon with Mount Tabor (cf. Judg 4: 6, 12), the circular mountain arising from the Jezreel Valley approximately twenty miles from Tel Megiddo. This makes Tabor a plausible candidate for the "mountain of Megiddo."

Medieval Latin commentaries which cite variants of Jerome's etymologies include the seventh-century Reference Bible's *De Enigmatibus*, Bede's eighth-century *Expositio Apocalypseos*, Berengaudus (possibly eleventh century)^①, Rupert of Deutz (c. 1075-1129)^②, Martin of Leon (1125-1203)^③, and the *Glossa Ordinaria* on the Apocalypse.^④ Often they elaborate on Jerome's terse etymologies to offer allegorical interpretations. For example, the Reference Bible explains *consurrectio in priora* as meaning "the saints liberated from the persecution."^⑤ The interest is less in identifying the location that in exploring the divinely-gifted meaning of the place name, which here reflects the fact that, at Armageddon, the persecutors of God's people will themselves be defeated. Pseudo-Anselm (12th century?) knows the alternative *mons furum* or "mountain of robbers," which he interprets as a reference to the Antichrist, "who is head of all who wish the steal the faith from the saints" (*qui est caput omnium qui sanctis fidem furari volunt*).^⑥ Again, the name is viewed as appropriate to what will occur there.

The hermeneutics of the fourth-century Tyconius of Carthage also shapes how several Latin commentators understand Armageddon. Tyconius's emphasis on recapitulation anticipates several modern commentators in seeing the battle scenes of Rev 16: 16 and 20: 7-10 as describing the same final battle, and interpreting the place of the battle ecclesiologically rather than

① PL 17: 908.

② PL 169: 1126.

③ PL 209: 383.

④ Gryson, *Incerti auctoris Glossa in Apocalypsin*, 118. The Cambridge ms reads "Hermaidon" for "Armageddon."

⑤ Gumerlock, *Early Latin Commentaries*, 75.

⑥ Ps-Anselm, PL 162: 1559, apparently a variant of Jerome's *mons a latrunculis*. This reading is also known to Martin of Leon (PL 209: 383).

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geographically.^① Armageddon is where the nations gather to surround “the camp of the saints and the beloved city^②, that is, the church (*id est, ecclesiam*).”^③ This conception that the last battle is played out multiple times, wherever the church is threatened by hostile forces, is followed by Primasius, Beatus, and Bede. Such interpretations are very different from the often crassly militaristic modern readings in which Armageddon functions as a literal final battle between opposing human armies.^④

However one judges the robustness of these interpretations^⑤, two things are clear from the medieval Latin texts. First, Jerome and his successors evidently seek an etymological explanation via Hebrew, responding directly to the clue provided in Rev 16:16. Indeed, Jerome’s *mons a latrunculis* is not dissimilar to the modern proposal that the name means “marauding mountain,” a variation on Babylon’s “destroying mountain” in Jer 51:25.^⑥ Second, few seem interested in identifying a specific geographical location for Armageddon. Instead, their focus is on what the place name signifies, whether because of what will take place there or because of its physical characteristics. A rare exception is Bruno of Segni, who references Josiah’s death at Megiddo, but merges it with the quotation from Zech 12:11-12, thus seeing weeping at Josiah’s death as foreshadowing the grief at the final battle in Jerusalem.^⑦

① Schreiner identifies this as the position of modern amillennialists. Schreiner, *Revelation*, 559.

② A reference to Rev 20:9.

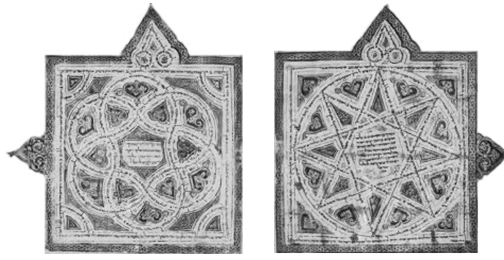
③ Gryson, *Tyconii Afri*, 201; English translation from Tyconius, *Exposition*, 157.

④ B. Chilton, *Visions of the Apocalypse: Receptions of John’s Revelation in Western Imagination* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2013), 9-10.

⑤ Torrey dismisses Origen and Jerome as resorting to “far-fetched etymology.” Torrey, “Armageddon,” 239.

