

THE BOOK OF REVELATION.
A REVIEW ARTICLE ON SOME RECENT LITERATURE

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Recent years have seen an increasing interest in the study of the book of Revelation. There have been welcome reappraisals and new efforts toward getting at the real focus and meaning of the message of this important Bible book. To be sure, all that past scholarship has accomplished is not to be rejected; but it is gratifying to see the attempts now being made toward grasping the spiritual significance of a book which altogether too often in the past has either been neglected as insolubly enigmatic or been forced by expositors into somewhat preconceived molds.¹ The literary structure of Rev still needs much attention, a matter of prime importance which I have noted elsewhere, mentioning some recent endeavors along this line and also attempting an analysis of my own.²

In just the past few years several works dealing with Rev have appeared which deserve special attention for the kind of contributions they make or because of the sort of approaches they represent: Paul S. Minear, *I Saw a New Earth: An Introduction to the Visions of the Apocalypse* (Washington, D.C., 1968); Leon Morris, *The Revelation of St. John: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1969); and George Eldon Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1972). For the first of these I have already provided a brief critical review, and it is my hope to do likewise for the

¹ Interpreters within various "schools of interpretation," such as "preterist," "futurist," etc., have often been quite rigid as well as limited in their perspectives. The recent trend is toward a more comprehensive view which takes into account meaning and relevance.

² K. A. Strand, *The Open Gates of Heaven: A Brief Introduction to Literary Analysis of the Book of Revelation* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1970), pp. 33-48. This book has been republished in an enlarged edition (Ann Arbor, 1972). Hereinafter citation will be *Open Gates*, with edition number indicated only if reference is made to new material in the 2d ed.

other two.³ However, certain items falling largely outside the purview of such short reviews will be noted here.

1. Minear's *I Saw a New Earth*

On several previous occasions I have called attention to the significance of the work of Paul S. Minear regarding certain vital matters: (1) hermeneutical concerns important for understanding ancient symbolism; (2) literary structure of *Rev*; and (3) meaning and relevance of biblical literature, including *Rev*.⁴ There is no question but that this scholar has made some outstanding contributions to NT studies generally and toward the study of *Rev*. Nevertheless, in spite of his thought-provoking material in *I Saw a New Earth* and other publications on *Rev*, I find it necessary to disagree on various points, including what appears to be a rather basic assumption; namely, that in *Rev* the line of demarcation between the two opposing sides (God's and Satan's) portrays a division within the Christian church itself, rather than embracing "outsiders" as the opponents of John's Christian addressees.⁵ More will be said in this regard shortly.

In my previous discussions of Minear's work I have not dealt with the various essays which appear in Part II, except to note their titles and to make a brief favorable comment regarding the one entitled "Comparable Patterns of Thought in Luke's Gospel."⁶ Those essays treat significant questions which Minear admits are "hotly debated among scholars."⁷ Here attention will be focused briefly on five of them, whose titles and locations within Minear's book are indicated at the beginning of each of the following paragraphs.

"*The Significance of Suffering*" (pp. 201-212). This essay proposes that the early Christian church faced animosity, contrary to

³ *AUSS*, 8 (1970), 197-199.

⁴ Respectively in *Open Gates*, p. 30; in *AUSS*, 8 (1970), 197, 198, and *Open Gates*, pp. 39, 40; and in *Open Gates*, 2d ed., p. 30, n. 4, and pp. 69, 70.

⁵ See *Open Gates*, 2d ed., pp. 67, 68, as well as *AUSS*, 8 (1970), 199. M. M. Bourke, the writer of the "Foreword" to Minear's *I Saw a New Earth*, also takes issue, as indicated on pp. viii-xiii.

⁶ *AUSS*, 8 (1970), 198.

