

## RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN THE STUDY OF THE BOOK OF REVELATION

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The book of Revelation is currently recovering from 35 years of critical neglect. We are entering a new era of scholarly interest in the Apocalypse that may surpass even that of the beginning of this century, which is associated with such names as Charles, Swete, Allo, and Lohmeyer. This essay offers an overview and critique of four recently published books on Revelation. Two function as critical introductions to the book,<sup>1</sup> one addresses the issue of its Semitic background,<sup>2</sup> and one is a thematic study of Revelation's relationship to the NT gospel.<sup>3</sup>

### 1. *Two Critical Approaches*

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's *Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* is a collection of essays published in various places over a seventeen-year period.<sup>4</sup> The prologue attempts to bring unity to the essays by summarizing them in such a way as to reveal the unifying purpose behind their composition. The collection is a preliminary introduction to the author's forthcoming commentary on Revelation in the Hermeneia series.

Many readers will be disappointed that the previously published articles were not more extensively revised. Although there

<sup>1</sup>Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment* (Philadelphia, 1985); Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia, 1984).

<sup>2</sup>Steven Thompson, *The Apocalypse and Semitic Syntax*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 52 (Cambridge, Eng., 1985).

<sup>3</sup>Graeme Goldsworthy, *The Lion and the Lamb: The Gospel in Revelation* (New York, 1984).

<sup>4</sup>Of the volume's nine essays (including the prologue), six were published previously in journals and multi-author volumes, two were in the publication process, and one (the prologue) is unique to the book. See p. vi for a complete listing.

were hundreds of editorial changes,<sup>5</sup> they were not major and the literature citations were not updated. Nevertheless, the book is helpful for a number of reasons. First, it collects essays that many readers would have difficulty assembling otherwise. Second, the essays are far more impressive as a group than they are when read individually. Although published over a seventeen-year period, there is a remarkable consistency in the author's work. The volume reads as though it was written as a unit.

Schüssler Fiorenza asserts in her introduction that the failure of critical scholarship to provide a definitive interpretation of Revelation in its original setting argues for new approaches to the book's language and imagery. She calls for the integration of historical-critical and literary-critical paradigms so that a new literary-historical model of interpretation can emerge.

In the first two chapters, Schüssler Fiorenza explores whether Revelation is to be understood in terms of Jewish apocalyptic or NT eschatology. She contends for the latter on the grounds that the focus in Revelation is on the final judgment, the vindication of the Christian community, the shortness of time until the end, and God's kingdom,<sup>6</sup> rather than on world history as a whole (pp. 46-51). She realizes that this assertion can be disputed with regard to the two scrolls (Rev 4:1-15:4), but she views them as thematic rather than chronological.

Chapters 3-5 assess the relationship between the theology of Revelation and other Christian theologies which had an impact on the contemporary churches of Asia Minor. With exceptional thoroughness, the author shows that Revelation has as much in common with Paul and the Synoptic Apocalypse as it has with the Gospel of John. She suggests that the author of Revelation made an eclectic use of OT, apocalyptic, Pauline, and Johannine traditions, while perhaps being most at home with an early Christian prophetic-apocalyptic tradition.

<sup>5</sup>These changes consisted primarily in the rearrangement of words or their replacement with ones the author preferred. The most significant change was the consistent replacement throughout the book of the word "Apocalypse" with the word "Revelation." Several charts were also omitted. In the reviewer's opinion, the content of the essays was not altered significantly.

<sup>6</sup>Schüssler Fiorenza views God's kingdom in Revelation as a reality only in the Christian community, and not in the larger world.

Schüssler Fiorenza identifies John's opponents in Revelation with the enthusiasts of Corinth rather than with the Judaizers of Galatia or Colossae. These "Nicolaitans" practiced some form of libertine gnosticism which enabled them to participate in pagan society while professing Christianity. She argues that both Paul and John countered this libertine theology and its overrealized eschatology with the help of apocalyptic categories. Thus, the theology of Revelation was quite at home in the Pauline communities of Asia Minor.

