

STUDY QUESTIONS

the Reverend Helen McPeak

Valuing scholarship and accessibility, the Reverend Dr. Frederick W. Schmidt brings his expertise to bear upon the task of reclaiming and “unpacking” Scripture. With academic insight grounded in an awareness of the layperson’s day-to-day life, Schmidt invites us into a healthy and helpful relationship with John’s vision. This study illuminates a vital piece of apocalyptic literature for the person of thinking faith as it educates the reader about various approaches to Revelation and important contextual and interpretive details of the text. These questions are meant to aid the reader’s consideration of Revelation, taking different angles to assist in a broad connection with John’s book. A good resource for parish study, this section can be used partially or as a whole.

Introduction

Before you begin, jot down a few sentences about each of the following:

- Why you are engaging in this study of Revelation.
- What you remember hearing earlier in your life about Revelation.
- What you expect of this study.

Pray the prayer offered on page xx4 together.

- In what kinds of situations in your life do you seek faith, courage, strength, and/or hope?
- Why might these be needed now?
- How is it for you to pray this prayer?

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Schmidt introduces this study series by commenting on the enormous variety encompassed by Anglicanism, including approach to Scripture.

- Review the four descriptors he offers (xx6–9).
- Which of these resonates well with you? Why?
- Where is your discomfort?

Schmidt comments, “We know the Bible was shaped by the language, culture and issues of worlds that no longer exist as such” (xx12).

- What are the implications of this reality for our approach to the Bible?
- How does this reality interplay with the reality that many of us have “also lived in (the Bible) . . . inhabited it, through worship, preaching, teaching and meditation” (p. xx6)?

Schmidt states that people today read the book of Revelation with a Bible-as-roadmap-to-the-future view, if they read it at all (xx11).

- What has been your approach to this writing, if any?
- How did you come to this?

Review Schmidt’s four-point outline of what you will find in this study (see xx15). Hold these points in your consciousness as you continue your reading.

- Do you share his hopes for the results of this study?

Schmidt will address the text of John’s Revelation in particular sections later in the book. For now, read the piece as a whole.

- What themes and images stand out for you?
- What questions come into focus as you experience John’s vision?
- How do you feel about this writing?

Chapter One: Revelation as Roadmap

According to Schmidt, a “roadmap reading” approach to interpreting Revelation “enjoys the presumption of being the right way to read this difficult book” (xx16). It offers the reader “a rough idea of what will happen next.”

- How might this be positive? How negative?
- Where do you long to know what lies ahead?

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Many specific and possibly unfamiliar terms are used in Schmidt's presentation of the history of the roadmap reading approach. Choose several of these terms and look them up in a dictionary (standard, theological, of the Christian Church):

- millennialist (pre-, post-, a-millennialist), chiliast, dispensationalist;
- pre-, post-, mid-tribulationist, historicist, futurist;
- Montanus, Tertullian, Justin Martyr, Papias, Irenaus.

(You may as well go ahead and look up "recrudescence," too.)

What would be necessary for (some of) these words to become part of your daily vocabulary?

Catalog the assumptions Schmidt lists as being made by most, if not all, of the interpretations that take this roadmap approach, including the "deeper assumptions" on page xx21.

- Which of these assumptions do you accept? Which do you reject?
- Is it because they make logical sense to you? Is it a gut-level feeling?
- What evidence supports or denies the assumptions?

Schmidt cites Tim LaHaye's noteworthy observation, most people "don't take the Bible literally. They categorize and mythologize it and read into it their own preconceived ideas. They don't think a loving God will send people to hell. He will" (xx21).

- How do you respond to LaHaye's observation?
- What do you suppose was his intention in making it?

Revisit Schmidt's basic elements of left behind salvation on xx29.

- Where do these elements invite us to focus (e.g. individual, family, community, nation, global population)?
- Do these elements invite action? In what ways?

Are you "getting" this?

- What do you need to better absorb "this extraordinary part of the Greek Testament" (xx17)?

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Chapter Two: Revelation as Myth

Schmidt offers the definition of myth as “not just a fairytale, but . . . also a bit of narrative or an image used to describe in an evocative fashion the real and deeper nature of an experience, event, or person” (xx34). Myths function “not only to pluck at our heartstrings, but also to shape our thinking and prompt us to act.”

- Look up “myth” in an etymological dictionary.
- What roles has mythology played in your own edification?
- Name some myths of your own culture, explicit or implicit.

