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Lifelines: The Book of Revelation

With the approach of the year 2000, thoughts are turning to questions of time, the future, and the extent to which there is an ultimate purpose to the world. In Christian circles, the next couple of years will be marked by books, conferences, and maybe sermons, on the theme of eschatology. The definitive guide to thinking about the last things will of course be issue four of *Anvil* next year, which is devoted to eschatology, with Professor Trevor Hart as guest editor. Do remember to renew your subscription in time!

In this context, our interpretation of the single most sustained piece of apocalyptic writing in the NT – the book of Revelation – becomes highly significant. Revelation's reputation as the preserve of eccentrics has led to a certain reluctance to engage with it. Yet this book has immense and profound resources for theological reflection and Christian living.

I would guess that many readers of *Anvil* might have on their shelves one or more of the following excellent books on Revelation dating from the 1960s and 1970s: the commentaries by George Beasley-Murray (Eerdmans, 1978), George Caird (Black, 1966), Robert Mounce (Eerdmans, 1977), and the Bible Speaks Today volume by Michael Wilcock (IVP, 1975). These are all still very much worth consulting. But the last twenty years have seen an enormous growth in interest in apocalyptic literature in general and in Revelation in particular. The aim of this article is to introduce readers to some of the main debates of the last few years, and to the most significant books which have emerged. I have listed at the end of the article the half dozen 'must read' books for anyone wanting to look in depth at current scholarly discussions.

Broadly, the recent debates about Revelation break down into two main areas: first, what sort of text is it? and second, what is the purpose of the text?¹

1 The more traditional questions of authorship and date of Revelation continue to be addressed, of course, but there has been no great shift in thinking on these issues over the last two or three decades. Most scholars argue that the John of Revelation was neither John the apostle, nor the author of the Gospel of John, but a Christian prophet based in Asia Minor. They would also

argue for a date of around AD 95, towards the end of the reign of Domitian. For an eloquent statement of a minority view (John the son of Zebedee wrote Revelation in the 60s); see Stephen Smalley, *Thunder and Love: John's Revelation and John's Community*, Word Books, Milton Keynes 1994, pp 40-50.

What sort of text is it?

There has been an important and continuing debate about the literary genre of Revelation. It has been described variously as an apocalypse, a prophecy, and a letter, or a combination of more than one of these. Before you decide to skip this section, it's worth remembering that decisions about the genre to which a text is thought to belong are most important for the way we interpret it. For example, a decision to classify a text as an apocalypse will naturally lead the interpreter to compare that text with other ancient apocalypses, looking for similarities in the use of symbolism, and so on.

But what exactly is an apocalypse? This provoked a considerable amount of discussion in the late 1970s and 1980s, in which scholars sought to agree on a set of features which could be held to characterise apocalypses. A general consensus emerged, to the effect that an apocalypse takes narrative form, involving disclosures by an otherworldly being to a human recipient. These disclosures relate to transcendent reality which is both temporal (envisaging eschatological salvation) and spatial (involving the supernatural world). The function of apocalypses is to influence both the understanding and behaviour of their audience.²

Most scholars accept this kind of definition, which enables them to count Revelation as an apocalypse. A minority are however uneasy about this conclusion. They argue that Jewish apocalyptic literature is marked by a strongly deterministic view of history, in which events proceed on a rigidly pre-ordained path. Revelation, on the other hand, aims to encourage people to repent and thus allow their destiny to be changed. On this view, Revelation should be seen not as an apocalypse at all, but rather as a prophecy, demanding a response.³

Although a large amount of scholarly energy has been devoted to this question – and continues to be devoted to it – there is a danger that we lose sight of the point that genre is a complex issue and that to seek to press texts into only one genre, to the exclusion of others, can be unnecessary and misleading. I would argue that the peculiar form of Revelation requires that it be read *both* as an apocalypse, painting a panoramic picture of God's dealings with the universe, *and* as a prophecy, urging its readers and hearers to repent and remain faithful to Christ. This multi-layered character of Revelation, addressing the particular and the universal, makes it such a rich document.

One text or many?

In his great commentary of 1920 (published in T. & T. Clark's ICC series and still in print!), R. H. Charles argued that the mysterious nature of Revelation results

2 Those interested in pursuing these discussions in detail should consult two issues of the journal *Semeia* (issue 14 from 1979, and issue 36 from 1986). A stimulating contribution to the study of apocalyptic as a whole, including the Book of Revelation, is Christopher Rowland's *The Open Heaven*, SPCK, London 1982. Rowland's key argument is that apocalyptic literature is

fundamentally about the disclosure of heavenly secrets, to influence life in the present, rather than necessarily about predicting the future.