In her last two chapters, Schüssler Fiorenza outlines her understanding of Revelation's message and the impact it might have had on the social situation of the Christian communities of Asia Minor. The heart of the author's message, a prophetic interpretation of the political and religious situation of the community, is indicated by the material in the structural center of the book (i.e., Rev 10:1-15:4).

That situation was characterized by social isolation, persecution, temporal deprivation, and the threat of violent death. As a result, many Christians (characterized as Nicolaitans, Balaam, and Jezebel) were advocating theological compromises which would enable them to participate actively in the commercial, political, and social life of their cities. In the face of this challenge, John paints the picture of heavenly realities to motivate them to take up his uncompromising stand toward the world. The readers are faced with a decision which will jeopardize either their lives and fortunes here and now or their lives and fortunes in the coming New Jerusalem. Through his symbolic universe the author transports the community onto a cosmic plane where decision for Christ can be seen in its true significance, independent of the vicissitudes of individual existence.

In contrast to Schüssler Fiorenza, Adela Yarbro Collins spends more time on traditional introductory questions, such as author and date, although the heart of her book is also concerned with issues of interpretation.

Yarbro Collins begins by addressing some of the basic assumptions with which people approach the book of Revelation. The historical-critical method, she asserts, while enlightening the modern reader as to the situation which a work addressed, also creates distance between the reader and the text. One must overcome this distance in order to determine the normative meaning of the text. Readers of Revelation have attempted to do this in three different

ways: precritically, critically, and postcritically. The precritical reader of a text is naive and gullible. He accepts his reading of the text at face value, totally unaware of the philosophical and sociological presuppositions that shape the way one understands the text. The critical reader attempts to examine both the text and the self with objectivity and detachment. While Yarbro Collins sees the critical reading of any text as basic, she hopes to lead her readers to a postcritical reading. "A postcritical reading of a text," she writes,

is one based on a lived, experienced knowledge of the text as a product of another time and place and as a flawed human product. At the same time there is an openness to a personal reinvolvement on a new level. There is recognition that a flawed, broken myth can still speak to our broken human condition (p. 22).

Following the Introduction are chapters on the authorship and date of Revelation. Yarbro Collins agrees with most scholars that the date is Domitianic. In dialogue with Schüssler Fiorenza, however, she contends that the author is an unknown Palestinian Jew whose self-understanding had been shaped by the traditions of the classical prophets rather than by some early Christian "prophetic school."

Yarbro Collins breaks new ground when she points out that there is very little evidence that Domitian persecuted the Christians (pp. 69-73). As a result, she argues that John was not so much writing to comfort Christians in a time of persecution, as to call their attention to a crisis that many of them did not perceive—a crisis brought about by the willingness of many to accommodate themselves to the pagan culture for economic, political, and social reasons.

Since the crisis that produced Revelation may not have been all that obvious to most Christians at the time, Yarbro Collins argues that apocalyptic arises out of the condition of "relative deprivation." In other words, the crucial element is not so much "whether one is actually oppressed, but whether one feels oppressed" (p. 84). The apocalyptic mentality arose because of the disparity between expectations and their satisfaction. Thus, "it was the tension between John's vision of the kingdom of God and his environment that moved him to write his Apocalypse" (p. 106).

Yarbro Collins addresses the social situation of the author and his readers in her first three chapters. Chapters 4 and 5 turn to the

effect that the Apocalypse had on its first readers and how it produced that effect. These chapters argue that Revelation's task was to overcome cognitive dissonance—the intolerable tension between hopeful faith and the reality that Christ had not returned and that the social situation of the Christian addressees had not improved when they became Christians (p. 141). The imagery of the Apocalypse was designed to provide a logical model capable of overcoming the tension. Yarbro Collins calls that model “social radicalism.” John was advocating social, political, and economic withdrawal from the life of the cities of Asia Minor.

