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Review: Revelation

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struggle to confront the issue of James's literary unity is engaged with a greater attention to exegetical detail in Nystrom's commentary than in Richardson's. The end result, however, only underscores the amount of work which remains to be done in the study of this frequently overlooked gem in the NT canon.

Clearly the concept of a Biblical commentary is undergoing a transition in American evangelicalism, with interest shifting away from the hard science of historical interpretation towards the process of contextualizing the Biblical message into the contemporary scene. In this climate, two concluding observations are perhaps appropriate. First, any attempt to illuminate the contemporary significance of Holy Scripture must begin with a convincing analysis of the text's ancient meaning. This task can only be treated as an unwanted distraction at our own peril. Secondly, due to the lack of consensus on the methodology of moving the Biblical message into contemporary life, it might after all be better to reserve the genre of Biblical commentary for the discussion of the ancient meaning. Taking Nystrom's treatment of the contemporary significance of James's letter as an example, one might fairly wonder if the lengthy series of anecdotes from the commentator's own ministry really illumine the Biblical message in a way that a well-written explanation of James's message to the ancient Church would not. Given that the length of Nystrom's commentary exceeds that of more weighty academic treatments, have I really gained anything by assigning my students to read this volume rather than, say, P. Davids's work in the New International Greek Testament Commentary series (Eerdmans), or for the English reader S. Laws's in Harper's New Testament Commentary (Harper)? I am not sure the students themselves would think so.

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Revelation By J. Ramsey Michaels. IVP New Testament Commentary. Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997, 265 pp., \$17.99.

Michaels daringly begins his brief commentary with this quote from *The Devil's Dictionary*: Revelation is "a famous book in which St. John the Divine concealed all that he knew. The revealing is done by the commentators, who know nothing" (p. 13).

According to Michaels, Revelation is a "prophetic letter" rather than an "apocalypse." Its first-person style makes it a "spiritual autobiography, a testimony or personal narrative" of what the author saw and heard on Patmos. John, for example, was amazed at what he saw and responded emotionally to it (5:5, 17:6).

The traditional date for the book may be accurate, says Michaels, but Revelation addresses a *perceived* crisis, rather than actual persecution; it is a wake-up call to Christians who do not realize they are in danger. John depicts the Church and the Roman Empire on a collision course because of a growing culture of compromise and complacency within the Church.

Michaels calls his interpretation of the book a "qualified literalism" that takes explicit predictions of the future as genuine prophecies, but sees most of chaps. 4–22 as a "series of first-century visions containing promises and warnings to Christian believers always and everywhere" (pp. 25–26). What John presents is simply what he saw, not the literal course of future events.

The purpose of Revelation is to warn Christians to maintain an honest and forthright testimony in spite of the threat of persecution. The one sin that stands out above all others in the book is lying—pretending to be something one is not. John warns that the "cowardly" and "all liars" will be refused entrance into the New Jerusalem. These include Judaizing Gentiles, who are fearful of being seen by Rome as distinct from

Jews, and Nicolaitans, immoral prophet-teachers who are urging Christians to compromise with Roman values and religion in order to win social acceptance

The seven "letters" (Revelation 2-3) are not letters at all, but the oracles of a prophet, given in the name of Christ. The "overcomers" in each congregation are those who "triumph" over hypocrisy and complacency, following the model of Christ himself (3:21)

Michaels dances around several possible interpretations of the Beast's number 666 (13:18), but ultimately deduces that the number may simply mean that the Beast (which somehow represents the Roman Empire and its ruler) is evil and will be "like Nero." He concludes that John presents a premillennial view of Christ's return, but this does not tell us much about future chronology, since Jesus did not literally return when the Roman Empire came to an end.

The commentaries in this IVP series are designed to be useful to pastors and Bible study leaders, however, teachers of Revelation would be better advised to consult the more extensive works by Mounce, Beasley-Murray, Ladd, and Walvoord. Michaels tries to enliven his commentary by including homiletical illustrations and applications, but his overemphasis on the visions in contrast to their meaning as future prophecy will make it more difficult for readers to trace the Biblical author's purpose. This is deadening for a commentary, especially on the Apocalypse.

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Challenges to New Testament Theology: An Attempt to Justify the Enterprise. By Peter Balla. WUNT 95. Tübingen: Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1997, xv + 284 pp., DM 98.00 paper.

This book is "a version of [the author's] thesis brought up-to-date" (p. viii). The title is an accurate indication of the author's objective. Balla attempts to justify the enterprise of NT theology, which, as most seminarians know, is questioned by many in the academy on two counts: first, that the NT canon is a theological and artificial delimiting of the textual evidence for early Christian thought, and second, that "theology," in that singular, titular fashion, overlooks the real truth that even in the "artificial" NT canon there exist multiple "theologies." Thus, it is claimed, one should rather speak of and engage early Christian theolog-*ies* rather than NT theology.

Balla's point of departure is a reaffirmation by H. Raisanen (*Beyond New Testament Theology*, 1990) of the declaration by W. Wrede in 1897: "the name New Testament theology is wrong in both its terms. The appropriate name for the subject-matter is early Christian history of religion, or rather the history of early Christian religion and theology" (p. 1). Balla revisits those scholars most responsible for this redefinition (D. F. Strauss, F. C. Baur, H. Koester, R. Bultmann, *et al.*) and begins the process of defining and refining terms and concepts in ways that make his case. The result is that he wrests the idea of NT theology back from the liberals. To his credit, he splits hairs with the best of them. And anyone who has had to earn a degree under conditions of ideological dissonance can appreciate the struggle. However, evangelicals may not be entirely satisfied with what he delivers: an enterprise so carefully defined that we may be content to say that only the confessional approach can be properly called NT theology, let the academic approach claim whatever it will.

Balla's first thesis is that one may properly speak of and study the NT as a canon because when "a group of Christians separates its writing from the writings of another group of Christians, the historian is justified in making the distinction between 'canons.' The New Testament emerged as one part of Christianity. Thus, the



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