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Chapter 12

Libraries, Special Libraries, and John of Patmos

Garrick V. Allen

The tractate *De liberis educandis* (περὶ παίδων ἀγωγῆς), attributed to Plutarch, directly addresses the responsibility of fathers to educate their children. Applying to wealthy, free-born male children (*Lib. ed.* 1.1.1; 1.1.4f), the author sketches the important features that contribute to a well-educated and socially capable child, commenting on a range of topics including the proper selection of a spouse (she should be of equal social status to the son), conception (fathers should be sober during sex), sustenance in early life (children should be breastfed), and the hiring of a teacher (stinginess leads to ignorance), among other topics. However, the author only briefly mentions the use, or rather the collection, of textual artefacts, noting that

it is useful, or rather it is necessary not to be indifferent about acquiring the works of earlier writers (παλαιῶν συγγραμμάτων), but to make a collection (συλλογὴν) of these, like a set of tools in farming. For the corresponding tool of education is the use of books (βιβλίων), and by their means it has come to pass that we are able to study knowledge at its source (*Lib. ed.* 1.1.8b).

For the author of this work, the use of textual artefacts is an assumed characteristic of education – they are as essential to learning as agricultural implements are to farming. Children are expected to both read and hear the works of previous writers, as other treatises attributed to Plutarch also indicate (e.g. *Quomodo adolescens poetas audire debeat* and *De*

recta ratione audiendi).¹ Nonetheless, he fails to mention the context in which these artefacts would have been available, who would have organized them, and how they would have been procured.

The use of textual objects that Plutarch takes for granted is germane to questions that remain at the forefront of research on the New Testament's book of Revelation and the location of the New Testament within a much broader ancient Mediterranean textual culture. The author of this work ("John") is deeply embedded in the textual culture of the period, incessantly alluding to Jewish scriptural traditions and making use of literary devices that are hallmarks of the late Second Temple period and broader Greco-Roman traditions.² The book of Revelation's bookishness places it at the nexus of early Jewish, Christian, and classical traditions.

More specifically, the Apocalypse provides unique access into the educational and textual background of its author. John, offers not only his name, but also a geographic location at which he purportedly experienced visions – Patmos, a small island off the coast of Asia Minor (Rev 1:9), about 100 km west of Ephesus.³ Although the question of authorship is a vexing one and intertwined with other Johannine traditions,⁴ the identification of Patmos and the seven cities of western Asia Minor to which the book is addressed (1:4) provides a

¹ Memory remains at the pinnacle of education according to our pseudo-Plutarch (*Lib. ed.* 1.1.9e-f), suggesting that textual artefacts were used as memory aids: books are to agricultural instruments what memory is to crops.

² This literature on John's use of scripture has increased dramatically since the 1980s and there is no need to rehearse the data here. For an overview, see Garrick V. Allen, *The Book of Revelation and Early Jewish Textual Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

³ While the majority of commentators assume that the author of the Apocalypse was active on Asia Minor, including myself, Jan Dochhorn, "Ist die Apokalypse des Johannes ein Text des Christentums der Asia?" in *The Rise and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries of the Common Era*, ed. C. K. Rothschild and J. Schröter (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 299–322 has called this orthodoxy into question, indicating also that, at least in early Christian tradition, the author was also associated with Rome.

⁴ Eusebius of Caesarea helpfully lays out the breadth of his knowledge of Johannine traditions in *Hist. eccl.* 3.20.9, 3.23.1–19, 3.24.1, 17–18, 3.25.4–6, 4.18.8, 6.25.9–10, 7.25.1–27. See Craig R. Koester, *Revelation*, AYB 38A (London: Yale University Press, 2014), 65–69 for a clear summary of the issue and Jörg Frey, "Das Corpus Johanneum und die Apokalypse des Johannes. Die Johanneslegende, die Probleme der johanneischen Verfasserschaft und die Frage der Pseudonymität der Apokalypse," in *Poetik und Intertextualität der Johannesapokalypse*, ed. S. Alkier, T. Hieke, and T. Nicklas (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 71–133.

context (even if it is only a literary or fictive context) in which the author composed this work.

Additionally, it is probable that the author was a native of Judea, deduced from the fact that his native language was either Aramaic or Hebrew and, perhaps less conclusively, that he was familiar with the Jerusalem temple and cultic practices (Rev 8:3–5; 11:1–3, 19).⁵ John's status as an expatriate offers an opportunity to gauge the interplay between past education and access to documents in the context of literary composition. One might ask how John's past experiences in Palestinian Jewish educational contexts and his on-going scriptural encounters in the process of composition shaped the exegetical processes indicative of Revelation's substance.

In previous research, scholars have largely been silent on the details of John's textual access, simply noting that he knows Jewish scripture and knows it well. Many have argued that John had no access to manuscripts in the period in which the work was written, adopting the author's assertion that the work is largely a transcription of unprocessed visions experienced on Patmos.⁶ And even those who highlight John's erudite engagement and knowledge of Jewish literary traditions, drawing close parallels between interpretive practices

⁵ R. H. Charles, *The Revelation of St. John*, 2 vols., ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1920), 1.xxi; G. Mussies, *The Morphology of Koine Greek as used in the Apocalypse of John: A Study in Bilingualism* (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 352–353; Hermann Lichtenberger, "Die Schrift in der Offenbarung des Johannes," in *Die Septuaginta und das frühe Christentum*, ed. T. S. Cauley and H. Lichtenberger (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 382–390. On use of Hebrew text forms see Garrick V. Allen, "Textual Pluriformity and Allusion in the Book of Revelation: The Text of Zechariah 4 in the Apocalypse," *ZNW* 106 (2015): 136–145. On John's polyglossic ability, prophetic persona, and the distinction between his self-presentation and actual socio-historical standing see Michael Labahn, "Die Macht des Gedächtnisses: Überlegungen zu Möglichkeit und Grenzen des Einflusses hebräischer Texttradition auf die Johannesapokalypse," in *Von der Septuaginta zum Neuen Testament: Textgeschichtliche Erörterungen*, ed. M. Karrer et al. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010), 387–390. Going back all the way to Charles, *Revelation*, 1.xxxix the suggestion has been made that John was a refugee from Palestine.

⁶ E.g. Leon Morris, *The Revelation of St. John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 30: "Revelation was written in exile. The writer had no access to the tools of scholarship and apparently no opportunity for a leisurely scholarly approach." Koester, *Revelation*, 124 also suggests that the author probably "worked from memory, rather than a written source."

found at Qumran,⁷ and attributing to him translation activities⁸ and textual “meditation,”⁹ fail to examine the textual culture of early Judaism within its broader context. These literary activities suggest at least sporadic access to textual artefacts, but in what locations would he have contact with such documents in first century Asia Minor? I am interested in exploring this question to better comprehend the text-centred events that contributed to the writing of the Apocalypse and to explore how Revelation’s bookishness might be situated in the Mediterranean literary world.¹⁰ What social mechanisms allowed John to produce a text that is so relentlessly intertextual?

I answer these questions in two parts, beginning by surveying information relating to Jewish education in Roman Judea. Literary and documentary material create a likely scenario for the type of education that John may have experienced, however circumstantial the historical reconstruction. Second, I examine the likely points of access that John may have had to scriptural material in western Asia Minor, building a socio-historical situation that accounts for Revelation’s intertextual relationships and complex literary shape. I highlight the role of textual objects (i.e. manuscripts) and text-based learning within in a culture that was minimally literate and orally/aurally organised.¹¹ I conclude by reflecting on the interrelationship of memory and reading in the literary culture of the late first century CE, arguing that they are co-dependent and inseparable processes.

Jewish education in the Roman period and the author of Revelation

⁷ Pierre Prigent, *L’Apocalypse de Saint Jean*. 2nd ed. (Paris: Labor et Fides, 2000), 36.

⁸ E.g. Charles, *Revelation*, 1.xxi–xxii.

⁹ G. K. Beale, *John’s Use of the Old Testament in Revelation* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 76–99, here 84.

¹⁰ Cf. William A. Johnson, “Constructing Elite Reading Communities in the High Empire,” in *Ancient Literacies: The Culture of Reading in Greece and Rome*, ed. W. A. Johnson and H. N. Parker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 321 for a similar approach to Roman reading practices.