⑥ G.B. Caird, *The Revelation of St John the Divine*, BNTC (London: A. & C. Black, 1966), 207, deriving “marauding” from the Hebrew מַרְדָּו, as in Zech 12:11 LXX. See also M. Jauhiainen, “The OT Background to Armageddon (Rev. 16:16) Reconsidered,” *NovT* 47.4 (2005): 381-393.

⑦ Bruno of Segni on Rev 16:16 (PL 165:695). For modern parallels, see e.g., Corsini’s view that Armageddon is an allegory for the death of Jesus as the new Josiah, which took place on the hill of Golgotha. Corsini, *The Apocalypse*, 355-356. On the Josiah typology, see also the perceptive comments in P. J. Leithart, *Revelation 1-11*, ITC (London and New York: Bloomsbury/T. & T. Clark, 2018), 155-157.



V. The Cities of the Seven Churches

If the above-mentioned places function more symbolically than geographically, what of the locations of the seven congregations, the seven cities of Asia (Rev 1: 11; 2-3)? Most critical scholars assume that it suffices to locate these cities literally in first-century proconsular Asia.^① A minority, however, observing that there were more than seven congregations of Christ-followers in first-century proconsular Asia^②, permit that the seven churches function as more than seven historical congregations, given the symbolic meaning of the number seven.^③

This view that the seven churches represent more than the sum of their parts is taken as read by earlier commentators. The author of the Muratorian Canon finds it significant that both John and Paul wrote to seven churches, i.e., to the whole church (Mur. Frag. II, 48-50, 57-60).^④ So does Victorinus, noting that what John “says to one, he says to all (*quod uni dicit omnibus dicit*).”^⑤ This conviction that the seven churches represent the universal church will become standard in medieval Latin exegesis (e.g., Apringius, Primasius, Bede, Berengaudus). The same pertains in the East. For Andrew of Caesarea, there is already a “mystical” dimension to the number seven: “mystically meaning [τὸ μυστικὸν] by this number the churches everywhere.”

① E.g., B. Witherington III, *Revelation*, NCBC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 75. On wider reception, see e.g., Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, 52-58; Koester, *Revelation*, 231-234; M. Karrer, *Johannesoffenbarung* (Off. 1, 1-5, 14), EKK 24/1 (Ostfildern: Patmos Verlag/Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), 373-392.

② Colossae and Hierapolis near Laodicea in the Lycus valley, Col 1: 2; 4: 13; Magnesia-on-the-Meander and Tralles, addressed in the early second century by Ignatius of Antioch; Alexandrian Troas, Acts 16: 8; 20: 6-12; 2 Cor 2: 12; 2 Tim 4: 13.

③ E.g., H. Giesen, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes*, RNT (Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 1997), 42-44; G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids and Cambridge/Carlisle: Eerdmans/Paternoster Press, 1999), 186-187; Boxall, *The Revelation of Saint John*, 29-30; Moloney, *The Apocalypse of John*, 45.

④ Bede, *Expositio* Rev 1: 11, makes a similar comparison between John and Paul.

⑤ English translation from Weinrich, *Latin Commentaries*, 3; Latin from Victorin de Poetovio, *Sur l'Apocalypse et autres écrits*, ed. M. Dulaey, SC 423 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1997), 52. See also e.g., Cyprian, *Fort.* 11; Origen, *Num. Hom.* 3.3.3.

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In addition, he discerns a further correspondence to his own time, “in which the seventh period of days is taking place.”^① This figurative interpretation generally goes hand-in-hand with the conviction that Rev 2-3 was originally addressed to literal first-century congregations, as Bede observes in his commentary on Rev 1: 11: “The Church of Christ was not only in these places at this time, but all fulness is comprised in the number seven.”^② Bede, and others in the Tyconian tradition (e.g., Caesarius of Arles; Beatus), view the seven churches as types of different kinds of churches, or different types of Christian, on the basis that the Spirit addresses himself to “the churches” (Rev 2: 7, 11, 17, 29; 3: 6, 13, 22).^③

