

Patmos has the perfect blue skies and white painted houses of a typical Greek island but it is also where one of the strangest and most argued-over sacred books was written / **By NATALIE WATSON**

Where the end of the world began

FOR TWO MILLENNIA, the last book of the Bible has fascinated and intrigued theologians, artists, musicians, and conspiracy theorists. The striking imagery in this tale of two cities, Babylon and Jerusalem, has provided fuel for the imagination of painters from Brueghel to Blake to Kandinsky, of composers from Handel to Messiaen. The Church's relationship with the book of Revelation has been complex. It was a late addition to the canon of the New Testament and does not appear in some early lists of the books of the Christian Bible. Martin Luther said it was neither apostolic nor prophetic, and he could not find Christ in it. Lectionary compilers have been reticent to include too much of it, but there are also those who see in it a roadmap for the world we live in and the end that is to come.

Every year, thousands flock to Patmos, in the Aegean Sea, closer to Turkey than to the Greek mainland, in search of its most famous exile. With a population of just over 3,000 and about 40 monks, the northernmost island of the Dodecanese archipelago is a UN World Heritage Site. Tourists and pilgrims are seeking more than beaches, spotless sunshine, white painted houses, ouzo and grilled octopus. The fortress is already visible as their ships approach the island and, as they climb the steps to the monastery, they come perhaps less in search of a map through the intricacies of apocalyptic writing but more in memory of one who lived and worked there. "I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which said: 'Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.'"

IT IS ON PATMOS that the last book of the Bible, the Apocalypse or Revelation, had its origin, written by an old man, scholar and pastor, who had been expelled from the metropolis of Ephesus. On a clear day, he could see the shores of Asia Minor. Some have called Patmos "the island where the end of the world began", but what is intriguing is not so much the notion of the end of the world, whether or not this is what the Apocalypse is about, but a man writing in exile, not the first and not the last. Tradition has it that John came here as an old man, exiled



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St John's icon is paraded during Holy Week

by the Emperor Domitian in the last decade of the first century AD. Banishment was considered a relatively mild punishment for a preacher whose words had caused a stir and who was putting the support economy of the local temples out of business. John was free to move around the island, but he was separated from the community he had built and which he loved. According to the tradition, he eventually returned and died in Ephesus.

In the eleventh century, a Greek monk, Christodoulos Latrinos, asked permission from the Byzantine Emperor Alexios I Komnenos to found a monastery on Patmos. Having been the abbot of Lavra Monastery of Stylos on the mountain of Latros near to Miletus in Asia Minor, he had himself been forced to flee after the Turkish conquest. On top of a mountain, on the site of a former

temple of Artemis and an early Christian church, the monastery fortress built by Christodoulos and his companions dominates the island and is the centre of its religious and civic life. The monks' library of books and manuscripts holds many treasures, including Alexios I Komnenos' "golden bull", granting the island to Christodoulos, and the *firman* – a type of edict – issued by Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror from 1454, confirming the monastery's independence and assigning a monk as a tax collector.

In the Cave of the Apocalypse, a monk reads from John's letter of reassurance, comfort and encouragement, written to his brothers and sisters in turbulent times. There is the stone that was the old man's pillow and the table where Prochorus, his companion, wrote to

John's dictation. Seven silver lamps light the otherwise dark room, and a threefold crack in the ceiling represents God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is a place of prayer, where memory and imagination meet and move outwards to be heard not only by God but also by his people. Pilgrims are drawn into the timeless rhythm of the divine liturgy that is the focus of monastic life, and they remember John, perhaps imagining him alone in his cave, hearing the voice of his Lord and calling him to write.

Communication with those he had left behind may have been interrupted, but John was not alone. As a writer in exile, John was in good company. Exile is one of the great themes of the Old Testament, the Bible John knew. The powerful writings of Isaiah and Jeremiah, warning, comforting, reassuring, speaking of punishment and return to the land God had given his people, are more familiar to us than the visions of Daniel that echo through the Apocalypse.

WRITING IN EXILE has a long tradition. Modern dictators know as well as Domitian how dangerous words can be. For more than a century, PEN International has supported authors from countries where writing deemed critical of the ruling regime can result in long prison sentences and even death. "In a country where open discourse and free expression are taboo, poetry becomes the only alternative outlet for information dissemination and empowering the citizenry," writes poet Collen Kajokoto from Zimbabwe, recipient of a PEN scholarship for Writers in Exile. In Turkey, only a short ferry ride away from Patmos, hundreds of journalists languish behind bars.

Articles and books by writers living in exile are often a lifeline, voices encouraging us to believe that, in the end, freedom will prevail. And they can sometimes speak for those who are prevented from speaking for themselves. A journalist from Afghanistan supported by PEN has to remain anonymous, but his website culturalfrontafghanistan.com tells the world what is happening inside his hermetically-sealed country. The Apocalypse gives away little about its writer – John was a common name – but we learn about the people for whom he writes, Christian communities in turmoil who are comforted and reassured that the world as they know it will end but the God they believe in will prevail. Like those of other writers in exile, John's words were a lifeline.

Natalie K. Watson is a theologian, writer and editor. She is leading the Tablet pilgrimage to Patmos and the Dodecanese Islands, 7-16 May. To book call 01252 226133 or visit mccabe-travel.co.uk, quoting "The Tablet".