How could he motivate the community to withdraw? Yarbro Collins suggests that the feeling of powerlessness caused by a marginal social situation was mitigated by the assurance that the community had access to privileged information of heavenly origin. That powerless situation was exactly where God wanted them to be. Although the forces of chaos were dominant at that time, their defeat was certain; and then roles would be reversed. This vision of a heavenly reality and of a radically new future, she asserts, functioned as compensation for the relatively disadvantaged situation of the first-century readers and hearers of the Apocalypse.

Yarbro Collins, however, goes even further. She argues that the book of Revelation exemplifies a type of transference. “When aggressive action,” she writes, “is not desirable and aggressive feelings cannot simply be suppressed or converted into other feelings and activities, the aggressive feelings may be transferred.” The aggression is transferred from the community to Christ, who makes war on its enemies, and from the past to the future, when Christ will deal with the community's opponents both within and without.

In her conclusion, Yarbro Collins takes off the mantle of the scholar and puts on the robe of the ordinary Christian who struggles to understand in what sense a book like the Apocalypse should be authoritative for him or her personally. A critical and post-critical reading of the book of Revelation has led Yarbro Collins to the conclusion that there is a failure of love in the Apocalypse. Love has been subordinated to justice. While Revelation does promote the cause of the poor and the powerless, the book tends to divide people and ideas into uncompromising categories of right and wrong which oversimplify the complexities of human society. Violence is portrayed as a solution to injustice.

In spite of these perceived shortcomings, Yarbro Collins argues that the Apocalypse can be taken critically and seriously in the

second half of the twentieth century. It encourages the church today to protest all institutions which reflect the characteristics of the demonic, and to ally itself with all movements that promote freedom, peace, justice, and reconciliation.

Although they disagree on many points of detail, both Schüssler Fiorenza and Yarbrow Collins break new ground in the study of the book of Revelation. They have issued a clarion call to understand the Apocalypse in terms of its author's concerns and his social situation before addressing what authority the book might have for the twentieth century. While this is not a new insight, sociological and literary paradigms are shedding fresh light on both the author's original situation and the needs a book like Revelation might address in today's world. These books cannot be ignored in the future study of Revelation. It is to be hoped that each of these scholars will soon provide a commentary on the text of the Apocalypse that will flesh out the insights expressed in their introductory works.<sup>7</sup>

These words of commendation do not ignore the fact that there are problems in both books. Schüssler Fiorenza seems to have dismissed the role of history in Revelation too lightly. Like 2 Thess 2 and the Synoptic Apocalypse, Revelation could well be addressing the community's concerns in terms of its place in history as well as its place in the kingdom of God. Likewise, although she has made a powerful case for the dissimilarity between Revelation and the fourth gospel, other lines of research suggest a fundamental unity of thought between the two.<sup>8</sup> One could also wish that Schüssler Fiorenza had given more attention to the Judaizing heresy and its impact on Revelation (cf. Rev 2:9 and 3:9). But these are mere quibbles.

The major concern with Yarbrow Collins's book is the suspicion that her postcritical approach has at times been overly critical

<sup>7</sup>Schüssler Fiorenza has been commissioned to produce the commentary on Revelation in the Hermeneia series. In Nov. 1985 she indicated that publication was still a few years away. Another capable scholar, David Aune, may complete a commentary along similar lines before the end of the decade for the Word Biblical Commentary series.