¹¹ Just as Philo insinuates that texts are teachers (*Cher.* 49), so too the author of Revelation used texts in the process of composition.

In a previous generation, scholars posited an ingrained network of public elementary schools in the Tannaitic period, the precursor of which already existed in the time of the Second Temple.¹² In contrast, as Catherine Hezser has made abundantly clear, this

argumentation is usually based on an uncritical understanding of later Talmudic texts which are not only anachronistic in associating the educational institutions of the amoraic period with pre-70 times, but also vastly exaggerate with regard to the number of educational establishments likely to have existed at either time.¹³

Instead of organized systems of public education, both in Judea and the Greco-Roman world generally, educational practices usually consisted of informal and opportunistic networks of patrons, teachers, and students, organised within a loose set of concentric circles consistent with varying levels of education.¹⁴ As Sean Ryan has recently argued, Jewish educational practices were diverse and dependent on variables, including gender, wealth, social status, and location.¹⁵ As an example, consider learning in the elite social classes represented by Flavius Josephus in Judea and Rome and Philo in Alexandria.¹⁶ Much of this evidence has been rehearsed elsewhere, and I will not revisit these discussions in full.¹⁷ But a few points are worth noting about the upper echelons of Jewish education.

¹² E.g. Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, rev. ed., 3 vols. (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 2.417–422.

¹³ Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine*, TSAJ 81 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), 39.

¹⁴ Hezser, *Jewish Literacy*, 39 notes, “The financial and ideational support for primary teachers and schools seems to have come from private individuals only.” See also Raffaella Cribiore, *Gymnastics of the Mind: Greek Education in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011) and her work on educational practices in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt.

¹⁵ Sean Michael Ryan, *Hearing at the Boundaries of Vision: Education Informing Cosmology in Revelation 9* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 27–29. Cf. also Cribiore, *Gymnastics*, 174–244 for a similar typology of education.

¹⁶ Cf. David M. Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 244–251.

¹⁷ Ryan, *Hearing*, 29–37.

First, education was privately available to those who could afford it in Greek and Hebrew/Aramaic.¹⁸ Josephus, while aware of numerous non-Jewish traditions and sources, is well acquainted with Jewish scripture and its interpretive traditions as the first ten books of his *Antiquitates judaicae* demonstrate. Moreover, his ability to compose *Bellum judaicum* (81 CE) so soon after his arrival in Rome indicates a person already acquainted with Greek language and composition, although he admits that it is not ideal medium (*A.J.* 20.263–265).¹⁹ In Judea, the opportunity to learn Greek language and literature was likely confined to the aristocracy and possibly also administration.²⁰ As a parallel example, Philo demonstrates an acute awareness of Jewish scripture (in Greek translation), coupled with knowledge of Greek texts that he often quotes (e.g. quotations of Homer in *Conf.* 4; *Abr.* 10; *Omn.* 31; *Cont.* 17; *Legat.* 80). Despite attention to Greco-Roman texts, the Torah and prophets remained at the centre of Jewish education in this period, a fact supported by the assertions of Josephus and Philo that Jewish records are far superior in their historicity and philosophical value to pagan sources (cf. Josephus, *C. Ap.* 1.38–41; 2.178; Philo, *Spec.* 2.64; *Legat.* 210).²¹

Second, those equipped with primary education were capable adult learners. In *A.J.* 20.262–263, for example, Josephus notes that his education in a Jewish context enabled him to perfect his knowledge of Greek grammar and poetry after a considerable time in Rome. Michael Tuval has also recently argued that Josephus greatly increased his understanding of

¹⁸ Hezser, *Jewish Literacy*, 90–94.

¹⁹ Royce M. Victor, *Colonial Education and Class Formation in Early Judaism: A Postcolonial Reading* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 87–108 points out that Greek language and culture were deeply entrenched in Judea by the first century CE.

²⁰ Hezser, *Jewish Literacy*, 90. In the late first century BCE and early first century CE, the learning of Greek texts may have been closely connected to the Herodian dynasty and their collection of texts, for which there is anecdotal evidence. See Ben Zion Wacholder, “Greek Authors in Herod’s Library,” *Studies in Bibliography and Booklore* (1961): 102–109 and Cribiore, *Gymnastics*.

²¹ Cf. Carr, *Writing*, 260–261 who notes: “Just as elite Hellenic identity appears to have been shaped by education and participation in a culture defined by Greek literature, the Hasmonean period saw the emergence and gradual diffusion of an emergent elite Jewish identity shaped by a sharply defined collection of Hebrew texts. Greek cultural forms were now opposed, balanced, and/or supplemented by a distinctively Jewish, purportedly pre-Hellenistic Hebrew form of *politeia* based – at least for elites – in a Hebrew *paideia*.” Cf. Cecilia Wassen, “On the Education of Children in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” *Studies in Religion* (2012): 350–363.

Jewish scriptural traditions only after leaving Jerusalem and settling in Rome, due to the lack of explicit scriptural engagement in *Bellum judaicum* in comparison to the later *Antiquitates*.²² In addition to the evidence of large Jewish communities in Rome and other urban centres, this conclusion signals that central Jewish works were available in the diaspora at the end of the first century CE.

Third, elite Jewish education was often associated with priestly status or closely connected to priestly circles. Josephus equates his own genealogy with priesthood and nobility, implicitly connecting these features of his background to his educational prowess:

My family is no ignoble one, tracing its descent far back to priestly ancestors.

Different races base their claim to nobility on various grounds; with us a connexion with the priesthood is the hallmark of an illustrious line. Not only were my ancestors priests, but they belonged to the first of the twenty-four courses...and to the most eminent of its constituent clans. Moreover, on my mother's side I am of royal blood; for the posterity of Asamonaeus, from whom she sprang, for a very considerable period were kings, as well as high-priests, of our nation (*Vita* 1–2; LCL Thackeray).

Following a brief interlude, Josephus goes on to describe his progress in education (παιδείας), his excellent memory (μνήμη), his love of letters (φιλογράμματον), and his decision to join the Pharisees (*Vita* 7–12).²³ Priests were also associated with leadership of communities in the diaspora. The description of Sceva in Acts 19:14 as a Jewish high priest (Ἰουδαίου ἀρχιερέως) in Ephesus intimates that priestly standing extended beyond Jerusalem.²⁴ A

²² Michael Tuval, *From Jerusalem Priest to Roman Jew: On Josephus and the Paradigms of Ancient Judaism* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), esp. 283.

²³ Numerous other statements of Josephus assume that priests were involved in education (e.g. *B.J.* 3.252). Hezser, *Jewish Literacy*, 422 notes that almost all Jewish literary production in this period was confined to priestly circles.

²⁴ See Tuval, *From Jerusalem*, 265–267.

plethora of other texts, like *Aristeas* 310, 4 Macc 5:4 (cf. 2 Macc 6:18), Philo (*Hypoth.* 7.13; *Contempl.* 82),²⁵ and some funerary inscriptions (e.g. IJO II 33 in Ephesus) demonstrate that priestly identity and communal leadership were enmeshed. Regardless of the function of priests in the diaspora, elite status and education were tied into the social standing and responsibilities of the priestly guild, although not exclusively.

In addition to these facets of elite education, Ryan identifies another layer of schooling defined by scribal proficiencies.²⁶ The use of the word scribe in modern critical discourse is problematic since it has been used to describe composers of literature, craftsmen-like copyists, and administrative officials.²⁷ I refer here to the scholarly skills associated with this class of education, which included the ability to read and interpret texts, and also compose new compositions, although there certainly exists a wide spectrum of scribal skills.²⁸ This group likely lacked sufficient training in the contours of Greco-Roman literature, although this is true only in gradations. Though perhaps an idealized goal rather than a reality, this form of education equates closely to a description in the *Rule of the Congregation* (1QSa I 6–8): “From [early ch]ildhood each boy [is to be in]structed in the Book of Meditation. As he grows older, they shall teach him the statutes of the Covenant, and he [will receive in]struction in their laws.”²⁹ Scribal activity was widespread in Jewish literary cultures of this period, witnessing a diversity of training practices, locations, and

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 267.