⁷ *I Saw a New Earth*, p. xxv.

what has sometimes been claimed on the basis of church growth, etc. Minear substantiates his thesis with adequate evidence and indicates the likelihood that the churches in the Roman province of Asia lived amid hostility both before and after John's time. To Minear, however, a more important matter than the attitude of outsiders toward the church is the "interior" aspect of the conflict. For him, the "ultimate adversary" was not to be found in "Roman governors or Jewish priests," but rather "in the invisible power which aroused and used this hostility as a trial of Christian faith" (p. 209). So far, so good! But to interiorize to the degree that the "invisible power" becomes limited to the situation of the addressed Christians is quite another matter. To say, for example, that the reason why John "describes the Great Prostitute as he does" is because "he discovers whoredom among Christians themselves" (p. 211) seems to overdo the point! Very worthy of consideration, on the other hand, is his analysis of our modern notion regarding the "resistance" to early Christianity as being an "exceptional and passing phenomenon." He links this notion to several factors: (1) our classification of Christianity under the somewhat innocuous heading (politically and socially) of "religion"; (2) our concept that "religion" applies to man's inner life but not to "the powers which control historical destiny"; and (3) our tendency to find crises "only in the extraordinary tides of historical development and not in the ordinary sequences of daily life" (pp. 210, 211).

"The Prophet's Motives" (pp. 213-227). In this illuminating study Minear points out at least eight different literary forms in which John expresses "a distinct hortatory intention" (see p. 214). These forms cannot be detailed here, but it must be said that once again the cleavage between good and evil is placed within the framework of the Christian church—or individual Christians—as they face the alternatives of choice for God or for the forces of evil. A hortatory thrust might readily be taken to suggest such a conclusion, and the strong element of exhortation in Rev cannot be denied. Nevertheless, the very fact that Rev is *epistolary* in nature can well account for this emphasis without doing injustice to the apocalyptic character of the book. That the reward of the righteous and fate of the wicked are

brought to attention in Rev in terms of striking opposites, and often within hortatory contexts, does not necessarily mean that the whole applies only to Christians addressed by John. Nor does it mean that the sides are determined by whether those Christians through their choices are redeemed by Christ or are lost through rejection of His grace. Rather, the lines seem *already* to have been drawn, and John's exhortations to Christians fall within the sphere of encouragement to make the right decisions, especially in view of the accomplished victory of the Lamb. The twin theme of Rev as given in 1:7, 8, and 22:12, 13, gives (1) assurance to Christians of Christ's presence with them even now in their trials (trials from outside, of course, and not just from within) and (2) promise that He will come again to set aright a "topsy-turvy" world (punishing all evil-doers, not merely apostate Christians).

"*Sovereignities in Conflict*" (pp. 228-234). Keen analysis is given in this essay regarding hierarchies of good (God, Christ, and those who rule with Christ) and evil (Satan, the Beast or other antichrist figures, and the kings of the earth).⁸ Minear aptly points out the need of the Christian "soldier" for "help in identifying the antagonists and in determining his own immediate duties" (p. 232). John's role of clarification in this respect puts him, according to Minear, in the "vocation of the prophets of Israel" (p. 233). For John, he continues, "the victory of Christ over Satan had served to provide the essential definition of that kind of power by which God established his sovereignty" (ibid.).

"*The Kings of the Earth*" (pp. 235-246). For the most part this essay deals with the "seven kings" and "ten kings" portrayed by seven heads and ten horns of the beast in Rev 17:9-12. Minear raises questions about traditional preterist interpretation, whose general view of Rev 17 is that the beast represents the Roman Empire, Babylon designates the city of Rome, the seven kings refer to a sequence of Roman emperors (not "dynasty," as Minear has it), and the ten kings stand for heads of restless puppet states (p. 236). A consistent application of this symbolism

⁸ On p. 229 Minear places these in side-by-side listings, with slightly more description or identification than in my summarized form.