<sup>8</sup>See Otto Bocher's contribution to the Uppsala Colloquium, "Das Verhältnis der Apokalypse des Johannes zum Evangelium des Johannes," in *L'Apocalypse johannique et l'Apocalyptique dans le Nouveau Testament* (Gembloux, 1980), pp. 289-301.

toward the text. She freely admits that the bottom line of post-critical interpretation is the reader's own "critically interpreted present experience" (p. 167). Unfortunately, human beings are often naive, even in their self-critical objectivity. Time and again scholarly debate has uncovered flaws in the interpretation of even the most self-critical scholars. The scholarly consensus of one generation becomes the precritical naivete of the next. Thus, we must approach Yarbro Collins's concluding assertions with great care. For example, she faults the author of Revelation for seeing the world in discrete categories of right and wrong. But we must not forget that Paul and Jesus were also intolerant by our standards (see, e.g., Matt 12:30; Luke 11:23; 14:26-33; Mark 9:43,45,47; 1 Cor 5:1-5; 2 Thess 3:6,14). The NT documents exhibit a continual tension between loving acceptance and uncompromising faithfulness. At what point can the text be allowed to challenge our "critically interpreted present experience"? In Revelation we experience an author who speaks to those who "have their backs against the wall." While he offers them encouragement in Christ, he also exhorts them to uncompromising faithfulness at a time in which tolerance might only breed compromise, resulting in the loss of the gospel and the gravest of consequences for a world under judgment. Perhaps it is a secular generation like ours, in which tolerance and acceptance are proclaimed as a way of life, that needs to be reminded by John that there are truths that are worth dying for.

While acknowledging the danger inherent in Yarbro Collins's concluding assertions, we must commend her for the openness with which she has approached an issue that many with less courage have wrestled with in private. The best safeguard against precritical naivete is the self-correcting influence of scholarly debate. In her willingness to dialogue publicly with us, Yarbro Collins has served us well.

## 2. *A Linguistic Approach*

Another recent book that is important for every Revelation scholar's library is Steven Thompson's *Apocalypse and Semitic Syntax*. Thompson's observations impact on nearly every exegetical detail of the book of Revelation.

The book grows out of a doctoral dissertation supervised by Matthew Black at the University of St. Andrews. After a brief

survey of previous work on the Semitic background of the Apocalypse,<sup>9</sup> Thompson offers a short chapter on the current status of the text. The heart of his book deals with specific examples of Semitic influence on the meaning of Greek verbs (chapter 2), on the verbal syntax (chapter 3), and on the clause (chapter 4) in the Apocalypse. He closes the volume with some observations concerning the larger implications of his work for the ongoing study of the book of Revelation (chapter 5). In addition to a bibliography and general index, there is an index of references to biblical and other ancient materials. This makes *The Apocalypse and Semitic Syntax* an invaluable reference tool for the study of Revelation.

Of the multitude of exegetical insights afforded by the book, space permits listing only a few. For example, Thompson indicates that the Greek aorist tense in the Apocalypse normally translates the Hebrew perfect. Thus it is not necessarily punctiliar, but often expresses the sense of the Hebrew prophetic perfect (p. 37). In addition, the Greek present tends to translate the Hebrew participle, the future translates the imperfect, and the Greek perfect generally carries the force of one of the derived conjugations in the Hebrew (cf. the chart on p. 53). Thompson also notes that verbal clauses in Revelation often retain the word order that would be common to such a construction in the Hebrew, and that one should not expect to find a precise temporal relationship between the participle and the main verb, as is the case in classical Greek. As one can see from these examples, much previous work on the book of Revelation may need to be revised in the light of Thompson's findings.

Thompson's most basic contribution is to clarify the nature of Revelation's peculiar language. Most of the "barbarisms," he suggests, are due to the influence of Semitic syntax, which overpowers the rules of Greek grammar (p. 107). "In the Apocalypse," he writes, "the Greek language was little more than a membrane, stretched tightly over a Semitic framework, showing many essential contours from beneath" (p. 108). While this is not a new suggestion, the book broadens the base of evidence. Thompson speculates that for the author "the necessity of expressing sacred themes in a Gentile tongue was rendered less distasteful" by preserving the syntax of OT language.

<sup>9</sup>Bousset, Laughlin, Charles, Scott, Allo, Torrey, Lancellotti, Mussies, Rydbeck, Mandilaras, Bakker, Turner, and Beyer.