²⁶ Ryan, *Hearing*, 27.

²⁷ For some aspects of the training for scribal craftsmen see Philip S. Alexander, “Literacy among Jews in Second Temple Palestine: Reflections on the Evidence from Qumran,” in *Hamlet on a Hill: Semitic and Greek Studies Presented to Professor T. Muraoka on the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. M. F. J. Baasten and W. Th. Van Peursen (Leuven: Peeters 2003), 3–24. The social status of scribal craftsmen was probably relatively low, while the status of literary composers was more ample (p. 17).

²⁸ See Emanuel Tov, *Scribal Practices and Approaches Reflected in the Texts Found in the Judean Desert*, STDJ 54 (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 7–30.

²⁹ Cf. Wassen, “Education of Children.” For Rabbinic texts on education see b. B. Bat. 21a and the texts noted in Schürer, *History*, 2.415–416.

degrees of expertise.³⁰ The texts that eventually came to make up the Hebrew Bible and other “parabiblical” Jewish literary sources played an outsized role in this form of education.³¹

Finally, situated at the border of the preceding levels of education stood the broader populace who possessed some minimal level of education, perhaps from parents, enabling them to read short passages and public texts (cf. Josephus, *C. Ap.* 2.204). Those with limited education could not write, or perhaps write only their name, even if they could read rudimentary texts; although, many scribal craftsmen could copy texts without comprehending their semantic sense as the documentary evidence from the Bar Kochba caves demonstrates.³² The vast majority of the population in this period was not privy to advanced or even rudimentary literary or scribal education.

Where does John’s literary educational fit into this scheme? The data internal to Revelation suggests that he was privy to a form of elite education and that Jewish scripture formed the core of his textual trajectory. First, as much of the research on John’s reuse of scripture in the last thirty years has demonstrated, he was intimately familiar with the text of Jewish scripture in both Greek and Hebrew and adept at combining and interpreting these texts. His ability to function as a text-broker is alone indicative of exceptional training and social privilege.³³ Linguistically, the evidence from Revelation suggests that John was aware of multiple forms of Jewish scripture and ambient traditions associated with its interpretation. He also knows *dramatis personae* (Balaam and Balak [2:14]; Jezebel [2:20]) and significant

³⁰ David Andrew Teeter, *Scribal Laws: Exegetical Variation in the Textual Transmission of Biblical Law in the Late Second Temple Period*, FAT 92 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 246–247; Alexander, “Literacy,” 14–15. Jewish scribes were active also in the diaspora, see e.g. the funerary inscription IJO II 44 in Smyrna.

³¹ Carr, *Writing*, 215–239. Tom Thatcher, “Literacy, Textual Communities, and Josephus’ *Jewish War*,” *JSJ* 29 (1998): 128 notes that “sacred writings formed the core of Jewish ideology in the at Second Temple period, whether or not individual Jews could read them and whether or not specific customs were actually based on them.” Criore, *Gymnastics*, 137–147 identifies the contexts in which books were used in Hellenistic Egyptian education.

³² Michael Owen Wise, *Language and Literacy in Roman Judaea: A Study of the Bar Kokhba Documents* (London: Yale University Press, 2015), 30, 50–53.

³³ Cf. Seth Schwarz, “Hebrew and Imperialism in Palestine,” in *Ancient Judaism and its Hellenistic Context*, ed. C. Bakhos (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 78–81.

geographic locations from Jewish scripture (Sodom and Egypt [11:8]; Babylon [14:8; 16:19; 17:5; 18:21]). His familiarity with these works likely goes back to education in Judea, perhaps connected to priestly circles. John's ability to read, write, and interact with scriptural texts in Greek indicates participation in a privileged level of Jewish education. His depiction of Jesus as the alpha and omega (1:8; 21:6; 22:13) and recording of numerous commands to write (γράφω: e.g. 1:11; 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14; 10:4; 19:9), a trope shared with many other early Jewish prophetic and apocalyptic traditions, demonstrate his mastery not only of the Greek alphabet, but also the ability to transcribe visions and accurately record events, at least notionally. John as scribal transcriptionist is a literary veneer that is central to the integrity of his vision reports. As a character within the book, the seer acts primarily as a transcriber, not interpreter, of visions.³⁴

Second, John is aware of priestly cultic duties. He depicts the risen Jesus (1:13) and the twenty-four elders in priest-like garb.³⁵ He also mentions numerous liturgical practices and items, including worship in the temple (7:15; λατρεύουσιν...τῷ ναῷ), the (heavenly) temple (11:19; 14:15, 17; 15:5, 8; 16:1), the grounds of the temple (11:1-2), altars (8:3; 9:13; 11:1; 14:18; 16:7 θυσιαστήριον), censers (8:3, 5; λιβανωτός), and the ark of the covenant (11:19; κιβωτὸς τῆς διαθήκης). This incessant reference to cultic items perhaps hints that John was somehow connected to a priestly milieu, or least that he was familiar with literary traditions that depict cultic activity.

Third, John is aware of Greco-Roman traditions. His knowledge of the Leto/Python or Isis/Seth-Tryphon combat myth (Revelation 12) and the *Nero redivivus* legend (13:1, 3, 18;

³⁴ This is an important distinction to consider when examining questions relating to "John": to what degree is the governing voice's self-presentation reflect the reality of the works literary production?

³⁵ There is some discussion on whether the long robe (ποδήρη) and belt (ζώνην) denote priestly vestments. Cf. David E. Aune, *Revelation*, 3 vols. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson 1997), 1.93–94.

17:8–12) may have also developed in Judea, but it is possible also that he was exposed to these traditions once in Asia Minor.³⁶

Fourth, John has a developed cosmology. This is demonstrated first in the extended depiction of the heavenly throne room in chapters 4–5, which the seer describes after being taken up in the spirit (4:2; cf. *1 Enoch* 17–19).³⁷ The tripartite division of heaven, earth, and under the earth (5:3, 13; cf. Phil 2:10) corresponds to other ancient Jewish (e.g. T.Sol. 16:3) and pagan cosmological conceptions (*ANET* 372–373). John’s depiction in other places of a two-level cosmos (10:5, 6; 12:12; 14:6; 21:1), suggests that he is aware of various cosmological conceptions.³⁸

Fifth, John transliterates and translates Hebrew words or is at least aware of transliterated traditions, suggesting again proximity to a bi-lingual context. In Rev 9:11, the Hebrew name of the king of the locusts is called Abaddon (אַבְדֹּן), usually meaning “underworld.”³⁹ John translates the word as Ἀπολλύων, “destroyer,” corresponding to some readings in the OG/LXX (Prov 15:11; Job 26:6; 28:22; 31:12; Ps 88:12). Additionally, in Rev 16:16, John transliterates the Hebrew phrase הַר מְגִדּוֹן, “mountain of Meggido,” as Ἀρμαγεδών, although there is significant variance in the Greek manuscripts here. Both of these instances show his familiarity with Semitic languages and the latter example demonstrates his familiarity with a topographical feature of Judea.

Sixth, John asks his audience to partake in gematria, a form of paronomasia where graphemes represent a certain number value. In Rev 13:18, the identity of the beast is coded in the number 666 (or 616 in some traditions). While one of the most debated interpretive

³⁶ Cf. Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation* (Missoula: Scholars, 1976), 57–85. I am not suggesting direct dependence, but simply pointing to the fact that the Apocalypse shows some awareness of Greco-Roman traditions.

³⁷ Cf. the diagram in Ryan, *Hearing*, 64.

³⁸ Aune, *Revelation*, 1.347–349.