3 A recent defence of this view is F. D. Mazzaferri, *The Book of Revelation from a Source-Critical Perspective*, de Gruyter, Berlin 1989.

partly from the way different sources were combined, sometimes in a peculiar order: the task of the critic was therefore to disentangle the document and reconstruct it. There has of course been a strong reaction against this kind of 'scissors-and-paste' scholarship over the last few years. Most scholars dealing with the text today acknowledge that although it may contain material from various original sources, we should do justice to the final form of the text. Recent work, especially that by Richard Bauckham, has shown just how intricate and unified the whole text of the book really is.

Whether one regards the text as a composite of various different sources, or as a unified whole, there remains the question of how it fits together. Which parts should be understood as belonging with which? For example, how much of the text should be taken as representing the contents of the scrolls on chapters five and ten? Are these different scrolls at all, or different references to the same scroll? And so on, and so on. Attempts to provide a convincing explanation for the structure of Revelation have mushroomed in the last few years.⁴ Yet we are no nearer a consensus. This does not prevent us reaching conclusions about the overall message of the book. But it does leave considerable scope for different interpretations of particular passages. One obvious example is the question of whether chapters 19-20 should be seen as a single sequence, which could be used to support the view that the millennial kingdom is to be understood as a future event. The more 'mainstream' amillennialist view, which regards the millennium of Revelation 20 as a picture of the present age, requires there to be a clear break in the sequence, from the future back into the past, at the beginning of chapter 20. This second view is theologically more attractive to many, but (I believe) harder to read from the text.⁵

So the recent debates about what sort of text Revelation is, and how it is constructed, have produced a measure of agreement in some areas. Elsewhere, interpretations still differ widely. In some ways, more interesting and theologically-stimulating debate has surrounded the *purpose* of the text, and I now turn to this.

What is the purpose of the text?

There is widespread agreement among scholars that the key aim of the writer of Revelation was not to provide some kind of chronology of end-time events for its own sake. Rather, the writer was seeking to influence the attitudes and behaviour of the communities to whom Revelation is addressed. To be sure, this would involve placing the experience of those communities in an ultimate spatial and temporal context. But the effect of this is actually to re-focus attention back onto the earthly present. This is the underlying issue in two related but distinct recent debates which have proved highly stimulating.

4 The structure suggested by Bauckham in the books listed at the end of this article is as convincing as any. But, as Yarbro Collins has commented, there are almost as many outlines of the text as there are interpreters.

5 I start to develop another option for interpreting this passage in *The Meaning of the Millennium*, Grove Books, Cambridge 1997.

Crisis? What crisis?

The first of these two debates relates to the social and political situation of Christians in Asia Minor at the time Revelation was written. It is here that perhaps the most striking recent reassessment of the book has taken place. Until the last fifteen years or so, the standard view was that Revelation was written in response to persecution, either under Nero or under Domitian, depending on your conclusions about the date of the text. However, two developments have led many scholars to reject this older view.

First, considerable doubt has been cast on the idea that there was any systematic persecution of Christians in Asia Minor in the reign of Domitian, which is when most scholars believe Revelation to have been written. The most illuminating examination of this question is in the excellent book by Leonard Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire*, first published in 1990 (see the list at the end of this article). Thompson argues that the assumption that Domitian persecuted Christians in a systematic way depends on a naïve reading of later historians such as Suetonius and Tacitus, who served the interests of Domitian's successors by blackening his reputation, presenting him as a ruthless tyrant.

Second, several writers have put forward the thesis that Revelation is not so much a *response* to a crisis caused by persecution, as rather an attempt to *provoke* a crisis. The most influential argument on these lines has been that of Adela Yarbro Collins, in her book *Crisis and Catharsis: the Power of the Apocalypse*, published in 1984 (again, see the 'must read' list). Yarbro Collins argues that 'rather than simply consoling his fellow Christians in a situation of grave crisis, [John] wrote his book to point out a crisis that many of them did not perceive'.⁶ John has seen the dangers of compromise with Roman authority, for example over the requirements of the cult of emperor worship, and urges an exclusivist social radicalism on his fellow Christians as a way of remaining faithful to God.⁷

This reassessment of the background to the text has two important implications. It throws into sharp relief the extent to which the writer of Revelation is seeking to shape events, rather than simply respond to them. Making Christians aware of unseen layers of reality, spatial and temporal, is not merely a source of comfort in adversity, but an incentive for active witness. And if Revelation is not seen only as a response to persecution, then it becomes easier to see its relevance to a wide variety of contemporary situations where Christians need to focus more clearly on the dangers of compromise and on what living faithfully might mean.⁸

6 Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*, p 77.

7 Other interpreters, such as Leonard Thompson and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, have put forward broadly similar proposals.

