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12-2013

Review of Revelation

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Recommended Citation

Luter, A. Boyd. Review of Revelation, by Paige Patterson. *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 56, no. 4 (December 2013): 894-96.

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Revelation. By Paige Patterson. New American Commentary. Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2012, 411 pp., \$29.99.

Paige Patterson (Ph.D., New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary) is President and Professor of Theology at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, also occupying the L.R. Scarborough Chair of Evangelism at SWBTS. Patterson has also published smaller, and more popularly written, commentaries on the Song of Songs, 1 Corinthians, Titus and 1 Peter, as well as articles and book chapters in the field of theology.

The current commentary has been in preparation for over 20 years (a point the author strongly implies in his Acknowledgements [p.9]). Apparently, the demands of Patterson's roles at Southwestern, in the Southern Baptist Convention and ministries and other activities worldwide, and in serving as a New Testament Consulting Editor for the New American Commentary series, significantly slowed the completion of this volume. This reviewer recalls rumors that its release was imminent as early as 2000-2001, and shortly thereafter saw an online comment purported to be written by a recommender who had supposedly read a prepublication copy of the manuscript. Thinking the commentary would surely appear soon, that was the point in time when I initially requested the opportunity to review this view. Obviously, that request proved to be quite a bit premature.

Among more recent commentaries on the Apocalypse, Patterson's NAC volume carves out something of a niche of its own. That is not easy to do with a biblical book on which numerous at least broadly evangelical commentaries have been released in the last two decades. For example, it is not as scholarly—or lengthy—as works like Beale's massive NIGTC volume or even Smalley's free-standing work. It is not as compact and readable as Michaels' contribution to the IVPNTC series or as practical as Keener's NIV Application Commentary work. In general "feel" (i.e., readability and length), it most reminds this reviewer of Mounce's 1997 revision of his NICNT volume.

In producing this distinctive volume, it is hard to tell whether Patterson felt somewhat restricted by the stated series design of the New American Commentary (see the Editors' Preface on pp. 7-8). Specifically, in the Introduction, he focuses pages 45-48 on "Preaching the Apocalypse," which discussion includes a number of helpful general preaching tips summarized from his article on that subject in *Faith and Mission* in 1994. However, Patterson does not follow up consistently on that implied desire to help pastors and teachers reading his work to more effectively expound the book of Revelation. To his credit, Patterson does intersperse seven excurses—six of which are titled "Pastoral Excursus on..."—in what appears to be an attempt to make the commentary somewhat more practical for ministry. However, there is no clear rhyme or reason why he chose the topics for the excurses or the related passages. For example, there are no excurses related to chapters 1-3, 5-9 or 19-22, areas of the book that contain a number of passages with potentially important pastoral/practical ramifications.

This commentary has several notable strengths to commend it. *First*, Patterson brings to bear his lively personality, near encyclopedic wider reading and infectious communication style very effectively in the writing of this volume. Accordingly, it is nothing if not interesting to read. *Second*, given the NAC's series subtitle—"An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture"—Patterson took his assignment seriously and accomplished these twin aims

quite well: there is much attention given to text critical and close exegetical/grammatical issues and many of his theological conclusions strongly reflect his theological commitments drawn from elsewhere in Scripture. *Third*, the Introduction section (pp. 17-51) leaves no reader in doubt as to where Patterson stand on the issues he chooses to treat. *Fourth*, there are several points at which Patterson helpfully critiques the NIV translation, which the NAC series employs as the written text before each section of the book—and offers his own rendering. *Fifth*, the commentary bibliography includes a wide variety of sources on the Apocalypse all the way from the ancient church to 2008, and Patterson actually does quote—often at great length—from a significant majority of them. *Sixth*, Patterson is to be commended for making it clear that it is quite possible to hold a pretribulational position without being a full-blown dispensationalist (e.g., p. 41). *Seventh*, his discussion that extends the identity of “Babylon the Great” back to the attitude exemplified by those who built the Tower of Babel is highly perceptive, not falling into the common nearsighted “rebuilt Babylon” view of many pretribulationists. *Eighth*, Patterson is correct in his assertion that there will be “one people of God” in the New Jerusalem (see Revelation 21:12, 14), though there will be no mistaking the continuing distinctiveness of Israel and the church (p. 370). In that passage, he admirably allows the implications of the text to speak for themselves.