³⁹ *HALOT*, 3.

issues in the Apocalypse,⁴⁰ it demonstrates that John is acquainted with forms of coded wordplay. Moreover, in 17:9, hearers are asked to identify yet another character – the whore of Babylon seated upon a seven-headed beast. Although gematria is not involved here, John asks his audience to decode his symbolic language, providing some hints along the way (17:10–14). Another example of bilingual paronomasia occurs in Rev 21:17. John tells the reader that the wall of the New Jerusalem measured 144 cubits “in the measure of men, which the angel was using” (NRSV) or “which is also an angel’s measurement” (ESV) (ὅ ἐστιν ἀγγέλου). The final three words of this phrase are syntactically difficult. However, the graphemes of the word ἄγγελος, when transliterated into Hebrew (אנגל), equals 144 – the number of cubits of the wall.⁴¹

The book of Revelation is the result of a complex literary process that showcases the author’s various learned skills. John is closely connected with the substance of scriptural works, generally knowledgeable of contemporary Greco-Roman myths, adept in coded speech, multi-lingual, and cosmologically aware. His complex interweaving of traditions suggests not only that he is learned, but also that his education continued after he left Judea. Part of this on-going learning revolved around access to scriptural texts. Despite Revelation’s silence on the processes of its composition (a feature shared with the majority of early Christian and Jewish literature), its detailed redeployments of scriptural idioms and images suggests that John continued to experience Jewish scripture as the book took shape. To explore his engagement with these traditions it is necessary to explore the social contexts in which he may have encountered these texts.

Book collections in the diaspora

⁴⁰ Cf. Aune, *Revelation*, 2.770–773; Garrick V. Allen, *Manuscripts of the Book of Revelation: New Philology, Paratexts, Reception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 121–155.

⁴¹ א + נ + ג + ל + ס = 1 + 50 + 3 + 30 + 60 = 144. Similar Greek-Hebrew word plays occur also in 3 *Bar.* 4.7, 10. Cf. Gideon Bohak, “Greek-Hebrew Gematrias in 3 *Baruch* and in Revelation,” *JSP* 7 (1990): 119–121.

The underlying tension of this section rests in the fact that the Apocalypse is a complicated work that belongs to a sub-group (nascent Christianity) with no well-defined point of cultural transaction and textual engagement. Most authors of early Christian works were not interested to show off the swish of their intellectual prowess or bookishness, even though a great amount of learning and literary design stands behind most of these works. We must reconstruct the social locations where continued learning occurred. In the case of Revelation, the initial confining of the search to Asia Minor brings into sharper focus the locus of his textual access.⁴² I begin by considering the interaction between Greco-Roman libraries and early Christian reading culture.

Greco-Roman libraries

When one thinks generally of access to literature in the diaspora, the great Greco-Roman libraries immediately come to mind. Among Greek and Latin authors from the third century BCE through to the Second Sophistic,⁴³ textuality, access to centres of learning, and the acquisition of obscure philological information was the pinnacle of elite reading cultures, particularly as Roman hegemony cemented itself in the eastern Mediterranean.⁴⁴ Writers like Galen portray their intellectual habits as closely intertwined with books, lucubration, and note

⁴² Most of these observations would also be valid if we posit an alternative location of composition, like Rome for example.

⁴³ On the importance of the book in the Second Sophistic see Simon Goldhill, "The Anecdote: Exploring the Boundaries between Oral and Literate Performance in the Second Sophistic," in *Ancient Literacies: The Culture of Reading in Greece and Rome*, ed. W. A. Johnson and H. N. Parker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 96–113.

⁴⁴ Cf. Anthony Corbeill, "Education in the Roman Republic: Creating Traditions," in *Education in Greek and Roman Antiquity*, ed. Y. L. Too (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 283 for the connection between Roman education elite status.

taking,⁴⁵ although a noted affinity for the spoken word remained (Galen, *Comp. med. sec. loc.* 6). The social cachet associated with abstruse knowledge was also connected to the production of complex Greek and Latin literary texts, both in Rome and in urban centres throughout the Empire, including Asia Minor. Ephesus for example, the first of John's seven cities (Rev 2:1–7) was a text-driven city in the late first and early second centuries CE.⁴⁶ The Library of Celsus, constructed in the early second century,⁴⁷ became the focal point of this textual ideology, housing manuscripts of Greco-Roman authors and preserving a number of bilingual inscriptions on its still-standing façade.⁴⁸ Celsus' location adjacent to Ephesus' *tetragonos agora*, like the vast majority of other Greco-Roman libraries, was closely affiliated both geographically and in terms of social currency with temples, gymnasia, palaces, baths, or the villas of imperial fat cats, "public" spaces where the elite transacted.⁴⁹ The irony of the ancient "public" library is that the majority were "founded by the cultural elite for the cultural elite."⁵⁰

Despite the broader social context of these libraries as locations of elite cultural interaction and education, authors also made liberal use of libraries' textual holdings. By the second century CE, lucubration was a dominant *topos* in Roman intellectual engagement, signifying that the author (be it Pliny, Galen, Cicero, Seneca or others) had expended an

⁴⁵ See Matthew Nicholls, "Galen and Libraries in the *Peri Alupias*," *JRS* 101 (2011): 124, 129, 138–140; Gregory H. Snyder, *Teachers and Texts in the Ancient World: Philosophers, Jews and Christians* (London: Routledge, 2000), 192–193.

⁴⁶ Text here refers not only to complex literary works, but also public inscriptions and other expressions of visual communication such as architecture, statuary, and décor.

⁴⁷ A time not too distant from the usual dating of Revelation in the 90s, although this date has recently been vigorously challenged by Thomas Witulski, *Die Johannesoffenbarung und Kaiser Hadrian: Studien zur Datierung der neutestamentlichen Apokalypse* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007).

⁴⁸ Barbara Burrell, "Reading, Hearing, and Looking at Ephesos," in *Ancient Literacies: The Culture of Reading in Greece and Rome*, ed. W. A. Johnson and H. N. Parker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 78–82.

⁴⁹ See Matthew Nicholls, "Roman Libraries as Public Building in the Cities of the Empire," in *Ancient Libraries*, ed. J. König, K. Oikonomopoulou, and G. Woolf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 267–270, 274–276. The presence of libraries in gymnasia is especially indicative of Greek education. Cf. Carr, *Writing*, 192.

⁵⁰ Victor M. Martínez and Megan Finn Sensensey, "The Professional and his Books: Special Libraries in the Ancient World," in *Ancient Libraries*, ed. J. König, K. Oikonomopoulou, and G. Woolf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 403.

inordinate amount of effort.⁵¹ Arduous personal study, including library usage, becomes “a cultural construction of *otium* that carries with it essentialist notions of what it is to be ‘Roman.’”⁵² In this way, access to literature and literary composition played a prominent role in organising high society, functioning as an exclusionary device, an internal ordering scheme, and an ideological and aesthetic statement about what epitomized Romanness.⁵³

In addition to Ephesus, another city addressed by John – Pergamum (Rev 2:12–17) – was renowned in its pre-Roman context for its library (second century BCE) under the patronage of the Attalid dynasty and noted for its rivalry with the library of Alexandria (cf. Strabo, *Geo.* 13.1.54; 13.4.2).⁵⁴ Little is known of this library in comparison to its more famous Egyptian competitor, including its precise location, but the *kritikoi* who worked there in its heyday surely used its textual holdings.⁵⁵ The collection of books and elite learning were closely related.⁵⁶

Despite the importance of these institutions for elite circles, they have only minimal direct bearing on the question of scriptural access for the author of Revelation. There is almost no evidence that these libraries or others like them held Jewish or Christian literary material.⁵⁷ A possible exception exists in *Aristeas*’ depiction of the patron relationship between the high priest Eleazar and Demetrius, the librarian of Alexandria, acting on behalf

⁵¹ Johnson, “Elite Reading,” 324. E.g. Pliny, *Nat. praef.* 18, 24; Cicero, *Cael.* 45; Seneca, *Ep.* 8.1.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 324.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 329.

⁵⁴ Cf. Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 1.3a. On the origin and end of the Alexandrian library see Yun Lee Too, *The Idea of the Library in the Ancient World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 31–40.

⁵⁵ Cf. Gregory Nagy, “The Library of Pergamon as a Classical Model,” in *Pergamon Citadel of the Gods: Archaeological Record, Literary Description, and Religious Development*, ed. H. Koester (Harrisburg: Trinity, 1998), 185–232; Wolfram Hoepfner, “Die Bibliothek Eumenes’ II. in Pergamon,” in *Antike Bibliotheken*, ed. W. Hoepfner (Mainz am Rhein: von Zabern, 2002), 44–52.