That conclusion leads to Thompson's most radical proposition: the book of Revelation was little influenced by the Hebrew and Aramaic of the first century, since its primary source was the language of the OT prophets—i.e., biblical Hebrew and Aramaic (pp. 1, 34, 56, 57, 107). This points the exegete to the OT background of the thought and imagery of the book. While the social and literary setting of Asia Minor (discussed above in relation to the books by Schüssler Fiorenza and Yarbro Collins) is important, Thompson holds that the author of Revelation will be misunderstood unless full weight is given to the overwhelmingly OT flavor of his account. In the drive to understand the first-century meaning of Revelation, therefore, examination of the OT background must play a central role.

Thompson's book does not make for light reading. It is, as one would expect from the subject matter, rather ponderous and full of minute details. That, however, is typical of most reference works, and many of its purchasers will use it primarily for reference. The reader will note that in a number of places Thompson's examples could be interpreted differently than they are. On the other hand, the work exudes a general solidity which lends confidence to his conclusions. *The Apocalypse and Semitic Syntax* should change the way exegetes of the Apocalypse do things. From now on the student of Revelation's language must be fully aware of Hebrew meanings, grammar, and syntax, as well as of NT Greek.

### 3. *A Theological Approach*

Graeme Goldsworthy's *The Lion and the Lamb* is fittingly subtitled *The Gospel in Revelation*. The author addresses the question of how the content of Revelation relates to the NT gospel. Although the book has a contemporary emphasis that is almost devotional at times, it argues persuasively that the gospel is the central theme of the Apocalypse.

Goldsworthy takes a theological approach in which he assesses the relationship of various aspects of Revelation to its central theme. Following an introduction, in which he argues the need to take the author's perspective seriously, Goldsworthy has written ten chapters to demonstrate that all portions of the Apocalypse—the prologue and epilogue, the letters to the churches, the key symbols, the hymnic material, and even the prophetic and apocalyptic visions—share in the basic NT perspective of justification by

faith and the tension between the two ages. Following an appendix on the mark of the beast, the book concludes with a subject index and a list of biblical references.

If Goldsworthy's basic thesis is correct, that Revelation shares the same basic theological substructure as the rest of the NT, it would further underline recent scholarly studies into the apocalyptic nature of Paul's letters and the gospels. The NT writers saw no dichotomy between salvation and eschatology. For them the salvific coming of Jesus ushered in the OT "Day of Yahweh." Though the consummation was still future, in Christ the new age had overlapped the old. Goldsworthy's contribution is to show that while Revelation, in its use of the language and structure of the OT, seems to share in its eschatological viewpoint, it has modified that viewpoint to reflect the NT perspective of the two ages. Thus John's apocalyptic visions cannot be rightly understood unless they are approached from the NT eschatological point of view, whether or not Christ or the gospel is explicitly named in a given passage. Recent studies demonstrating the essential unity of the Apocalypse support this thesis, since the gospel perspective of the letters to the churches and the hymnic material is unquestionable.

The weakness of Goldsworthy's book lies in the fact that he appears to have an ax to grind. His definition of the gospel is limited to the historical act of the Christ-event, and is not to be confused with regeneration or sanctification. While one may not disagree with his reiteration of the classical Protestant position over against Trent and Cardinal Newman, it is to be questioned whether that debate fairly addresses what is going on in the book of Revelation. Goldsworthy fears that traditional interpretations of Revelation undermine this "pure gospel," and in his zeal to reclaim John's Apocalypse for the Reformation he at times overstates his case.