Do some further research on the theologians Schmidt refers to in his discussion of Revelation as Myth: Origen, Dionysius, Eusebius, Augustine of Hippo, Joachim of Fiore, Jacques Ellul, and Catherine Keller. (A theological dictionary can offer a brief exposition. Also check out the Youth Non-Fiction section of your library for some easily approachable texts.)

- If you had to vote one of these “most popular” at the moment, whom would you choose? Why?

According to Schmidt, the net result of Origen’s approach was “a religious and cultural amalgam that placed a premium upon the spiritual over the material (xx37).

- Is a premium placed upon the spiritual over the material in our culture?
- What priorities exist here and now?
- How might these priorities influence your study?

Dionysius is cited as taking the view that “the interpretation of the various sections is largely a mystery, something too wonderful for our comprehension . . . but I suspect that some *deeper meaning* is concealed in the words” (xx38).

- What is your expectation of your own relationship with this writing?

Schmidt includes several amusingly strong verbal attacks in his discussion (e.g. “For he seems to have been a man of very small intelligence, to judge from his books” Eusebius on xx38).

- How is it for you to see this side of the Church Fathers’ interaction?

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Schmidt offers significant discussion of Augustine's reasons for supporting the inclusion of Revelation in the fledgling church's Scriptures.

- What sacred literature is read as part of worship in your community?
- Who decides what will be read? What criteria are used?

Schmidt asserts that for Augustine, sacred literature was the story of "God's effort to redeem humankind working in and through history . . . and should be read as such" (xx40). Augustine divided sacred history into six parts (see xx40).

- What reason do you see for his divisions?
- What role does Revelation play in telling the story?

Review Schmidt's list of convictions that shaped the mythic approach to Scripture (xx41).

- How do you relate to these convictions? What would you change?

Native American storytellers often say things like, "I don't know if this is how it really happened, but I know that it is true." In discussing the fact that those who favored the roadmap approach tended to equate myth with falsehood, Schmidt states, "If what John described wasn't real, then it wasn't true and that conclusion was hardly acceptable" (xx43).

- In what ways are these opposing views attractive to you?
- Where do you prefer the historians' commitment to finding meaning of the text in its historical setting?

Schmidt cites Ellul as suggesting "that the absence of a relationship with God insured that they could not understand Scripture properly—in spite of all their learning" (xx44).

- How does your relationship with God or lack thereof influence your participation in this study?

Schmidt points to looking for "the patterns that reappear time and time again throughout history that are either reflective of God's presence, or in opposition to it" (xx49) as one of the strengths of the mythic reading of Revelation. An example is Ellul's structuring of the writing into five sections with seven elements each:

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- the church as it is now
- the meaning of history
- Jesus as Lord of both the church and history
- history's end
- the church as it shall be

- How is this kind of pattern helpful to your reading of John's vision?
- How does it distract from finding a deeper meaning?

Chapter Three: Revelation as History

In this chapter, Schmidt introduces the historical-critical approach to biblical criticism, describing “the historical setting of a text as an important key to its meaning” (xx51).

- What has been your experience with this approach?
- When does Schmidt say historical criticism began? How have conceptions of history changed over time?
- How do you respond to Schmidt's statement that “Certain circumstances usually require us to write and we write in hopes of shaping the circumstances” (xx54)?

Review the list of clues to Revelation's specific context that loom large from the Bible, according to Schmidt (xx54–55). Schmidt writes that “all scholars can know about *who* wrote the book was that his name was John and he considered himself a prophet.”

- How is this information helpful to your understanding of the Book of Revelation?

Schmidt concludes “a somewhat stronger argument is to be made for those who date the Apocalypse to the reign of Domitian” (xx58). Find other presentations of church and world history of this time to supplement your understanding of the period. (Again, the public library may have useful resources in creating a general overview.)

- What challenges, themes, or patterns present themselves throughout history?
- What is unique to this period?

Schmidt states that “. . . the Apocalypse is both a call for faithfulness under circumstances that (John) feared would erode the commit-

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ment of the community and an effort to shape the perceptions of that community in a fashion that would prompt it to take that call seriously” (xx61).

- Review the factors that contributed to “the sense of tension, crisis, and alienation that John and some of his circle felt.” (See xx59–61.)
- In what ways are these factors foreign to your life?
- In what ways can you sympathize with John’s audience?

Schmidt reminds us that “. . . there is no necessary connection between the practice of criticism and a loss of faith, let alone hostility to it.” He continues, “Ultimately, the critical process of raising and answering questions should involve probing not only the words and worlds of the biblical text, but the information and perspectives that help us to understand those worlds more completely” (xx62).