⁵⁶ Samuel N. C. Lieu, “Scholars and Students in the Roman East,” in *The Library of Alexandria: Centre of Learning in the Ancient World*, ed. R. MacLeod (London: Tauris, 2000), 137–139.

⁵⁷ The book-list papyri also bear out this reality (e.g. Otranto, no. 16 [*PSILaur. Inv.* 19662v]). Cf. George W. Houston, “Papyrological Evidence for Book Collections and Libraries in the Roman Empire,” in *Ancient Literacies: The Culture of Reading in Greece and Rome*, ed. W. A. Johnson and H. N. Parker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 233–267.

of the Ptolemy, and the production of the Septuagint (*Aristeas* 30–51; 301–311).⁵⁸ Although *Aristeas* is of dubitable historical value, its ideology represents the cultural aspirations of at least a portion of the Jewish community in Alexandria in the first century BCE, displaying the desire to connect Jerusalem and important Jewish literature to the realm of Greek elite culture. At least some ancient Jewish communities living in the shadow of and closely enmeshed with Greek cultural icons were interested to acquire some of the social capital that these institutions offered. If the Ptolemies were to collect all the books of the world (*Aristeas* 9), surely Jewish scriptural texts must be a celebrated part of this collection. Even though this Greek library interacted with Jewish literature, at least in the *mythos* of the creations of the Septuagint, its burning in 48 BCE and eventual destruction (or slow decline to obsolescence)⁵⁹ and location apart from the working area of our author make the evidence for textual access less than helpful. However, the desire of Alexandrian Jews to participate in the textual world of the library at least raises the possibility that similar moves were made in other locations. In this way, the cultural boundaries between Hellenism and Judaism (if they existed at all) were transcended at the level of education and book culture in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. The myth surrounding the construction of the Septuagint represents an attempt to negotiate the cultural tensions of Jewish life in the diaspora.

Overall, Greco-Roman libraries demonstrate, among other things, that elite reading cultures were cultivated in these periods. Although John was not privy to this culture, and his anti-Roman polemic strongly suggests he would not have been interested, he was a part of a literary sub-culture enveloped in the shadow of the reading culture of the imperial elites. His

⁵⁸ For a brief overview of the library see Monica Berti, “Greek and Roman Libraries in the Hellenistic Age,” in *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Concept of a Library*, ed. S. White Crawford and C. Wassen (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 33–47. Stephen Pfann, “Reassessing the Judean Desert Caves: Libraries, Archives, *Genizas* and Hiding Places,” *Bulletin of the Anglo-Israel Archaeological Society* 25 (2007): 148 also indicates that material from the Jerusalem Temple was also likely stored in Vespasian’s Library of Peace in Rome following its erection in 76 CE.

⁵⁹ Roger S. Bagnall, “Alexandria: Library of Dreams,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 146 (2002): 359.

sub-culture was controlled not by the acquisition of intellectual cachet or the literature of classical Greece or the Augustan court, but by the Hebrew Bible, its versions, and the God about whom these texts speak.⁶⁰

The elite status of text users in Greco-Roman reading cultures also suggests that text users in John's sub-culture (generically, "Jewish reading culture") were also likely the elites of their community – those who held the keys to the community's "classic" traditions. Reading in this community was tightly bound to the construction of identity, and John's reuse of scripture implements "classic" texts to this end.⁶¹ Revelation constructs a world that placed the ideology of Rome at odds with the received literary traditions of nascent Christianity. It is true that the transmission of early Christian literature provides evidence for the enfranchising readers of diverse social strata in contrast to the elite reading culture of the Empire, and indeed Revelation is not elite literature in the sense that it was composed only for a group of textual experts. Nor does the author play up the lucubrity of composition, instead presenting the text as a series of passively received transcribed revelations, masking the complex literary and intellectual work that stands behind the work's composition.

But the way that scriptural traditions are handled indicates that the author was familiar with the literary works and modes of interpretation that defined early Jewish textual culture writ large.⁶² The literary products of Christianity are more accessible to broader swathes of the community, but production of texts is still confined to the upper echelons of the communal elite. Although distinct in some ways, it is not possible to completely divorce the

⁶⁰ As Teeter, *Scribal Laws*, 269 notes: "This complex and multifaceted textual culture [of Early Judaism] was simultaneously the product and producer of the scriptural text at its center. Scribal copyists were thus firmly and necessarily imbedded within a cultural matrix wholly invested in engagement with that text and its meaning."

⁶¹ See William A. Johnson, "Towards a Sociology of Reading in Classical Antiquity," *The American Journal of Philology* 121 (2000): 615–624 for a similar phenomenon in Roman reading in the first and second centuries CE.

⁶² Allen, *Book of Revelation*.

culture of textuality embodied in the libraries of the *polis* from the culture that defines early Christian text production.⁶³

Although John did not access copies of Second Temple Jewish literature or scriptural manuscripts in monumental Greco-Roman libraries, and although he had no social impetus to take part in the elite reading cultures, it is plausible that he had access to textual artefacts in other contexts. The evidence indicates that John was party to an alternative and ambient culture of reading that also implicitly valued lucubration, and which dominated early Judaism and Christianity. This culture valued a way of interacting with texts that included the controlling of detailed and precise knowledge of Jewish scriptural works. Many critics are content to say this much, but important socio-historical questions linger behind this portrait: if not the cultural monuments of the Greco-Roman library, where would an itinerant prophet from Judea active in western Asia Minor access scriptural material?

Synagogues

Despite the limits of our knowledge of these institutions in the first century, one answer is synagogues.⁶⁴ Some archaeological and Rabbinic sources suggest that synagogues of the diaspora (or their “study houses”)⁶⁵ retained manuscripts, at least copies of the Torah stored

⁶³ The lack of distinction indeed comes more into focus as Christianity develops into the religion of the Empire. We know that later Christian authors, like Eusebius of Caesarea (born *c.* 260 CE), used library holdings attached to particular churches to compose their literary works (*Hist. eccl.* 6.20.1–2) and that Origen spawned an early Christian library in Caesarea Maritima. The two reading cultures merge as early Christianity develops, but the seeds of this union existed even at the end of the first century CE. Cf. Marco Frenschkowski, “Studien zur Geschichte der Bibliothek von Cäsarea,” in *New Testament Manuscripts: Their Texts and Their World*, ed. T. J. Kraus and T. Nicklas (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 52–104. For more on the presence of “congregational libraries” and larger early Christian libraries, see Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in Early Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 144–202. Other evidence for Christian libraries, most which dates to the fourth century CE at the earliest, is located in the form of P. Ash. Inv. 3, an annotated list of Christian texts, and in the fact that Diocletian’s edict in 303 presupposes that Christian communities collected books.

⁶⁴ On the relationship of synagogues and libraries see Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 189–192.

⁶⁵ Cf. Hezser, *Jewish Literacy*, 457–458.

in the “Ark of the Law” used for liturgical purposes.⁶⁶ While local traditions differed, there is evidence that Jewish communities, to varying degrees, emphasised the study of scriptural texts as a vital part of religious experience (cf. Philo, *Mos.* 2.215-216; Josephus, *A.J.* 16.43).⁶⁷ Take Sardis, another city of western Asia Minor, as an example. Jews were known to have been in the city since the time of Babylonian exile (cf. Obad 20) and, as Josephus reports (*A.J.* 12.147–153; 14.235, 259–261; 16.171), a permanent Jewish community existed there from the third century BCE, blossoming into a group of some civic standing by the first century of the same era.⁶⁸ The Christian community in this city is addressed in Rev 3:1–6.

A large building usually identified as a synagogue was discovered in 1962 excavations. It is part of the broader civic structure of the Sardis gymnasium complex. Its current architectural form dates to the third century CE, but it is likely older and shows evidence of multiple remodels.⁶⁹ In addition to liturgical and communal functions, the physical layout of the building indicates that it was a location of education. Kraabel argues that the *bema* installed in the centre of the Sardis hall served as the focal point of learning, and this in connection with the *aediculae* at the east of the hall – the likely location of manuscript storage.⁷⁰ Indeed a primary function of the synagogue, especially as we move

⁶⁶ E. L. Sukenik, *Ancient Synagogues in Palestine and Greece*. (London: British Academy, 1930), 52– 53 (repr. Munich: Kraus, 1980).