In spite of this weakness, Goldsworthy's basic thesis is true to the text. Revelation opens with a summation of the Christian view of God, Christ, salvation, and eschatology (Rev 1:4-8). The major apocalyptic visions are then preceded by images of Christ that transform the OT sanctuary into a Christian house of worship (note esp. Rev 1:12-20; and chapters 4 and 5). The victory of God is founded on the Lamb that was slain, and the Lion and the Lamb become symbols of the two ages of suffering and glory (Rev 5:5,6). The letters to the churches emphasize that "the good works of the

people of God are part of the apocalyptic struggle between the reigning Christ and the powers of darkness" (p. 80). Goldsworthy is of the opinion that John uses the hymnic material scattered throughout the book as a gospel-oriented framework to mitigate the apparently Christless bleakness of the apocalyptic sections. Even the apocalyptic material, with no readily apparent Christian emphasis, contains themes and vocabulary common to other NT passages.<sup>10</sup> In so doing, it becomes apparent that the apocalyptic war is played out in everyday life as much as at the cosmic level. Thus it is a distortion to see Revelation as primarily a vengeful diatribe against Rome. The heart of the book is the work of Christ and the experience of those who are faithful to him.

#### 4. *Summary Evaluation*

What direction should the study of Revelation take in the light of the four books reviewed here? Current scholarly interest focuses on historical, literary, and sociological concerns. Schüssler Fiorenza and Yarbrow Collins have reaped well-deserved acclaim for their contributions to the discussion. Exegetes cannot ignore these concerns if they wish to understand John's message and the impact it may have had on his audience in Asia Minor.

Current scholarly interests, however, are often pursued to the neglect of other areas of equal importance. The impact of the OT and the early Christian traditions on the thought of the author and his audience has been seriously neglected in much recent scholarship. The books by Thompson and Goldsworthy provide a corrective to the current trend.

Thompson forces us to note that the language and imagery of Revelation betray much more dependence on OT language and thought than on Jewish or Greek apocalypses. It is now also clear that John studiously avoided the constructions common to the rabbis and sectarian Jews in favor of the syntax of the Hebrew OT. Thus, as Thompson points out, John models himself on the OT prophets rather than on any contemporary model. Goldsworthy

<sup>10</sup>Note, e.g., the allusion to Luke 10:17-20 in Rev 9:1-4. Apocalyptic passages also contain exhortations to the individual reader that are reminiscent of other NT writers. Cf. Rev 16:15 with Mark 13:35-37, Matt 24:43,44, Luke 12:39,40, 1 Thess 5:2,4, and 2 Pet 3:10. Cf. Rev 18:4 with 2 Cor 6:17, Matt 24:15,16, and parallel passages.

reminds us that the basic message of Revelation is one that is Christian. Although heavily symbolic in nature and written in the language of OT history and prophecy, Revelation is more a Christian book than a Jewish one. The recent books by these two authors indicate that an overemphasis on the historical, literary, and social setting of Revelation to the neglect of the OT and NT backgrounds will result in a misunderstanding of the message of the Apocalypse.

That fact does not deny the need for basic exegesis of the Apocalypse. But the complexity of that book, indicated anew by the divergent concerns our four authors have expressed, suggests that a broader, more theological method of exegesis is necessary to do justice to Revelation.

Therefore, having done the basic exegesis, the exegete needs to consider the impact of the OT language and idioms on the passage. An essential part of the exegetical process must be to assess, on the basis of the context, the extent to which a given passage is to be read in terms of standard Greek or in light of the Semitic background. Attention must also be given to literary and thematic allusions to the OT.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, it is clear that John's experience with Jesus has led him in the Apocalypse to transform thoroughly the OT materials with which he was working. Thus, rather than trying to impose OT concepts and structures upon Revelation, we must interpret these concepts through the prism of the Christ-event. The correct interpretation of Revelation will be one that is fundamentally Christian.

Taken together, the four books we have discussed are helpful toward providing a balanced basis for future study of Revelation. The wealth of recent literature suggests that significant advances in the understanding of this enigmatic book may be forthcoming.

<sup>11</sup>This is an area of great complexity in which much work needs to be done. This reviewer plans to publish in the field of OT allusions in Revelation at a future time.