results in absurdities, as Minear has pointed out. Not only is there the well-known difficulty in identifying the seven emperors, but there are also a number of other incongruities such as the city of Rome sitting upon the series of emperors (see p. 239).⁹ Perhaps the latter problem can in part be attributed to the "fluidity" of symbol, a factor with which Minear possibly has not sufficiently reckoned here.¹⁰ Nonetheless, this scholar has succeeded well in pointing out difficulties in usual preterist-type interpretations of Rev. 17. On the other hand, he seems to have missed a vital factor of interpretation when he assumes that "heads, horns, crowns, and thrones" are all "symbols of royal power" (p. 235). Actually, with regard to the seven-headed, ten-horned animals, "*crowns*" are the symbol of regal authority, and Minear seems to have overlooked the importance of the fact that in Rev 17 *neither heads nor horns* have crowns, whereas in Rev 12 the *heads* have crowns, and in Rev 13 the *horns* have crowns. To this we shall return in discussing Minear's next essay. But it may be pointed out here that Rev 17:8, 10, refers to "was," "is-not," and "is-to-come" phases of the beast and to "five-are-fallen," "one-is," and "one-is-not-yet-come" aspects of the heads; and that Minear parallels these chronological aspects in what he considers three "stages" (see pp. 242, 243). He encounters an apparent contradiction, of course, in "*Stage two*" in that the supposedly parallel references state "is not" and "one is." Minear's explanation is that functionally "the *is not* assertion appears to indicate that the Lamb has conquered him [the beast]," whereas those "who worship the beast verify the fact that he *is*" (ibid.). Would not the judgment setting of the *vision* of Rev 17 imply that at that time the beast simply did *not* exist at all, whereas the *explanation* of the vision from the prophet's point of view in history would look upon five heads as fallen, *one in*

⁹ For a brief and simplified discussion of the sequence of emperors, see T. S. Kepler, *The Book of Revelation* (New York, 1957), pp. 139-141; and also C. M. Laymon, *The Book of Revelation* (New York, 1960), pp. 118-120. On p. 119 Laymon includes I. T. Beckwith's chart revealing four alternative ways of trying to identify the Roman emperors with the heads of the beast (actually *eight* emperors on the basis of the statement in Rev 17:11 that the beast himself is "the eighth" head).

¹⁰ See my discussion of "Fluidity of Symbol" in *Open Gates*, p. 28.

real existence at that very time, and one yet to come? (See Fig. 1 for a suggested solution.)

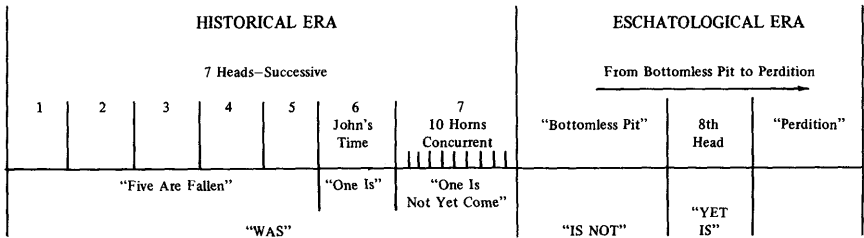


Fig. 1. Diagrammatic sketch concerning the 7-headed, 10-horned beast of Rev 17. (Taken from K. A. Strand, *The Open Gates of Heaven* [Ann Arbor, Mich., 1970, 1972], p. 51.)

"Death and Resurrection of the Sea-Beast" (pp. 247-260). Minear's previous chapter has in a sense set the stage for his major thesis here, which concerns the wounded head of the Sea-Beast of Rev 13. Apparently this wounded head is considered to be the "now-is" or 6th head described in Rev 17 and thus correlates with the "is-not" stage of the Beast's existence. Again Minear argues against usual preterist interpretation which sees a connection with the *Nero redivivus* myth. Among his various arguments in this regard are the fact that the mortal wound to a head of the beast "simultaneously destroyed the authority of head, beast, and dragon by terminating the blasphemous adoration by men," and it would be difficult to see Nero's suicide as fulfilling such a specification. Moreover, whereas "the healing of the wound enhanced the prestige of the beast," there is no evidence to show that Nero's "rumored resuscitation" had induced "either Roman citizens or Christians 'to follow the beast with wonder'" (pp. 251, 252). Minear's interpretation of the wound is that the Messiah's crucifixion and exaltation brought about this death-blow to the beast (p. 254). Such an interpretation broadens the perspective beyond the drama of the Roman

Empire and the Imperial Cult as the prime adversaries of the Christians (though for the local situation in Asia at the time, it is hard to ignore the threat which these forces must have posed for Christians). On the other hand, Minear's failure to distinguish adequately between the historical setting of Rev 13 and "judgment" setting of Rev 17 may have closed the door to other possibilities regarding identification of the wounded head and the interpretation of the wound itself. The royal power in Rev 13 is with the *horns*, and these are described in the explanation of Rev 17:12 as ten kings "which have received no kingdom as yet." This raises the question as to whether it should not be the 7th or "is-not-yet-come" head rather than the 6th or "now-is" head that receives the mortal wound. In any event, a careful consideration of the "was," "is-not," "is-to-come," and "go-into-perdition" sequences of the beast itself in Rev 17 finds helpful recapitulation in chs. 19 and 20, whereas those latter chapters do not seem to have a similar relationship to Rev 13.