⁶⁷ Paul R. Trebilco, *Jewish Communities in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 187. For an overview of ancient Judaism in Asia Minor see Schürer, *History*, 3.17–36. Josephus also reports numerous events that centre on the destruction or movement of Jewish books in Judea: e.g. the Jews of Caesarea “snatching up” (ἀρπάσαντες) their copy of the law when they flee the city (*B.J.* 2.291) and the exuberant response to the destruction of a copy of the Law (τὸν ἱερὸν νόμου) by a Roman soldier (*B.J.* 2.228–231).

⁶⁸ Cf. Alf Thomas Kraabel, “The Diaspora Synagogue: Archaeological and Epigraphic Evidence since Sukenik,” in *Ancient Synagogues: Historical Analysis and Archeological Discovery Volume 1*, ed. D. Urman and P. V. M. Flesher (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 102; Tessa Rajak, *The Jewish Dialogue with Greece and Rome: Studies in Cultural and Social Interaction* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 447–462.

⁶⁹ Kraabel, “Diaspora Synagogue,” 102–104. A potential dedicatory inscription to Lucius Verus (161–169 CE) possibly shows that the building was in use at least as early as the mid-second century CE. Josephus, *A.J.* 14.235, 259–261 also suggests that a Jewish gathering place had gained imperial imprimatur by the end of the first century CE.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 105; Yaacov Shavit, “The ‘Qumran Library’ in the Light of the Attitude towards Books and Libraries in the Second Temple Period,” in *Methods of Investigation of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Khirbet Qumran Site: Present and Future Prospects*, ed. J. J. Collins, M. O. Wise, and N. Golb (New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1994), 306.

later into the amoraic period, was a place of Torah study, a practice that likely goes back to the first century CE.⁷¹ Although controversial in terms of historicity, the depiction of Jesus reading and expounding upon an Isaiah scroll in the Nazareth synagogue in Luke 4:16–30 lends viability to the idea that a primary *raison d'être* of the synagogue was the reading and interpretation the Torah and Prophets,⁷² a practice eventually idealised and codified in the reading cycles of the Mishnah and Toseftot.⁷³

The communal dimension of synagogues also contributed to these buildings as a place of study. In addition to community administration, they functioned as places of extra-liturgical learning and modest libraries (cf. Josephus, *C. Ap.* 2.175; Philo, *Mos.* 2.216).⁷⁴ These libraries “differed from congregation to congregation, depending upon local economic resources and local intellectual or cultural proclivities.”⁷⁵ Nonetheless, Jerome alludes to books borrowed from a synagogue (*Epist.* 36), suggesting that even into the fourth century CE Christians had access to Jewish libraries. Modest libraries were likely found in the synagogues of Asia Minor, particularly in wealthy communities in Ephesus and Sardis.

Returning to the Sardis synagogue, its location along the main street of a major city demonstrates that the Jewish community was engaged in civic life.⁷⁶ As we know from evidence in other regional centres, like Ephesus and Pergamum, access to large collections of textual objects was the privilege of the elite. (Of course this does not account for smaller

⁷¹ Zeev Safrai, “The Communal Functions of the Synagogue in the Land of Israel in the Rabbinic Period,” in *Ancient Synagogues: Historical Analysis and Archeological Discovery Volume I*, ed. D. Urman and P. V. M. Flesher (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 182–187.

⁷² Philo’s description of the reading practices of Essenes also firmly places scriptural reading and learning in the context of a voluntary association, even if within Judea (*Prob.* 80–82). Cf. also Philo’s extended discourse on the Therapeutae (*Contempl.* esp. 24–33), a Jewish group devoted, perhaps to an extreme, to the reading of Jewish scripture. For an overview of reading practices in synagogues see Thatcher, “Literacy,” 128–130. The Theodotos inscription dating from the first century CE also indicates that reading the Torah was a primary facet of synagogue activities.

⁷³ So Anders Runesson, *The Origins of the Synagogue: A Socio-historical Study* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2001), 193–207.

⁷⁴ See Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* (London: Yale University Press, 2000), 366–381.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 380.

⁷⁶ Although, cf. Martin Goodman, *Judaism in the Roman World: Collected Essays* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 237.

private collections, which also certainly existed.) The prominence of the Jewish community of Sardis, persisting well into the common era, indicates that some of its wealthy members may have institutionally gathered small collections of important texts for personal or communal use. There seems little reason to believe that such “libraries” did not exist.⁷⁷ In a cultural and religious setting where reading and writing engendered a certain social status,⁷⁸ the possession of textual artefacts increased social capital and were central to the life of the community.

Furthermore, this type of evidence can realistically be extrapolated to other cities of western Asia Minor that had Jewish communities (cf. Josephus, *A.J.* 14.244–246). Evidence for a synagogue in Ephesus comes from numerous literary sources (Philo, *Legat.* 315; Josephus, *A.J.* 14.225–227; Acts 18:19–21, 24–26; 19:8–9). John also antagonistically identifies a “synagogue of satan” in Smyrna (2:9) and Philadelphia (3:9). An inscription from the early second century CE in Thyatira (IJO II 146), also signifies the presence of a synagogue. More generally for the region, in *Legat.* 311, Philo describes an imperial decree allowing the Jews of Asia to gather in συναγωγή.

Evidence for the function of synagogues in Asia Minor in the first century remains circumstantial.⁷⁹ However, the archaeological, literary, and epigraphic data suggests the following. First, Jewish communities in Asia Minor, including many of the cities address in Revelation 2–3, boasted a location of voluntary religious association. The layout, adornment, and function of these buildings varied. Second, literary evidence and some archaeological features (e.g. Torah shrine) indicate that synagogues were locations of scriptural reading and

⁷⁷ Cf. Hezser, *Jewish Literacy*, 165–166.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 149 notes that Rabbinic literature suggests “that just as in Graeco-Roman culture intellectuals and teachers of higher learning would be the one who were most interested in owning books. They would have recommended the purchase of these books to their wealthy fellow-Jews, although the latter may not have followed their advice.”

⁷⁹ However, see the Levine, *Ancient Synagogue*, 128, 159 who presents the known functions of synagogues in early Judaism.

learning. The precise mechanisms of access to textual artefacts are hazy at best before the amoraic period, but scriptural texts were routinely read aloud in communal gatherings and presumably accessible for private study. Third, the Jewish communities of Asia Minor, especially in Ephesus and Sardis, were well-off and enmeshed in the social world of the Greco-Roman *polis*.

This portrait of Jewish social and religious life centred on the synagogue suggests that John may have had access to textual artefacts through encounters with these associations, particularly at Ephesus if it served as his home base.⁸⁰ The scrolls used for liturgical or educational purposes may have been available for private usage on an informal basis. Additionally, wealthy and connected members of the community may have retained private copies, offering another potential point of access. And John's interactions with Christian communities may have offered access to scriptural texts either via manuscripts or oral recitation. Due to the relative paucity of direct evidence for the textual practices of Jewish communities in this region, exploring the most consequential extant Jewish library of the period, the scrolls found in the area of Qumran, provides some illuminating parallels. And here we begin to explicitly explore the idea of a special library in antiquity.

The Dead Sea scrolls and special libraries

There continues to be a robust discussion on whether the manuscripts found in the eleven caves near Khirbet Qumran constitute a "library," a conversation best exemplified by a recent collection of essays entitled *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Concept of a Library*.⁸¹ On the one hand, the lack of evidence for an overarching organizational structure or place of storage at

⁸⁰ David E. Aune, *Apocalypticism, Prophecy and Magic in Early Christianity: Collected Essays* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 187.

