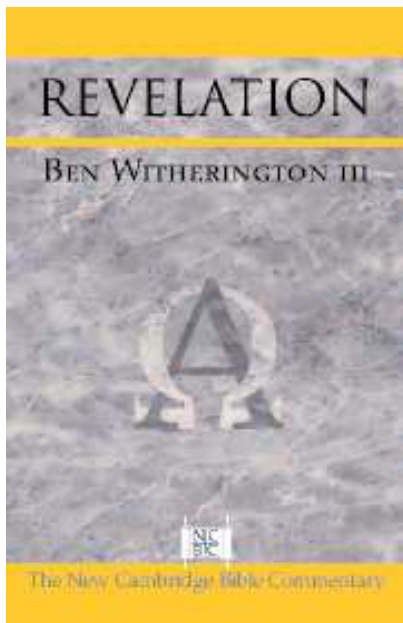


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Witherington, Ben, III

Revelation

New Cambridge Bible Commentary

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As the series preface states, the New Cambridge Bible Commentary “aims to elucidate the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures for a wide range of intellectually curious individuals.” Ben Witherington III, General Editor of the series, successfully reaches this aim with his commentary on the book of Revelation. The style and the outline of the commentary indeed address a wide audience: the book provides quick and helpful information for the pastor and teacher as well as interesting and inspiring suggestions for ongoing scholarly debate. Methodologically, Witherington stresses a sociorhetorical approach (pioneered by V. Robbins, as Witherington states on p. 53) and therefore claims his study to be innovative (i). This holds true insofar as a sociorhetorical approach does not analyze Revelation by means of the ancient canons of Greco-Roman rhetoric but rather integrates methodological steps of literary and narrative criticism. For this approach it is crucial to reconstruct the sociohistorical setting of the biblical book as precisely as possible, and the text is always read in view of the historical reality of early Christian communities in Asia Minor at the end of the first century A.D.

It is one characteristic feature of Witherington’s commentary to assume that John the seer did not write in a purely imaginative and fictitious manner but mostly referred to certain realities in the realm of his addressees. However, today it is very difficult to rediscover

exactly what John might have meant. Thus, Witherington is careful in this matter and does not press the evidence. For example, he shows that the number 666 in Rev 13:18 clearly refers to Nero and demonstrates that the Roman emperor is the Beast. Witherington follows Bauckham in this issue. However, he also admits that “the veiled nature of such gematric games allows John’s text to have a certain multivalency” (179). This multivalency makes it possible for later readers to identify the Beast and its number 666 with other sources of evil, such as Domitian or Adolf (not Adolph [179]) Hitler.

For identifying the social setting of Revelation, some helpful tools precede the introduction: a map of Western Asia Minor and the island of Patmos, and a list of Roman emperors from Augustus (27 B.C.–A.D. 14) to Domitian (A.D. 81–96). The introduction covers the first fifty pages of the book and works as an excellent guide of the interested reader into the book of Revelation. On page 1 Witherington takes the reader very carefully by the hand and clarifies the problematic identity of “John.” He first points to the identifications of later Christian traditions (John son of Zebedee), then turns to a serious discussion about the historical authorship of the book of Revelation. An identification of the author(s) of the Gospel and the letters of John with the author of Revelation is ruled out by a brief summary of mainly linguistic reasons (2–3). More space is dedicated to a detailed argumentation concerning the date. Witherington clearly favors a date from late in the first century, that is, in the reign of Domitian. As throughout the commentary, Witherington stands in discussion with the main currents in the secondary literature, which is documented by citing names of scholars in the text and bibliographical information in the footnotes. This feature does not distract the pastor and interested layperson too much from the provided information, but it helps the scholar to identify the position of the commentator in the discussion.

In accordance with his sociorhetorical approach, Witherington follows T. B. Slater and J. R. Michaels, who sketch the following situation of the Christians in Asia Minor (early 90s, first century) addressed by John: they experienced local harassment, ridicule, discrimination and oppression for their religious beliefs and customs. Thus, John deals with a situation of real social trauma for himself, being banished to the penal colony on the island of Patmos, and for his audience. Witherington resists explicitly the temptation to regard Revelation as a mere expression of an eccentric worldview unrelated to anything.

The second part of the introduction deals with “resources, rhetoric, and restructuring of Revelation” and addresses matters such as textual transmission, use of the Old Testament, and compositional and rhetoric techniques. Witherington points to the important works of J. Fekkes and R. Bauckham on these issues. It is quite helpful to get an overview of the great importance of Old Testament texts for understanding of Revelation and to see the

wide variety of reasons and purposes for which Revelation alludes to the Old Testament. On page 21, Witherington presents a chart with the outline of Revelation (according to Bauckham).