- Where in your life has “the critical process of raising and answering questions” been a positive experience?
- How have you been trained to tune your inner ear to God’s voice “speak(ing) to us *in and through life*, . . . always at work in the world” (xx63)?

Schmidt relates his experiences of using *The Wizard of Oz* as an example of historical criticism in his undergraduate course. (See xx63–66.)

- What was your own reaction to the information presented?
- What is to be learned from recent research’s deflating these theories?
- How is it for you to allow the interpretation of Scriptural texts to be similarly vulnerable?

Schmidt concludes his “opening gambit in support of an historical-critical approach to the interpretation of John’s Apocalypse” (xx65) by writing, “. . . without some idea of the author’s intended meaning there is, in the final analysis, no means of knowing what a passage does or does not mean or of adjudicating between interpretations” (xx67).

- How are you equipped to approach these texts?
- Who will accompany you in discovering this vital information in reading Revelation as well as the rest of Scripture?

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- What else do you need to help you pierce through the “thick curtain of incomprehensibility” this writing may seem to be? (Dionysius on xx53.)

Chapter Four: Movement One

Read Revelation 1:1–5:14. In your copious free time, consult a Bible commentary on these passages for a brief presentation from another perspective.

Schmidt cites a passage from Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*. He uses Kerouac’s writing as an example of strategies used in “oral mind” communication. Like a painter applying stroke after stroke, touching paint-laden brush to the canvas again and again, Schmidt creates for us an image of oral communication possibilities. Laying block upon block of description, Schmidt crafts a wall of comprehension upon which an image of a different way of absorbing verbal material may be projected. “You might think about it this way—now this way—then this way” (xx72).

- What are these strategies?
- How do they feel to your ear? To your eye?
- When in your life do you use “oral mind”? When “alphabet mind”?

Revisit Revelation 1:3, Schmidt’s single-sentence expression of the burden of the first movement. Schmidt states, “In John’s day . . . words had the power to change reality. They registered a fact and the fact registered here is that the blessing has already been given” (xx72).

- In what ways have you experienced blessing in your own life?
- What facts have been registered in your own time?

In discussing blessing on those who both hear and “keep” the spoken word, Schmidt asserts, “Truth is not just something given, but lived . . .” (xx73).

- Cite some other examples from Scripture of “truth-that-must-be-lived.”
- Cite some examples from your own experience.
- How does hearing and keeping the word spoken verify it?

Schmidt comments on the intimacy of the knowledge of the glorified Christ (xx73–74). He explores the notion of life on earth being mir-

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rored in the councils of God. He also comments on the concepts of purity and defilement, bringing to light the enormous consequence of the choices made by the members of each congregation (xx74).

- Compare and contrast what Schmidt describes with your own understanding of the relationship with the Divine.
- What effect does Schmidt's illumination have on your own expectations of your and God's roles together?

Schmidt articulates the crisis within the church to which John must have been responding. (See xx76–79.) He examines the competing perceptions that pulled at the churches. (See xx80–81.) Schmidt sees John's motivation to write imbedded in the question of Christian identity (xx82).

- Consider with John's audience the radical or root issue that he will develop: *Will you live your lives according to the dictates of the culture or of Christ?*
- What impact might this dualistic question have on the kind of Christian present in a church in Asia Minor to hear John's vision read?
- What impact might this question have on the kind of Christian present to participate in a study such as this one?

Review the list of characteristics Schmidt cites identifying apocalyptic literature. (See xx82.) Review also the definition offered on page xx85 as Schmidt continues his descriptive, not prescriptive task.

- What other examples of apocalyptic literature can you name from the Bible? From current literature? (Keep in mind Schmidt's suggestion that it works well to sit lightly between the definition on the one hand and the list on the other.)
- How do you respond to Schmidt's modified definition to fit John's creative use of *apocalyptic*? (See xx86.)

Schmidt states that influencing the behavior of people worshipping in the churches "is, for John, an issue of whose spiritual authority the people recognize." Also, "the appeal to divine authority is . . . the most basic of all appeals" (xx87).

- To what or whom do you grant authority in your own life?
- In what ways do you discern the authority of the Divine?
- How do you know when your discernment is correct?

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Schmidt presents a number of images from the Hebrew Bible that John used because they were familiar to his listeners and because “No claim to authority for his message would have made sense without it and neither John nor his audience could have imagined a different wellspring for the images of divine rule used here” (xx91).

- What is your own relationship with and expectation of these images?
- How do you experience the authority of “the one who conquers by dying”?

Schmidt writes, “Moving, of course, from the text to our lives without co-opting Scripture to make it say what we would like for it to say—or without glossing over the considerable differences between our world and the world of the text—is the challenge” (xx92).