More striking is the attention, particularly in the Latin exegetical tradition, to the meaning of the place names themselves. The original naming of these cities seems to have been eponymous. According to Strabo, Smyrna is said to have been named after the Amazon who founded it, as was the case for Ephesus, originally also called Smyrna (Strabo, *Geog.* 11.5.4; 12.3.21; 14.1.4).^④ Similarly, Pergamum supposedly received its name from its founder Pergamus^⑤, Philadelphia from Attalus II Philadelphus^⑥, and Laodicea from Laodikē, the wife or sister of Antiochus II, who renamed the city when he fortified it between 261 and 253 BCE.^⑦ Yet, apparently on the basis of Rev 11: 8 and 16: 16, as well as the symbolism of the number seven, greater attention is paid in Latin patristic and medieval exegesis to what *God* intended by these names.

For many Latin commentators, the main source is Jerome’s *On Hebrew Names*,

① Andrew of Caesarea, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, trans. E. S. Constantinou, FC 123 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 56; see Constantinou, *Guiding to a Blessed End*, 190.

② Bede, *Commentary on Revelation*, trans. F. Wallis, TTH 58 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 111.

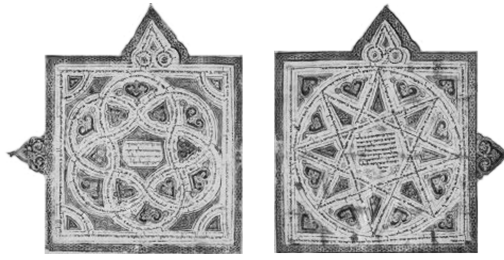
③ Tyconius, *Exposition*, 44; cf. Matt 5: 3; 2 Cor 6: 10.

④ D.E. Aune, *Revelation* 1-5, WBC 52A (Dallas: Word Books, 1997), 159.

⑤ Aune, *Revelation* 1-5, 180.

⑥ Charles, *Revelation of St. John*, i. 85. But see C. J. Hemer, *The Letters to the Seven Churches in their Local Setting*, JSNTS 11 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986), 153-154.

⑦ Aune, *Revelation* 1-5, 249.



paralleling the treatment of Armageddon.^① Jerome interprets the names of the seven cities as follows:^②

Ephesus	<i>uoluntas siue consilium meum</i> (“my will” or “my counsel”);
Smyrna	<i>canticum eorum</i> (“their song”);
Pergamum	<i>diuidenti cornua eorum uel dissecanti uallem</i> (“to him who divides their horns” or “to him who dissects the valley”);
Thyatira	<i>inluminata</i> (“enlightened”); ^③
Sardis	<i>principium pulchritudinis</i> (“beginning of beauty”);
Philadelphia	<i>saluans haerentem domino</i> (“preserving adherence to the Lord”);
Laodicea	<i>tribus amabilis domini siue fuerunt in uomitu</i> (“tribe beloved of the Lord” or “they were in vomit”). ^④

As for Armageddon, Jerome’s interpretations of the city names are apparently etymological, derived from Hebrew (cf. Rev 16: 16). Although precise derivation is unclear, the underlying presupposition is that names convey meaning. For later commentators on Revelation (e.g., Apringius, Primasius, Beatus, Bede), Jerome’s etymologies are expanded to function as glosses on the character of the cities, or the churches therein. As the sixth-century Apringius of Béja has it: “But there is a mighty mystery in the names, which we will examine and discuss to the extent that God allows.”^⑤ Thus, Apringius interprets Jerome’s “their song” (Smyrna) as a reference to the song “of those who have rightly

① Later medieval commentaries drawing on Jerome’s *On Hebrew Names* include Pseudo-Alcuin (PL 100; 1096), *Commemoratorium de Apocalypsi Johannis Apostoli* (in Gryson, *Variorum Auctorum Commentaria Minora*), Pseudo-Anselm (PL 162), Berengaudus (PL 17), the *Glossa ordinaria* (in Gryson, *Incerti auctoris Glossa in Apocalypsin*), and Martin of Leon (PL 209).

② Lagarde, “Liber interpretationis,” 159-160.

③ The definition for Thyatira comes from Jerome’s list of names from Acts; Lagarde, “Liber interpretationis,” 149-150.

④ The latter definition is probably derived from Rev 3: 16.