There are, however, also a number of weaknesses to be noted, several of which this reviewer sees as the “other side”—or downside—of strengths listed above. *First*, some of Patterson’s close attention to exegetical detail is near-sighted and not balanced with a sense of the “big picture” of the wider movement/structure of the book. *Second*—and relatedly, in an era in which the field of literary structural studies—including in relation to the Apocalypse—has exploded with a host of valuable insights for biblical exposition, Patterson limits himself to strongly asserting that 1:19 is the key to understanding Revelation’s structure (pp. 32-34), then offering the identical outline he prepared for the *Criswell Study Bible* in 1979 as the basis for his exposition (p. 48). *Third*, for a book as complex as Revelation, the Introduction section is very brief: only 34 out of the 369 total pages of the commentary, or about 9 per cent. *Fourth*, it is not at all clear that many of Patterson’s extended citations in his footnotes are that relevant beyond a sentence or two, or occasionally a short paragraph, but certainly not justifying the amount of material he chose to include... over and over. *Fifth*, the bibliography listing is limited almost exclusively to book-length treatments, essentially overlooking the great wealth of journal articles and other shorter sources produced over the past several decades. *Sixth*, the otherwise helpful “Scripture Index” (pp. 407-11) inexplicably ends with Jude, containing no references to the book of Revelation (p. 411). *Seventh*, there are several errata worth noting (e.g., p. 39 states that Revelation 20:1-10 mentions “1,000 years” five times, when it actually does so six times [20:2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7]; p. 42 reads “all will confirm outwardly to the millennial reign of Christ” when it clearly should read “conform”; and p. 233 reads “The significance of this statement can scarcely be underestimated” when “overestimated” is obviously intended. *Eighth*, Revelation is virtually universally understood today as being saturated with echoes of/allusions to the Hebrew Bible and the Gospels—many of which are strikingly clear. Thus—to point out but two obvious examples, it is quite surprising that Patterson offers no discussion of: 1) the side-by-side citations of Daniel 7:13 and Zechariah 12:10—not to mention Jesus’ allusion to both passages in Matthew 24:30—in his comments on Revelation 1:7 (pp. 62-63); or 2) the parallelism between the unsealing of the

scroll in Revelation 6 (pp. 175-189) and the “beginning of birth pains” portion of the Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24.

In regard to a recommendation, it is the opinion of this reviewer that the question should be approached in two ways. *First*, without question, when Paige Patterson’s *Revelation* is compared to the standards for the NAC series set forth in the Editor’s Preface (pp. 7-8), it should be considered eminently successful. With that in mind, this volume can be strongly recommended to its intended audience: “the minister or Bible student who wants to understand and expound the Scriptures.”

Second, for the purpose of learning from what has already been done to enhance future endeavors, this reviewer will close on a note of “what might have been.” The NAC series editorial standards were set in the later 1980s (p. 8). The ensuing two and a half decades, however, have seen the bar raised considerably in the field of evangelical commentary writing, notably in areas such as more careful and detailed attention to literary structure, exegesis that is more closely connected to the wider contextual flow, intertextuality and suggestiveness for application. Given Paige Patterson’s considerable ability, and with more than 20 years invested in focused study of the Apocalypse just for this 1980s style commentary released by Broadman & Holman, this reviewer firmly believes he was capable of a treatment of Revelation that was stronger exegetically, theologically and homiletically/practically. Had Dr. Patterson chosen to draw upon the abundant fruit available from such helpful emerging trends in biblical studies/commentary writing, this reviewer is convinced that he might be reviewing not just—as it is—a very helpful exposition, but one that rivaled—if not surpassed—Robert Thomas’s two-volume work as the standard pretribulational commentary of at least the past 25 years on Revelation.

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