Introduction

How Does the Book of Revelation Interact with the Roman Empire?

This question has consumed much of the scholarly interest in the Apocalypse of John over the past 125 years. Engaged directly and indirectly, it motivates intertextual explorations (both in the Old Testament and Graeco-Roman sources), historical inquiries, and sociological investigations. While the question is rarely stated, it, nevertheless, guides considerations and conclusions for the multilayered imagery in the text of Revelation as well as examinations and determinations about the socio-historical setting of the text’s audience. Regardless of the scholarly trajectory, the history of research for the Apocalypse of John persistently engages this key question: How does Revelation interact with the Roman Empire?

Similar queries dominate the broader biblical scholarship in recent Empire Studies in the disciplines of Paul and Jesus.1 To match these projects, the question is, at times, rephrased: ‘How does Paul interact with the Roman Empire?’ or ‘How does Jesus interact with the Roman Empire?’ The advances of Empire Studies in Paul and Jesus have reinvigorated the imperial inquiry into the Apocalypse of John. Though not always acknowledged, Revelation research over the past 125 years has struggled with this question that now arises afresh.

The Journey of the Question: Revelation Research of the Past 125 Years

In 1934, Ernst Lohmeyer lamented the relatively little advancement in Revelation research in his time: “Es gibt wenige urchristliche Schriften, die im ganzen wie im einzelnen in den letzten 14 Jahren so viel umworben sind und dennoch in dem Geheimnis ihrer Geschichte wie ihres Sinnes unberührt zu wohnen scheinen wie die Offenbarung Johannis.”2 Setting aside the theological

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1 For a full discussion, see chapters 1 and 2 below.

G.K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy (New York: Lane, 1908), 17 humorously concurs: “Critics are much madder than poets… And though St. John the Evangelist saw many strange monsters in his vision, he saw no creature so wild as one of his own commentators.”
mayhem that assails Revelation at the popular level, modern critical scholarship echoes Lohmeyer’s frustration, and yet, significant developments are evident, particularly in regard to the question: How does Revelation interact with the Roman Empire? Examining three approaches to the Apocalypse over the past 125 years brings to light these developments: intertextual explorations (Old Testament and Graeco-Roman sources), historical inquiries, and sociological investigations.

**Intertextual Explorations**

The saturation of the Apocalypse with Old Testament allusions has long been recognized. In 1895, Hermann Gunkel compared Job 40–41 with Revelation 13, and Henry Barclay Swete’s 1911 commentary presented linguistic comparisons...