⑤ *Sed est forte in nominibus sacramentum, quod discutientes, in quantum deus dederit, disseramus.* Apringius in Gryson, *Variorum Auctorum Commentaria Minora*, 41. English translation from Weinrich, *Latin Commentaries*, 28.

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confessed the catholic truth,” reflecting the positive assessment of that church’s faith (Rev 2: 9-10).^①

An obvious objection to Jerome’s etymologies is that the names of the seven cities of Asia should be derived either from Greek, or from an earlier Anatolian language. Thus, although Bede knows several of Jerome’s interpretations, probably via Primasius’s commentary^②, in some cases he prefers Greek alternatives. For Ephesus, he offers “a great falling away (*lapsus magnus*)” as an alternative to “my will is in her (*uoluntas mea in ea*),” reflecting the resemblance of the city’s name to the Greek ἔφεσις, “throwing” or “hurling.”^③ Both names are appropriate for Revelation’s message to the church in Ephesus, since its angel is said to have “fallen” (Rev 2: 5), yet the church contains those who carry out God’s will (Rev 2: 2-3, 6). Smyrna is understood as derived from the Greek word for “myrrh” (Latin: *myrra*; Greek: *σμύρνα*), which Bede gives an additional allegorical meaning, perhaps with a tropological function for the benefit of his readers: “which symbolizes the mortification of the flesh.”^④ Thyatira means “sacrificial victim” (*hostiam*; Greek *θητήριος*).^⑤ Sardis connects with the gemstone *σάρδιον*, one of the twelve precious stones adorning the New Jerusalem (Rev 21: 20), while the city of Philadelphia is appropriately identified as “brotherly love” (*dilectio fraterna*, from the Greek *φιλαδελφία*).^⑥

The exegetical process—beginning with etymology, and using that to discern the symbolic significance of a place name for readers attuned to Revelation’s mythic geography—is arguably rooted in the clues provided by John of Patmos, especially in Rev 11: 8 and 16: 16. The additional significance is frequently sought to make a moral or tropological point, in some cases related to the “character” of the church in that place.

① Weinrich, *Latin Commentaries*, 33.

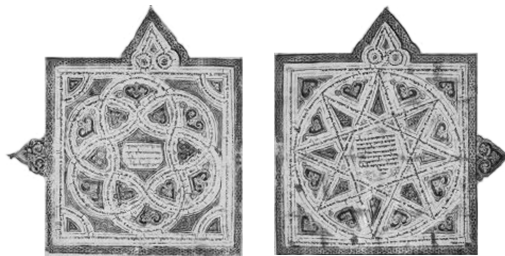
② E.g., Pergamum as “dividing their horns”; Laodicea as “tribe beloved of the Lord” or “they were in vomit.”

③ Bede, *Commentary on Revelation*, 116, n. 57; Latin from Gryson, *Bedae Presbyteri*, 249.

④ Bede, *Commentary on Revelation*, 117; Latin from Gryson, *Bedae Presbyteri*, 253.

⑤ Bede, *Commentary on Revelation*, 121, n. 86; Latin from Gryson, *Bedae Presbyteri*, 259.

⑥ Gryson, *Bedae Presbyteri*, 265, 267.



VI. Patmos

What, finally, of John's own location, at least for his inaugural vision if not also of composition? Even allowing for a symbolic addition to the names of the seven Asian cities, Patmos would appear to be an obvious exception to the symbolic rule. After all, it is mentioned prior to the visions proper, rooting the seer firmly on *terra firma*. Yet, a return to Rev 11: 8, with its statement that the great city “is spiritually called “Sodom” and “Egypt,” suggests a more complex reality. The passive *καλεῖται* could be taken as a divine or theological passive: i.e., God has called the great city “Sodom” and “Egypt.” The same could be said for the place “which is called (τὸν καλούμενον) in Hebrew Armageddon” (Rev 16: 16).