- What personal habits do you have which help you meet this challenge?
- What habits are cultivated in your community to probe “the significance of Scripture for the lives of its contemporary readers”?

Schmidt closes this chapter with two questions that arise in a meaningful conversation with Scripture in our own day. Consider these:

- What is essential to a Christian identity shaped by the deeper reality of our lives in Christ?
- What is lost and what is gained in accommodation that we all make to the cultures around us?

Chapter Five: Movement Two

Read Revelation 6:1–16:21. Consult a Bible commentary if you find this helpful.

Schmidt begins this chapter exploring “the power we have to shape perceptions of time and the power those perceptions have in shaping our lives” (xx97). He comments that “the purely chronological or measurable is often of little or no relevance in [religious] literature” (xx98).

- What are some of the various ways in which you perceive time?
- How is your sense of time different:
 - when you are with children?
 - during an illness?

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- with someone you love?
- while you travel?
- when you are in pain?
- when you are behind schedule?
- How firmly do you hold your perception of time? Is it difficult for you to read John's "overlapping and unreconciled" vision with its chronological looseness?

Schmidt writes, "The expectations of God and the promised deliverance of the church reshape the religious and ethical priorities of that moment" (xx98).

- Think of some mundane examples of changed expectations shaping the moment (e.g. the child caught with the proverbial hand in the cookie jar or an automobile accident). How does the reshaping take place?
- What experiences in your life of faith have reshaped your priorities or those of your community?
- What do you expect God to do in your life or in the future of the world?

In this chapter, Schmidt explains the seals, the trumpets, and the bowls and their probable references.

- What similarities do you find among these? What themes weave these images together?
- How do you integrate Schmidt's explanation into your understanding of Revelation?

John's vision uses images of horses and riders with messages, of mother and child, of the dragon.

- Do some further research on how these images are used in the broader body of literature and lore.
- What echoes of meaning do these archetypes carry over from other literature to which you've been exposed?

A significant collection of specific numbers is presented in this section of John's vision.

- How do they function to support or detract from John's big-picture goal to encourage the churches while creating an acute awareness of the deeper reality in which they live?

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- How are these numbers different from the (measurements and book pages and sizes on garment tags and time stamps and telephones and other) numbers that surround you in day-to-day life?
- Why do you suppose John was so specific?

Review Schmidt's discussion of John's "horizon" and our contemporary "horizon" on pages xx109–10.

- How does your understanding of the future change the shape of your life today?
- How is your eschatology evolving during this study? How is its role in your beliefs changed?

Chapter Six: Movement Three

Read Revelation 17:1–22:21. Consult a Bible commentary if this is helpful.

Take a moment to absorb the story of the girl studying butterflies and her later insight about what was missed when they were killed and pinned to a board (xx111–12). Your study of Revelation hopefully has allowed you the time to "sit still and pay attention with all your senses" to John's vision.

- What have you noticed?

Schmidt comments on John's decision to use cities as the central metaphor for the choice facing the church. John is, he says, "intentionally tapping his church's memory and emotions . . . put(ting) the choice between Christ and culture before his readers a final time, confronting some and comforting others" (xx114).

- How does this image work for you today?
- What metaphors from contemporary life might John use now?

Schmidt comments that John "both celebrates and mourns the undoing of Rome" (xx115) as he faces the complex shape of his churches and their pastoral demands.

- What effects does this complexity have on the clarity of his communication?
- What tones of voice do you imagine John using in laying out the case against the city? In calling out the church from the coming plagues?

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- What judgment on today's world do you both celebrate and mourn?

Revisit Schmidt's illuminations of the last seven visions on pages xx116–26.

- What interpretive mistakes does Schmidt reiterate as he begins this discussion?
- Catalog the themes that John underlines again for his audience to strengthen his communication with the "oral mind."

Review the list Schmidt offers of the ways in which John brings his audience "back into the moment (now that they have been) transformed by a vision of the realities he has revealed to them" (xx127).

- What brings you back into focus into the moment?

Schmidt acknowledges, "Anyone who subscribes to the conviction that a person of faith must engage the world will face a choice between the cities of our own making and God's" (xx128).

- How effective do you imagine John was in presenting the question in his own day?
- How well has John called your attention to this question in your own life?

Final Thoughts

In closing, Schmidt answers the questions he imagines you might want to ask.

- How accurate is Schmidt's guess of what you are wondering?
- How satisfactory are his answers?
- With what unanswered questions do you leave this study?
- So what?
- How are you different because of this study?
- What will you do while you wait for the One who comes?

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