2. *Morris' Commentary*

Leon Morris' publication is a worthy addition to the Tyndale Bible Commentaries (Vol. 20 of the NT series). Interestingly enough, its interpretational stance is difficult to detect. It appears to have no strong or clear leaning toward "preterism," "futurism," etc. Rather it concerns itself primarily with commentary on the meaning of words, phrases, and verses of the biblical text—commentary enriched by the wealth of background knowledge that the author has regarding both ancient and modern literature relevant to the subject.

My main concern here will be to evaluate a basic premise which Morris seems to carry through in some eight points he incorporates within his "Introduction." In a section bearing the title "The Revelation of St. John and Apocalyptic" (pp. 22-25), he aptly describes apocalyptic as "usually expressed in vivid symbolism, sometimes of a bizarre kind"; as appearing in "difficult times"; and as conveying to its readers "the author's profound conviction that the troubles in which they find themselves are not the last word" but that "God in His own good time will intervene catastrophically and destroy evil" (pp. 22, 23). "Not

infrequently," he goes on to say, "this deliverance is associated with God's Messiah who would inaugurate the kingdom of God." He points out, as well, that "apocalyptists were usually pessimistic about the present world," despairing "of man's efforts ever overcoming evil," and looking "to God to bring the victory" (p. 23).

Although Morris states that there "are good reasons for classing the Revelation with apocalyptic" (such as its abundance of "symbolism of a typically apocalyptic character," its expectation regarding the establishment of God's kingdom, and "revelations made through heavenly beings"), he feels that some eight marked differences should not be overlooked. In dealing with these in the following paragraphs, I shall use the designations "Morris" and "Response" and adopt his numbering for the various points.

I-3. Morris: The writer of Rev claims to be in the prophetic tradition, his visions conveying "the word of God." Also, the writer uses his own name, whereas apocalypses are pseudonymous. Furthermore, the "typical prophetic insistence on moral considerations is to be found throughout the book" (pp. 23, 24). *Response:* We may legitimately ask whether apocalyptic writers do not think of themselves as giving prophetic messages from God. Also, is the question of pseudonymity really an essential matter? Finally, although it is true that apocalyptic writings generally do not reveal so strong an apparent or ostensible insistence on moral and ethical concerns, it is nevertheless true, as Amos Wilder has pointed out, that moral and ethical considerations are not lacking in them.¹¹ I have referred to this sort of ethical concern as "implied ethic," and it is precisely such because of the fact that apocalyptic focuses on destiny, whereas general prophecy stresses the present situation with a naturally paramount emphasis on ethic.¹² Moreover, Rev has two characteristics different from apocalypses of the Israelite-Jewish tradition: (1) it is epistolary in nature, which would naturally give it a hortatory flavor containing moral and ethical aspects; and

¹¹ See Amos N. Wilder, *Eschatology and Ethics in the Teaching of Jesus* (rev. ed.; New York, 1950).

¹² *Open Gates*, p. 19.

(2) it rejoices in the victory of a Messiah who has come, lives for His people, and will come again for their final vindication—another strong motivation for emphasis on moral and ethical concerns.

4. *Morris*: “The pessimism of the apocalyptists does not seem to be found here [in Rev]” (p. 24). *Response*: That God in His own way and time will vindicate His saints—a characteristic of apocalyptic, according to Morris himself—is not necessarily pessimistic, even though *man’s own inability* is commonly so described. It is because of this latter factor that apocalyptic is termed “pessimistic.” But does Rev give more optimism regarding man’s ability to solve his great dilemma than do apocalypses in general? Is it not God who is designated there too as ultimately the One who must bring things to a state of “rightness”? In Rev we may, of course, detect a certain note of optimism which arises from the fact that Rev depicts God’s saving Instrument, the Messiah, as already having come and having gained the victory for His people—thus assuring them of His abiding and comforting presence in a world of trial, plus the fact that He will come again for their final vindication. This kind of “optimism,” however, in no way destroys the “pessimistic” view of this world’s history and man’s inability to bring about betterment.