Like 11: 8 and 16: 16, Rev 1: 9 combines a place name with the passive voice of the verb *καλέω*. John states, not merely that he was on Patmos, but that he was “on the island which is called Patmos” (ἐν τῇ νήσῳ τῇ καλουμένη Πάτμῳ, Rev 1: 9). Identifying his location as an island, within a Jewish worldview, highlights its marginal character, since in the LXX *νήσος* often describes “the islands of the gentiles,” particularly in the Mediterranean (νήσοι τῶν ἐθνῶν, e.g., Gen 10: 5, 32; Zeph 2: 11; 1 Macc 11: 38). That it is *called* Patmos potentially invests its place name with theological significance.^① Indeed, a plausible reading of Revelation's narrative presents Patmos as an island of mythic proportions, able to contain both a wilderness (Rev 17: 3) and a lofty mountain onto which the New Jerusalem descends (Rev 21: 10). Etymological explanations of the name Patmos (and its ancient variant Patnos, found in a 2nd century BCE inscription) have included a derivation from the Greek *πατήμα* or “step,” reflecting the myth that the god Poseidon stepped on this island, and from a Syriac word meaning “terebinth,” perhaps because such trees grew there.^②

Yet, unlike “the great city,” Armageddon, and even the cities of the seven churches, early reception history is more reluctant to explore the deeper

^① See the discussion in Boxall, *Patmos*, 16-22.

^② V. Guérin, *Description de l'île de Patmos et de l'île de Samos* (Paris: Auguste Durand, 1856), 2-4.

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significance of the name “Patmos.” Patmos is the sole place name in Revelation not discussed by Jerome in his *On Hebrew Names*. On the other hand, early interpreters did consider the appropriateness of the island’s remoteness and restricted size for the exile of a troublesome preacher and for the reception of visions.^① Both Primasius and Bede, for example, almost certainly drawing on Tyconius, observe that “It was fitting that when *he was forbidden to go beyond a circumscribed confine of the earth*, it was vouchsafed to him *to penetrate the secret things of heaven*.”^② This reading accords a greater role to divine agency in the debated phrase *διὰ τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τὴν μαρτυρίαν* (Rev 1: 9). Though human agents (e.g., the emperor, or a local Roman official in Asia Minor) may have been instrumental in John’s sojourn on Patmos, as the traditional view would have it, ultimately the hand of God was at work in bringing his servant to this island of vision.^③

More intriguing is a reading found in multiple medieval Latin commentaries, whereby Patmos is interpreted by the Latin noun *fretum* (“strait,” “channel,” “raging”). This interpretation goes back at least to the seventh or eighth century, since it is interpolated into a copy of Primasius’s commentary from that date in the Bodleian Library, Oxford.^④ It is also found, among others, in commentaries by Primasius’s eighth-century successor Ambrose Autpert, Haimo of Auxerre (ninth century), and Pseudo-Anselm. Moreover, Patmos as *fretum* was popularized in the Middle Ages through its inclusion in the *Glossa ordinaria*, which also connects the geographical remoteness of Patmos to John’s proximity to divine realities.^⑤ An etymological explanation is not obvious, whether one is working in Latin, Greek, or Hebrew. Though etymology cannot be ruled out entirely, a more promising

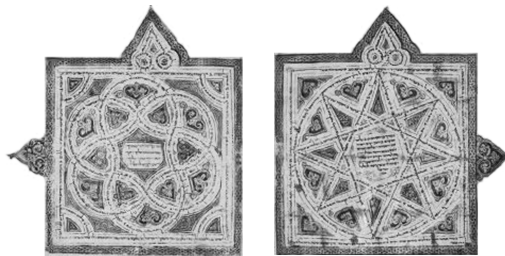
① Boxall, *Patmos*, 28-55.

② Bede, *Commentary on Revelation*, 111 (italics in the original, marking the direct quotation from Primasius). In support of a Tyconian source, see K. B. Steinhauser, *The Apocalypse Commentary of Tyconius: A History of Its Reception and Influence* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1987), 267.

③ This motif is particularly prominent in apocryphal lives of John, such as the *Acts of John at Rome* (either fourth or fifth century) and the Greek *Acts of John by Prochorus* (probably fifth century). Boxall, *Patmos*, 51-53, 106-114.

④ Codex Bodleianus, MS. Douce 140 [21714], II, 105-107. Boxall, *Patmos*, 70-71.