8 More generally, the political dimension of Revelation has been increasingly appreciated. Schüssler Fiorenza's commentary, listed at the end, is a valuable

account of the text from a feminist/liberationist perspective. For a moving application of Revelation to South Africa under apartheid, see Allan Boesak, *Comfort and Protest*, St Andrew's Press, Edinburgh 1987. Christopher Rowland's recent short commentary Epworth, London 1993, is always alive to the political dimension of the text.

Reality or escape?

I mentioned earlier that two recent debates have centred on the question of how the ultimate spatial and temporal horizons opened up by Revelation relate to the present situation of John's readers. One such debate is about the extent to which Revelation is designed to respond to or to provoke a crisis. The other debate is about how the world opened up by the text might be understood to relate to the reality of the earthly present.

The key point at issue here is whether the text offers a vision of an ultimate reality which is separate from the earthly present, or which encompasses it. To put it another way: is the text offering its readers an alternative world into which they might escape in their imaginations, or is it revealing layers of reality *within which* the earthly present is to be seen? Broadly speaking, Yarbrow Collins argues that Revelation offers an alternative reality, while Thompson argues that it offers a view of an encompassing reality. If these positions are pressed to their ultimate conclusions, it becomes clear that critical theological issues are at stake here. Is Revelation really an escapist document, which simply seeks to address conflicts or crises in the minds of its audience? Or is it a document which gives an insight into the nature of the way things really are, so that its readers can glimpse the ultimate realities lying behind the appearance of the earthly present? On this second view, Revelation is a powerful witness to the reality of the sovereignty of God and his ultimate triumph over evil, despite the apparent strength of evil in the earthly present.

What next?

It seems likely that all of the debates I have mentioned in this article will continue. One might expect, however, that arguments about genre and socio-political background will take account of a wider range of sources. A great deal of work has been done on the use by John of OT material.⁹ Much remains to be done in terms of comparisons with the texts from Qumran, and with Graeco-Roman texts, and I would expect to see considerable research in these areas over the next few years. The nature of Revelation, with its intricate structure and complex symbolism, has made it an obvious candidate for the application of various literary-critical techniques such as structuralist analysis. One might expect to see the growth of narrative-critical approaches to the text, examining the ways in which John uses gaps, repetitions, changes of scene, suspense, and so on, as the text develops.¹⁰

There is an enormous amount of work to be done in analysing the theology of the text. Some of the most influential recent interpreters of Revelation have made important contributions in this area, especially Richard Bauckham, Christopher Rowland and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. However, there are still vast areas where more reflection would be valuable. One is the way in which the key themes of

9 See in particular Steve Moyise's helpful book, *The Old Testament in the Book of Revelation*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield 1995.

10 A recent example of this approach is Alan Garrow's *Revelation*, in the New Testament Readings series, Routledge, London 1997.

Revelation (the triumph of God, the protection and vindication of his people, the creation of the new heaven and earth) relate to the rest of the NT. Seen in this light, Revelation is much more of a 'mainstream' text than its relative neglect in the church might suggest. Another potentially fruitful area is the interface between the theology of Revelation and the renewal of interest in eschatology among contemporary systematicians such as Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg.¹¹

My hope is that the current growth of academic interest in Revelation will be mirrored by increasing willingness to engage with the text in the life of the church. Concern about the way the book has been abused in the past, and the difficulty of interpreting some of John's symbolism, have led to a situation in which, aside from occasional sermons on the seven letters, Revelation is a practically closed book in many churches. Perhaps dipping into some of the key books listed below might inspire readers to rediscover the riches Revelation has to offer.

Recent key texts

David Aune, *Revelation* (Word Books, Dallas 1997). The first volume of this long-awaited commentary in the popular Word Biblical Commentaries series is now out, covering chapters 1-5 of Revelation. Two further volumes are due. This is the most extensive English-language commentary for decades, and is sure to become a standard text. The first volume demonstrates enormous breadth of learning, although (perhaps surprisingly for this series) less willingness to reflect on the theology of the text than preachers might like.

Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1993). A magnificent and concise distillation of the key themes of the book. Readers seeking more detail might consult Bauckham's *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh 1993), a valuable collection of his essays on the book.

Leonard L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (Oxford University Press, New York 1990 – now republished in 1997 in paperback). A brilliant book which deals in a highly stimulating way with the key issues surrounding the social setting of the text and John's use of symbol.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, (Fortress, Minneapolis 1991). A thought-provoking analysis of Revelation from a feminist/liberationist standpoint.

Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: the Power of the Apocalypse* (Westminster Press, Philadelphia 1984). Important for understanding recent debates on the use of symbolism in the book.

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¹¹ See in particular Moltmann's *The Coming of God*, SCM, London 1996, which draws extensively on Revelation.