5. *Morris*: “The apocalyptists characteristically retrace history in the guise of prophecy. . . . John takes his stand in his own days and looks resolutely to the future” (p. 24). *Response*: Is this really a vital concern regarding apocalyptic as a literary type?

6. *Morris*: G. E. Ladd’s comment in *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology*, p. 53, is quoted to the effect that Rev “embodies the prophetic tension between history and eschatology. The beast is Rome and at the same time an eschatological Antichrist. . . . The shadow of historical Rome is so outlined against the darker shadow of the eschatological Antichrist that it is difficult if not impossible to distinguish between the two. History is eschatologically interpreted; evil at the hands of Rome is realized eschatology” (*ibid.*). *Response*: Where in the OT prophetic writings (apocalyptic must now obviously be excluded) is the antichrist prefigured? The following, rather than Morris’ quota-

tion from Ladd, is a more nearly accurate portrayal of history as viewed prophetically and as viewed apocalyptically:

In contrast to general prophecy, which puts primary emphasis on the historical setting and then moves to eschatological implications, apocalyptic tends to view history as if from the end-time itself, when history is consummated in a grand and glorious eschatological climax. In other words, whereas general prophecy looks at world history from the standpoint of man's position (or God's view of it from where man is), apocalyptic can be said to view history from the standpoint of God's position in both place and time. It has, as it were, a peculiarly transcendental focus. From the standpoint of literary device, it could be said that whereas the historical setting is primary for general prophecy, the historical setting is functional for apocalyptic.¹³

7. *Morris*: Apocalypses contain curious visions, heavenly guides often making appearance to give explanation or illumination. In *Rev*, there is some interpretation, but not so much as in apocalyptic writings generally (pp. 24, 25). *Response*: First, is this a truly relevant matter? Second, are all extra-canonical apocalypses so essentially different from *Rev* in this respect?

8. *Morris*: Apocalypists looked forward to God's Messiah, who would "introduce a new thing into human history," but "for John the new thing has already appeared . . ." (p. 25). *Response*: Chronology and the Christian outlook alone would be adequate to account for this supposed distinction, and in no way is the apocalyptic thrust of *Rev* vitiated thereby. There is simply the addition of a new and important perspective, which has already been mentioned above.

In sum total, *Morris* has a poor case for viewing *Rev* as a type of work which contrasts significantly with apocalyptic. Rather, this book should be looked upon as apocalyptic with other characteristics: (1) It is apocalyptic cast into an *epistolary* framework. This framework includes elements of its own, such as a hortatory thrust. (2) It is *biblical* apocalyptic, and therefore manifests the general characteristics of the biblical perspective. (3) It is *NT* apocalyptic, and this explains the natural emphasis on such major *NT* themes as redemption through Christ, the activity of the Holy Spirit, and the role of the church.¹⁴

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 18, 19.

¹⁴ It should be noted that *Morris* has very recently produced an excellent little book entitled *Apocalyptic* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1972), in which he elaborates on various of the more prominent characteristics of apocalyptic

A mere listing of likenesses and differences of Rev as compared or contrasted with other apocalyptic writings can lead to hermeneutical dangers, if the full implications are not understood. Rev must be seen for what it is in all of its manifold aspects, and interpretation must be undertaken with due regard for a hermeneutic which takes into adequate account these various aspects.