⑤ Gryson, *Incerti auctoris Glossa in Apocalypsin*, 39.



explanation is offered by gematria. In a simple system whereby the letters of the Latin alphabet correspond to numbers from 1 to 23, both Patmos and *fretum* have the numerical value 79.^① This offers a somewhat different exegetical approach to the meaning of Revelation’s place names, taking its starting-point not from Rev 16: 16 (Hebrew etymology) but from the call to calculate the number of beast in Rev 13: 18, which is frequently solved using gematria.^②

Conclusion

This reception-historical exploration of Revelation’s place names makes no claim to be exhaustive. Further work could fruitfully be undertaken, for example, on Mount Zion, where the Lamb stands with the 144,000 (Rev 14: 1), or the River Euphrates (Rev 9: 14; 16: 2), the great river which flowed through Babylon, whose “many waters” (Jer 51: 13; cf. Rev 17: 1) come to symbolize “peoples and multitudes, nations and languages” in Revelation’s symbolic geography (Rev 17: 15). One might also have included the slew of personal names, some of which, like “Sodom” and “Egypt” (Rev 11: 8) serve to obscure actual names as well as revealing perceived character flaws: “Jezebel” (Rev 2: 20), “Balaam” (Rev 2: 14), possibly “the Nicolaitans” (Rev 2: 6, 15).^③ Attention to the meaning of names might accord additional significance to “Antipas,” the sole named Christian martyr in Pergamum (Rev 2: 13), and perhaps even that of John himself (Ἰωάννης, a Greek form of יהוה), “Yahweh is [or ‘has been’] gracious,” Rev 1: 1, 4, 9).^④

The reception history of the place names discussed here demonstrates the sensitivity of older interpreters to what such names convey, in a text whose

① PATMOS=15 +1+19+12+14+18=79. FRETUM=6+17+5+19+20+12=79. Boxall, *Patmos*, 72.

② There are some attempts to interpret Patmos etymologically from the Hebrew, though these are much later, e. g., the French Jesuit Jean Hardouin (1646-1729). J. Hardouin, *Joannis Harduini Commentarius in Novum Testamentum* (Amsterdam, 1741), 739; see Boxall, *Patmos*, 161-162.

③ The last two names are sometimes connected etymologically by scholars. Charles, *Revelation of St. John*, i. 52-53.

④ Aune, *Revelation* 1-5, xlix-l.

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“literal sense” is often profoundly symbolic. The various strategies employed can each claim to be rooted in exegetical clues provided by the biblical text, whether etymological explanations (grounded in Rev 16: 16), those resorting to gematria (taking Rev 13: 18 as their starting-point), or attending to a place’s history, character, or potential (following the lead of Rev 11: 8). In addition, the extensive scriptural memory bank of pre-modern interpreters often flags up intertextual connections which can further illuminate a text’s meaning, such as Hippolytus’s identification of Armageddon with the Valley of Jehoshaphat, recalling Joel 4: 2, or Bruno of Segni’s appeal both to Zech 12: 11-12 and to the death of Josiah at Megiddo (2 Kgs 23: 29), with its Christological potential for viewing Christ as the new Josiah. Such approaches can be illuminating for contemporary scholarship, irrespective of the particular merits of specific interpretations, such as the more tenuous etymological explanations, which inevitably reflect the circumstances and theological perspectives of the respective interpreter.

Moreover, such treatments of Revelation’s place names, which often move beyond etymology and gematria to questions of significance and their implications for Christian living, mesh with exegetical reflection on both Revelation’s genre and purpose. That names mean more than location is appropriate for a book with apocalyptic characteristics, given that apocalyptic visions “*expand* the boundaries of the known world through esoteric knowledge.”^① That readers are invited to enquire into the significance of place names for their own following of Christ also accords with a text which functions to challenge as well as console the churches (Rev 2-3). The basic instinct of pre-modern readers, in short, is to give full weight to the invitation to read names πνευματικῶς (Rev 11: 8), and thus permitting them properly *theological* significance. If *God* has called these places by names such as “Patmos,” “Sodom,” “Egypt,” and “Armageddon” (as Rev 1: 9, 11: 8 and 16: 16 imply), then the names themselves deserve as close attention by exegetes as do the specific locations they denote. Early interpreters of Revelation seem to have understood this theological imperative well.

① L. L. Thompson, “Mapping an Apocalyptic World,” in *Sacred Places and Profane Spaces*, eds. Scott and Simpson-Housley, 115-127, at 119.