

Revelation. By Ben Witherington, III. New Cambridge Bible Commentary. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 307 pp., \$19.99.

Under the general editorship of Ben Witherington III, the New Cambridge Bible Commentary (NCBC) has issued its first volume, *Revelation*. The remarkably prolific Witherington has set the pace for the series by authoring its first entry, adding to his already impressive list of New Testament commentaries. From the brief list of forthcoming volumes in the series, it appears that evangelical scholarship will be well represented (Craig Keener will author the volume on the Corinthian correspondence, while Craig Evans has been assigned Matthew).

The Apocalypse has hardly suffered neglect over the past decade. The mammoth contributions of Beale, Aune, and most recently Osborne have ensured that pastors and exegetes will be well equipped for years to come. Witherington's commentary does not attempt to match the "big three" in length or depth. Instead, he brings the insights of the past twenty years of research down to a level where laypeople ("a wide range of intellectually curious individuals," as the introduction states) may appropriate them for their own thinking and teaching.

One helpful feature that will be a fixture in all volumes of the NCBC is a suggested reading list, in which the author highlights the most helpful and influential works in the field and summarizes their contributions. This gives the uninitiated a quick snapshot of current scholarly thinking and sets the stage for later interaction in the commentary with secondary literature.

Each section of the commentary proper is laid out as follows. First, the text of the NRSV is reproduced. Witherington then provides general comments on the main interpretive issues of each paragraph. At least one excursus ("A Closer Look") addresses a key background or theological issue in each section. For example, the Closer Look for Revelation 12 discusses the "Mythological Background" of the chapter. Several paragraphs of applicational thoughts ("Bridging the Contexts") summarize Witherington's reflections on the present-day significance of Revelation's message. Witherington here depends heavily on Eugene Peterson's *Reversed Thunder* and Allan Boesak's liberation-theological *Comfort and Protest*.

Witherington largely limits his interaction with other scholarship to the footnotes. While he helpfully incorporates the views of more recent commentators (such as M. Reddish [2001] and C. Keener [2002]), he seems to have paid scant attention to Beale's in-depth work on the use of the Old Testament in Revelation. One might also wish, given the North American context within which Witherington is writing, that he would address more satisfactorily the dispensational interpretation that continues to hold sway in the popular imagination. Although he mentions the popular belief in a pretribulation rapture several times, his cavalier dismissal of the doctrine would not go very far in convincing a reader who holds to such a view. Witherington's discussion of the millennium, on the other hand, is very well

done; he devotes a substantial appendix to the issue and builds a very strong case for a premillennial understanding of Revelation 20.

In his interpretive approach, Witherington is consistently middle-of-the-road. He claims to combine the best of the idealist, preterist, and futurist interpretations. Thus, he is not averse to reading Babylon as Rome or referring the seal judgments to events contemporary with John. Neither, though, does he deny that John expects a real future escalation of tribulation and persecution.

One area in which Witherington strives to be innovative is his application of rhetorical criticism to the text of Revelation. This must be judged less than successful, though, for he fails to provide convincing evidence that Greco-Roman rhetorical strategies are really at play in Revelation. For example, is it really helpful to label the contrast between Babylon the Harlot and New Jerusalem the Bride as “*epideictic sunkrisis*” combined with *ekphrasis*? Would John have described his strategy this way, or would he have pointed to Old Testament precedents (e.g. personified Wisdom vs. the strange woman) as providing him with a model?

With regard to introductory issues, Witherington follows the consensus. The book was written during Domitian’s reign. The author is not to be identified with John the son of Zebedee (nor John the Presbyter) and is not the author of the Fourth Gospel or the Johannine Epistles, although he may have been a part of the Johannine community that produced those works. The social setting of Revelation is one of real persecution (contra L. Thompson) but this persecution was neither centralized nor widespread, as a previous generation of commentators held.

On the whole, Witherington’s work provides the reader with a brief manageable treatment of the text and interpretation of Revelation. The commentary would be appropriate for use in an undergraduate course on Revelation, or perhaps in an English exegesis course in a seminary setting. For pastors pressed for time, Witherington may fit the bill, but more serious students of Revelation will want to devote their attention to the more expansive treatments offered by Beale, Aune, and Osborne.

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Occupy until I Come: A. T. Pierson and the Evangelization of the World. By Dana L. Robert. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003, 322 pp., \$32.00; *The Kingdom Is Always but Coming: A Life of Walter Rauschenbusch.* By Christopher H. Evans. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004, 348 pp., \$25.00.

These latest volumes in the Library of Religious Biography offer a vivid comparison and contrast between two of America’s most influential Christian leaders during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Arthur Tappan Pierson, recognized as the “Father of Fundamentalism,” was