⁸¹ See Sidnie White Crawford and Cecilia Wassen, eds., *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Concept of a Library*, STDJ 116 (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

the site (beyond the caves) suggests that the Dead Sea Scrolls do not represent the holdings of a library.⁸² The physical trappings of ancient Hellenistic and Roman libraries, including inscriptions, statues, and other architectural features, indicate that if the scrolls discovered near Qumran are considered a library, it is not in the same sense as the cultural monument that is the Celsus library in Ephesus, for example.⁸³ The site is not a public space complete with a monumental building, but the location of a community that saw itself in conflict with its broader cultural environment (although, of course, deeply interconnected with it). However, the collection of over 900 manuscripts of literary works spread amongst the caves, some of which are sequestered based on language,⁸⁴ and the purported bookishness and priestly orientation of the community (Joseph, *B.J.* 2.136, 159), suggests that the scrolls were part of a “special library” of sorts.⁸⁵

A special library is a deliberate collection of thematically linked documents that transcends the inadequate labels of “public” or “private,” models first disseminated during the Public Libraries Movement of the 1850s.⁸⁶ In terms of modern library sciences, a special library consists of a number of interlocking features designed to address the specific

⁸² So Corrado Martone, “The Qumran ‘Library’ and Other Ancient Libraries: Elements for Comparison,” in *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Concept of a Library*, ed. S. White Crawford and C. Wassen (Leiden: Brill, 2016), esp. 68–69. His argument also compares Qumran to other grandiose ancient libraries like Ebla and Alexandria, and he seems to indicate that Qumran’s modesty in comparison means that it is not a library. This argumentation may overplay the idea of the library as a physical space, rather than a collection of textual artefacts, and is not convincing in light of the evidence for small private or communal libraries in this period (cf. Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 144–202). See also Shavit, “Qumran Library,” 309.

⁸³ So Ian Werrett, “Is Qumran a Library?” in *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Concept of a Library*, ed. S. White Crawford and C. Wassen (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 96–98, 101 who highlights the Greek cultural features of the Qumran site and manuscript collection, arguing that it too is a library similar to the Villa of the Papyri at Herculaneum. He notes also (p. 91) that the habits of the scholars and priest associated with the library of Alexandria are not entirely foreign to those of Qumran (common property, communal meals, overseen by a leading priest).

⁸⁴ Cf. the exclusively Greek nature of the scrolls in Cave 7.

⁸⁵ I also assume here a material connection between the community that inhabited Khirbet Qumran and the scrolls located in the cave. Cf. Mladen Popović, “Qumran as Scroll Storehouse in Times of Crisis? A Comparative Perspective on Judaean Desert Manuscript Collections,” *JSJ* 43 (2012): 551–594; contra Pfann, “Reassessing” among others. Also, it should be pointed out that, if the materials of the eleven caves are heterogeneous in provenance, the literary makeup, evidence of shelving, and *in situ* decay of the material in Cave 4 (so Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 193–195) point to this cache particularly as a library of a particular community. Of course, the extant scrolls were produced over a period of about two centuries, so it is difficult to imagine that they ever made up a coherent library collection as such.

⁸⁶ Martínez and Senseney, “Professional,” 401.

professional needs of a given guild, usually connected to an overarching institution. Small size, minimalistic setting, a thematically coherent collection, and limited clientele are the hallmarks of the special library.⁸⁷ A modern example is a small church library that provides religious sustenance to a congregation, retaining only volunteer staff, and holdings related to preaching or popular theology (or whatever congregants choose to offload there). Another example might be the legal library of a large law firm. The prominent characteristic of special libraries is their small scope (which Qumran is in comparison to the presentation of monumental library collections in the ancient world),⁸⁸ usually organised around a particular field of study. In the case of Qumran, the “field of study” was the literature of the Hebrew Bible, literature engaging with the Hebrew Bible, and the literature of a sect. The majority of the collection consisted either of scriptural manuscripts or literary works that engaged with the Hebrew Bible in some way.

The idea of a special library is admittedly a modern phenomenon, and the manuscripts from Qumran cannot be considered such a collection in a strict sense. Nonetheless, the trademarks of special libraries (i.e. an emphasis on efficiency, accessibility, limited collections, and thematic coherence) do correspond suggestively to the makeup of the collection, which lacks significant documentary material. In a general sense, the only users of ancient special libraries would have been “professions with an intellectual tradition or a need for specific, and sometimes technical information.”⁸⁹ Physicians like Galen or priests who required information pertaining to specific rites would have been the primary users of such collections, but this observation extends also to exegetical attention to important communal

⁸⁷ Esther Green Bierbaum, *Special Libraries in Action: Cases and Crises* (Engelwood: Libraries Unlimited, 1993), 7.

⁸⁸ Numerous different, and likely mythical, numbers are given for the size of the Alexandrian library, for instance, including estimates from 40,000 to 700,000. Cf. Bagnall, “Alexandria,” 351–352 for discussion of ancient sources. The size of the collection also pales in comparison to royal libraries of the Ancient Near East, including Ashurbanipal’s library at Nineveh (c. 25,000 tablets) or the library at Ebla (17,000 tablets). See Martone, “Qumran Library,” 58–59.

⁸⁹ Martínez and Senseney, “Professional,” 405.

documents, a reality witnessed not only at Qumran, but also in the ancient Greek commentaries on Homer and other works.

Victor Martínez and Megan Finn Senseney summarise the role of the special library thusly:

Special libraries do not share the monumental characteristics of their public counterparts. They do not serve as a symbolic gesture to the power of knowledge and literary culture, nor do they provide the general community with gathering spaces or organized events. To the contrary, the contemporary special library is rarely more than a few crowded rooms housed within the context of a larger building. As such, the library is neither a prominent feature of the organization nor is it a primary element of the building's architecture. Despite this humble position, the library serves an essential role in assuring that the information needs of an organization are met efficiently and accurately.⁹⁰

This description of a modern special library assuages some of the angst associated with identifying the Dead Sea Scrolls as a library. When considered a special library, the lack of monumental facades, inscriptions, and identifiable rooms dedicated to the use of texts is not so troubling. Like special libraries the scrolls were not part of a broader concerted effort to garner cultural prowess (at least not to those outside the community). Instead, the collection met the needs of a textual community that valued their religious documents and their interpretations of those documents. Production of new copies was likely undertaken in spurts and at a relatively slow pace over the life of the community,⁹¹ indicating that universal

⁹⁰ Ibid., 404–405.

⁹¹ Alexander, “Literacy,” 6–7.

assembly of material associated with ancient Judaism was not the goal of the collection. Even if Qumran is anomalous in light of comparative evidence, the isolated nature of the community ceases to be problematic if considered a special library, especially since its literary tastes were interconnected with similar collections in other Palestinian textual communities. Sidnie White Crawford concludes that the Scrolls are a “scribal library,” stating that “the Qumran scrolls are demonstrably not only a particular Jewish sectarian collection, but a Jewish sectarian collection shaped by the particular interests of an elite group of scholar scribes attached to that community.”⁹²

A parallel example to the special library at Qumran is the Villa of the Papyri at Herculaneum, destroyed and preserved by the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in 79 CE, re-discovered in 1709.⁹³ This collection of about 1,700 scrolls is top-heavy with the works of Philodemus and other Epicurean philosophers.⁹⁴ The importance of this collection for this discussion rests in the fact that it demonstrates that “a coherent collection could continue to exist for an extended period, well beyond a single person’s lifetime, and that its essential contents and integrity as a specialized collection might remain intact throughout that period.”⁹⁵ There is also evidence that a professional group interested in Epicureanism used the library at Herculaneum.⁹⁶ Although the papyri differ in that they were the collection of a

⁹² Sidnie White Crawford, “The Qumran Collection as a Scribal Library,” in *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Concept of a Library*, ed. S. White Crawford and C. Wassen (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 130, who additionally points out the archival function of the collection. She musters the following evidence for this argument: the collection is multi-lingual (e.g. Tobit in Aramaic 4Q196–199 and Hebrew 4Q200), shows evidence of a pattern of manuscript preparation and correction, occasionally employs paleo-Hebrew and cryptic scripts, contains translations, contains exegetical texts with interpretive goals, is interested in calendars and astronomical lore (4Q208–211), contains compositions that borrow or rely on scriptural idioms (e.g. *Songs of Sabbath Sacrifice* and *Hodayot*), contains lists (e.g. 4QMiscellaneous Rules), shows interest in magic and divination (4Q186, 4Q318, 4Q560, 4Q561), site has inkwells, multi-lingual ostraca inscriptions, and leather tabs in Cave 8.