3. *Ladd's Commentary*

Although I have already elsewhere dealt in quite some detail with one important facet of G. E. Ladd's *Commentary* on Rev, the present article would not be complete without at least brief mention of this work.¹⁵ Ladd has already distinguished himself by a number of publications treating eschatology and apocalyptic, and he brings to bear in this commentary a wealth of relevant background knowledge from both ancient and modern sources.¹⁶ Herein lies perhaps the greatest strength of this new book. But Ladd's commentary is important too from the standpoint of being a "breakthrough" in futuristically oriented treatments of Rev, for it departs from the usual dispensationalist variety of futuristic interpretation. Dispensationalists place a "secret rapture" of the church seven years prior to the open and visible second advent of Christ, and they squeeze most of Rev—from 4:1 onward—into this seven-year period. This period, moreover, is specially allotted to the Jews; but the antichrist (a personal figure) breaks covenant with them halfway through this time and begins to persecute them. After the seven years, Christ comes and establishes a Jewish millennial kingdom.

literature. In this new publication, which will receive separate treatment in a forthcoming review in *AUSS*, he devotes pp. 78-81 to Rev, noting once more the apparent "differences" between Rev and typical apocalypses. This time, however, he leaves the various points unnumbered, changes their sequence somewhat, and virtually ignores nos. 7 and 8 mentioned above (or treats these points only cursorily or obliquely). His basic position appears to have remained the same, though in some places he has added welcome elaboration to that position.

¹⁵ The facet already dealt with is the question of Ladd's treatment of the literary structure of Rev, in *Open Gates*, 2d ed., pp. 60-64.

¹⁶ Among his major publications dealing with eschatology and apocalyptic are *Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1952); *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids, 1956); and *Jesus and the Kingdom* (New York, 1964). He has also published some articles dealing with apocalyptic.

Ladd breaks with dispensationalist interpretation on all the foregoing points. However, he maintains a futuristic interpretation in which the details in Rev 8:1 through 19:10 are applied in a generally chronological sequence as representing events to occur during a relatively short period of trouble just prior to Christ's second coming. Some peculiarities arise in his interpretation because of this fact. For example, he utilizes a literary structure embodying 4:1 through 16:21 as one of his major divisions of Rev, as dispensationalists also tend to do, even though for him the structure appears to be meaningless in view of his interpretation wherein pure "futurism" begins at 8:1. Also, though there seem to be in this particular section of Rev repeated recapitulatory sequences leading up to Christ's second coming (7th seal, 7th trumpet, harvest, etc.), he finds it necessary to treat references of this type as simply proleptic. Still further, in Rev 12 he reverts to a mythical-language type of interpretation regarding such items as the birth of the man-child and the man-child's being taken up to God and to His throne. Apparently Ladd's futuristic position makes it impossible to see how such references could have an historical allusion to events connected with Christ's first coming; and they obviously do not fit into his futuristic sequence either.

Ladd's argument from OT general prophecy for maintaining a futuristic point of view for interpretation of Rev has already been noted in our discussion of Morris' commentary, above. While it is true that the general prophets often had what Ladd refers to in his new commentary as "two foci" (p. 13), it should be recognized that they moved from the situation of their own day to an eschatological "Day of the Lord" without detailing last events in the way Ladd proposes for Rev. Moreover, would it not have been more logical if Ladd had chosen to compare Rev with the OT apocalyptic book of Daniel and its several parallel sequences in chs. 2, and 7-12; or for that matter, with non-canonical Jewish apocalypses? If this had been done, there is a question as to whether his argumentation for a futuristic approach could be maintained. Actually, the prophetic twin foci to which Ladd calls attention provide a stronger *contrast* than comparison for what Ladd does in interpreting Rev; and he

would find similar contrast (in a different way) with apocalyptic as well, with its strong emphasis on a cosmic struggle in this present age in addition to its stress on the climactic events of the end-time.

4. *Conclusion*

The three afore-mentioned publications represent serious efforts to grapple with the message of Rev and its relevance for us today. In some ways, the hermeneutical guidelines used by the three scholars differ, and especially do their resulting conclusions, as well. This is particularly true of Minear as contrasted with the others, though they too differ in many respects.

If there is a common feature in my own evaluation of those publications, it probably relates most to the question of attitude or weight given to the apocalyptic element of Rev. None of the three authors would deny that Rev is a piece of apocalyptic writing, I am sure; but there is some tendency on the part of all of them to minimize this fact either in verbal statement or at least in interpretational practice. Would it not be better to give full recognition to Rev's apocalyptic nature, but recognize as well that along with this, due consideration must be given to the modifying characteristics or features that appear because the book is also a *letter*, because it is imbued with the general *biblical* perspective, and because it stresses *NT* themes?