The next section of the introduction reconstructs the social setting of Revelation in Western Asia Minor and points out how the book approaches and confronts the imperial cult and the social realities in this urbanized region. Readers who look rather for theological issues will find the part on Christology helpful. Here Witherington summarizes and systematizes the statements of the book about Christ as judge and redeemer, as “the Lamb of God” (28 times). Although the terminology differs from the Gospel and the letters of “John,” Revelation shares with the Johannine literature the “highest Christology in the NT” (32) and the tendency to use various names and titles of God for Jesus Christ: These documents redefine Jewish monotheism to accommodate what they wish to say about Christ.

A comparatively large part of the introduction is dedicated to the discussion of the genre of Revelation. Witherington sees apocalyptic as a type of hybrid literature that reflects the confluence of the Jewish prophetic and sapiential traditions, and for Revelation one needs to take Greco-Roman sources for prophecy additionally into account. However, John of Patmos did not simply create a “patchwork quilt” from Hebrew Scripture scrolls, but the visions came to a mind acquainted with Scripture as well as with popular and mythical images of the larger Greco-Roman world.

Under the header “A Brief Tour of the Book of Revelation” Witherington gives some examples for his way of interpreting the book. Several of the passages here occur almost verbatim later on in the commentary again, so this section seems to have the purpose to give the hurried reader a foretaste of the commentary itself.

The annotated bibliography is a helpful and important feature of the NCBC series. The “suggestions” are annotated in a way that one will easily discover the book(s) and article(s) one may find interesting or pertinent to research. The other (and almost more important) effect of this section is to show which literature the commentator consulted and where he stands in the discussion.

The commentary itself, beginning on page 65, is structured by four elements. First, the NRSV text is provided as a convenience to the reader (boldface type). The book of Revelation is split up into fourteen sections (pericopes) of differing length (e.g., Rev 1:1–3 and 4–20 but 19:11–21:8). The second element is the commentary itself, giving a general overview of the pericope, then proceeding verse by verse. At times the commentary is interrupted by an “excursus” typographically marked by a gray

shadowing. This element, called “A Closer Look,” focuses on key issues of the Greco-Roman world that bear on the text’s meaning. Here Witherington examines, for example, the meaning of “martyr” with the help of other early Christian literature (*Martyrdom of Polycarp*) or the role of prophets in the postapostolic age (*Didache*). Other items pursued are, for example, the question of Jewish and Christian relationships in Revelation; ancient scrolls; fallen angels in early Judaism and Christianity; 666, Nero, and the ancient art of gematria; slavery and the Roman economy; nuptial and city imagery; and John’s intertextuality. The fourth element, also marked by a gray shadowing, concludes each section and is called “Bridging the Horizons.” Witherington offers suggestions to connect the Greco-Roman world of the book of Revelation with the cultural, political, and religious environments of today. Readers involved in preaching and teaching may find here helpful ideas for sermons or lessons. The commentator livens up his text by interspersing experiences from his own pastoral practice and critical remarks on the discussion about the events of September 11, 2001. He also gives room to A. Boesak’s reading of Revelation from a South African perspective at a time when apartheid was coming to an end (A. Boesak, *Comfort and Protest: The Apocalypse from a South African Perspective* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986]).

In the appendix Witherington discusses “A Millennial Problem,” that is, the extremely problematic passage Rev 20:4–6, against the major millennial viewpoints of Christian communities. He concludes “that John believes in a future millennial reign upon the earth of Christ with at least some of the saints. This will transpire after the series of seven judgments but prior to the final judgment and the new heaven and new earth” (291). After the appendix the usual indexes follow (authors, extrabiblical texts, biblical texts, subjects).

Ben Witherington’s commentary on Revelation is an appropriate tool for interested people to find a way into a biblical book that was *terra incognita* for most of the Christian world for many years. However, the commentary is also an important contribution to the scholarly discussion and the academic world. Maybe the few experts on Revelation who will probably find their names and works listed in the “Suggested Reading” section will not see too much new in the work, but the majority of biblical scholars will find it helpful to get a comprehensive introduction to the complicated matters of the last book of the Christian Bible. This holds especially true since Witherington commands the state-of-the-art of biblical exegesis by applying new literary methods, such as the sociorhetorical approach. He can show that these new ways prove to be successful in bridging the gap between our world of today and the apocalyptic prophecy of the book of Revelation from the first century A.D.