⁹³ For overview, see Sandra Sider, “Herculaneum’s Library in 79 A.D.: The Villa of the Papyri,” *Libraries & Culture* 25 (1990): 534–542 1990; David Sider, *The Library of the Villa dei Papiri at Herculaneum* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty, 2005), 16–23.

⁹⁴ Houston, “Papyrological Evidence,” 256.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 257.

⁹⁶ Martínez and Senseney, “Professional,” 2013, 415; Sider, *Villa dei Papiri*, 6.

single wealthy family,⁹⁷ both Qumran and the Villa were multi-generational collections connected to a particular corpus of texts. Both the Villa and Qumran provide evidence that across the Greco-Roman world in the first century CE, textual collections designed around particular themes coalesced and were used by particular communities.

While the Scrolls and the Villa are the two largest and best examples of such collections, there seems to be no reason to doubt the existence of similar special libraries across the Roman world, suggesting that John may have had access to a similar, albeit modest collection of textual artefacts somewhere in Asia Minor. Although probably referring to a small personal collection of manuscripts, Paul's request of Timothy in 2 Tim 4:13 to bring him "the books, above all the parchments" (τὰ βιβλία μάλιστα τὰς μεμβράνας) indicates that early Christian authors made use of manuscripts, sought out books, and were aware of collections of artefacts that might be beneficial to their own literary activity or intellectual sustenance.⁹⁸ Additionally, Paul's admonishment to Timothy to "attend to the public reading of scripture, to preaching and to teaching" (1 Tim 4:13) implies the presence of Christian book collections in Asia Minor by at least the early second century (cf. Justin, *Apol.* 1.67).

The idea of the special library corresponds also to private ownership of manuscripts in this period.⁹⁹ For example, the finds from the minor sites near Qumran that served as places of refuge during the Jewish wars (66–73 or 132–135 CE, Wadi Murabba'at, Nahal Hever, Masada, and Wadi Daliyeh)¹⁰⁰ evidence personal possession of scriptural manuscripts, even though the finds from these locations are primarily documentary and exceptional in their context of escaping imminent conflict.¹⁰¹ Both Hebrew and Greek manuscripts (e.g.

⁹⁷ Likely founded by Lucius Calpurnius Piso Caesoninus or one of his offspring. Cf. Sider, *Villa dei Papiri*, 5–8.

⁹⁸ Bastiaan van Elderen, "Early Christian Libraries," in *The Bible as Book: The Manuscript Tradition*, ed. J. Sharpe and K. van Kampen (London: British Library, 1998), 45 suggest that Paul is likely asking for copies of Jewish scriptural works.

⁹⁹ Cf. Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 174–176.

¹⁰⁰ Or in the case of Wadi Daliyeh, Samaritan refugees fleeing Alexander the Great's forces in the fourth century BCE.

¹⁰¹ White Crawford, "Qumran Collection," 117–120.

8HevXIIgr) containing parts of Jewish scripture have been discovered. Perhaps literary texts were not confined to the urban “elite” of the late Second Temple period, but textuality expanded to the upper strata of rural society as well, as wealthy individuals brought their documentary and literary possessions to the caves.¹⁰²

This reality within Judea raises the possibility that well-connected Jewish families in the diaspora or patrons of early churches acted as text-brokers and retained copies of Jewish works, including portions of the Hebrew Bible and its early Greek versions. This is especially believable for locations like Pergamum and Ephesus, cities associated with textuality and books generally, and which boasted economically successful Jewish communities.¹⁰³

The ways in which John reused scriptural texts stands in continuity with the type of interpretive engagement found at Qumran and in other early Jewish works like Ben Sira. He is intimately connected to the substance of Jewish scripture, aware of the internal tensions and connections between works (including existing exegetical and Jesus traditions) is familiar with cultic affairs, magical traditions, myths, gematria, and a developed cosmology.¹⁰⁴ Each of these points describes an author who was part of a textual community not unlike that attached to the Qumran scrolls. I am not at all arguing that John was associated with the sectarians, but that he likely was familiar with similar forms of an ambient Palestinian textual culture before his time in Asia Minor. In Ephesus and during the composition of the Apocalypse it is probable that he sought a similar textual community, or at least a group or individual that had access to the artefacts that supported such engagement. Just as the Roman Empire enabled a situation where Greek intellectual culture was mobile between Rome and

¹⁰² Wise, *Language and Literacy*, 38–40.

¹⁰³ Trebilco, *Jewish Communities*, 186–190; John M. G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora from Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE–117 CE)* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 268–269, 271–272, 276–277. Cf. also the evidence for textuality in Smyrna attributed to Polycarp and his dissemination of Ignatius’ literary output (Gamble, *Books and Readers*, 153).

¹⁰⁴ Ryan, *Hearing*; Prigent, *L’Apocalypse*, 36–49.

the eastern provinces,¹⁰⁵ so also the Empire and a dispersed Jewish literary culture enabled the movement of Jewish and early Christian intellectual capital from Judea to the diaspora. Examples of special libraries preserved in rural Judea and urban Italy demonstrate the breadth of such collections across the Empire in this period.

Concluding Thoughts

Where does this synthesis leave us when we consider a social context for John's engagement with scriptural traditions? The evidence from both Greco-Roman and Jewish sources indicates a serious interest in textuality. By this I mean that textual artefacts were important interlocutors in education and literary composition and readily available to the upper classes of society in Judea and the diaspora in both Hellenistic and Jewish circles. Even though Revelation claims to be a report of a vision received on an isolated island, text-centred events factored into its composition. A person who was able to write complex literary texts in a non-native language likely received a high level of education. Additionally, John's proficiency in cosmology, coded symbols, numerology, and his critiques of Roman economic systems further supports the idea that he was a well-educated individual. A writer of this calibre surely read manuscripts as part of his training and continued to do so when available during the process of composition. When reading Revelation, it is important to distinguish between the governing voice's self-presentation as a lowly transcriber of visions and the high level literary care that stands unannounced behind the work's production.

The fact that John used manuscripts does not, however, indicate that he relied solely on physical forms of Jewish scriptural texts. Memory and orality were integral facets of his literary culture, complementing and encouraging textuality. As David Carr has argued,

¹⁰⁵ Nicholls, "Galen," 141.

learning in Jewish antiquity was an oral/textual hybrid.¹⁰⁶ The cultivation of memory and appreciation for scriptural traditions were reinforced by aural experience of recitation and private encounters with manuscripts. High-level learners become “walking libraries;” they “embody the library through their memories.”¹⁰⁷ However, John’s knowledge of scripture is more than the texts he was able to recall; his use of scriptural texts indicates continual reflection upon nearly every work that eventually became part of the Hebrew Bible. The use of manuscripts and appeal to memory function as partners in John’s crafting of reused scriptural locutions.

The preceding discussion also illuminates the interrelationship between Jewish and Greco-Roman book collections. Differences remain – particularly the high level of cachet attached to elite Greco-Roman libraries – but similarities persist. Collections in both contexts were usually modest and organised around the needs of those at the pinnacle of their given reading cultures. Special libraries like the Villa of the Papyri at Herculaneum and Qumran are thematically suited to the literary needs of a specific reading community. These collections are also multi-lingual: Latin and Greek in the case of the Villa and Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek at Qumran. The collection of literary works in multiple languages suggests that the users of these collections were educated to a very high standard within their particular sub-cultures, even if they lacked cultural prestige associated with wealth and Roman aristocratic status. Overall, the diffusion of book collections across the Empire, in both urban (Pergamum, Ephesus, Rome, Herculaneum) and rural (Judean Desert) settings, witnesses to the importance of reading for literary composition and the construction of cultural norms and boundaries. Within this context John recorded a visionary experience using Jewish scripture as an interpretive foundation to convey to the churches of Asia Minor the import of

¹⁰⁶ Carr, *Writing*.

¹⁰⁷ Too, *Idea*, 178, also 84–87. Cf. also Hezser, *Jewish Literacy*, 422–423.

encounters with the machinations of Empire. Books, book collections, and special libraries played an important role in this process, both in terms of John's past education and on-going encounters with literature in the process of composition. It is no longer appropriate to critique John's level of education based on this supposed ignorance of Greek grammatical norms or his handful of solecisms; instead a broader range of factors must indeed be taken seriously in reconstructing his educational background.