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Revelation in the History of Exegesis: Abuse, Neglect, and the Search for Contemporary Relevance

BY CRAIG S. FARMER

The history of the interpretation of the book of Revelation may be characterized as a story of both neglect and abuse. Throughout history many first-rate biblical commentators have steered clear of Revelation, hesitating to interpret a book that seems strange, mysterious, even frightening. Others have boldly taken up the challenge and done so with results that make one wish they had not been so courageous. Indeed, millenarian interpretations of Revelation, often filled with bizarre exegeses of its cryptic symbols, have contributed to the hesitation of more sober commentators to explain the book. The history of the interpretation of Revelation is not, however, a story only of neglect and abuse: the exegetical tradition also reflects many efforts to produce sober, sensitive interpretations of this difficult book. But at the outset it is important to note that many theologians and biblical scholars have felt a significant degree of discomfort with the language, imagery, and themes of Revelation.

In ancient church history, the controversial character of Revelation manifested itself in debates over the scriptural status of the book. That is to say, there were serious disagreements about whether the book was apostolic and therefore canonical. Although Revelation was cited by second- and third-century authorities such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Hippolytus, it was still not regarded with universal approval as late as the fourth century. Dionysius, third-century bishop of Alexandria, wrote that some Christians criticized the book as “without sense and without reason.” These Christians were suspicious that Revelation was written by a Gnostic named Cerinthus. “They say that it has a false title, for it is not of John. Nay, that it is not even a revelation, as it is covered with such a

dense and thick veil of ignorance, that not one of the apostles, and not one of the holy men, or those of the church could be its author.” Dionysius seems to have accepted its authority, but he denied that it was written by the apostle John, the son of Zebedee. And Dionysius was clearly worried about Christian groups that used Revelation to predict a literal thousand-year rule of Christ on earth. He warned against bold idiosyncratic interpretations: “For my part I would not venture to set this book aside, as there are many brethren that value it much; but having formed a conception of its subject as exceeding my capacity, I suspect that some deeper sense is enveloped in the words, and these I do not measure and judge by my private reason.”¹

In the early fourth century, Eusebius of Caesarea placed Revelation in his list of New Testament writings regarded as genuine. However, he noted that some Christians still rejected its authority.² Apparently, this division of opinion was especially characteristic of the Eastern church, where millenarian teaching flourished in various communities. The Latin church finally gave its stamp of approval to the book in 397 at the Synod of Carthage.³

In the Middle Ages, biblical commentators produced a number of fine works on Revelation. In general, these commentators accepted its traditional ascription to John the Apostle, the author of the Fourth Gospel. And in general they interpreted the book according to its “spiritual” meaning—that is, rejecting literal millenarian views and focusing little attention on its historical context. Controversy flared up in the thirteenth century when the Franciscan Spirituals (a rigorist party devoted to holy poverty) promoted the views of twelfth-century mystic

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Joachim of Fiore. Joachim wrote several apocalyptic works, including a millenarian interpretation of Revelation that interpreted history and the events of his own day in relation to the symbols of Revelation. Franciscan Spirituals relished this approach, focusing on the two witnesses of Revelation 11 as predictions of Francis of Assisi and Dominic, and on the two beasts of chapter 13 as Popes Boniface VIII and Benedict XI, enemies of their group.

The tendency to use Revelation polemically, as a club against one's enemies, became more pronounced during the Reformation. This tendency is one of the unfortunate legacies of the Reformation, one that continues to influence Protestant commentators to the present day. While Protestant reformers were more than willing to interpret satanic images as symbols of their Catholic enemies, in general they were not great admirers of the book of Revelation.

Luther, in his New Testament of 1522, wrote a preface to Revelation that questioned its apostolic and prophetic character. Although he made no demand that others follow his opinion, he claimed that he could "in no way detect that the Holy Spirit produced it." Clearly, the book of Revelation did not occupy a place in Luther's inner canon: "They are supposed to be blessed who keep what is written in this book; and yet no one knows what that is, to say nothing of keeping it. There are many far better books available for us to keep." In a later edition of his New Testament, Luther abandoned his harsh criticisms of Revelation, writing a lengthy preface that explained the book in antipapal terms. The two beasts, for example, Luther understood as symbols of the empire and the papacy. To him, the prediction of the fall of Babylon (Rev 14:8) represented the destruction of the papacy; the seven angels with the seven bowls (chapters 15–16), the attacks on the papacy by devout preachers.⁴

In Luther's two prefaces we see the two extremes in the interpretive approach to Revelation—neglect and abuse. Revelation is regarded as a strange, garbled, non-apostolic writing, unworthy of serious consideration, or it is regarded as a convenient battering ram for one's en-

emies. Among reformers, Luther was not alone in his low estimation of the book's worth. Zwingli did not like the book, and Calvin chose not to write a commentary on it. Other reformers, such as Heinrich Bullinger and David Chytraeus, took up the interpretive challenge but did so with a strong dose of antipapal exegesis.

One need not consider only the neglect or abuse approaches. A survey of medieval Latin commentaries on Revelation from the sixth through the twelfth centuries reveals a middle approach, which can be illustrated by the interpretation of the Babylonian harlot (Revelation 17–18).⁵ The approach of the medieval commentators tended to be consistently ahistorical. They interpreted symbols such as Babylon and the harlot morally or theologically. Thus they were not interested in the Babylonian harlot as a symbol of Roman imperial power, nor were they inclined to find a contemporary historical referent that might be symbolized by the harlot. Instead, they interpreted the symbol as an image of the forces of darkness, or of the devil, or of those who oppose Christ and his church. As an example, Haymo interpreted the harlot as representative of the entire multitude of the reprobate, who prostitute themselves by immersing themselves in the lusts of the flesh. Thus, all the language that describes the harlot and her destruction in Revelation 17–18 was interpreted by these commentators as symbolic of generic evil, not of some evil historic entity.

This medieval understanding of the satanic imagery of Revelation broke down during the Reformation era of the sixteenth century. As previously noted, Reformation theologians were not, in general, fond of the book of Revelation; few, if any, commentaries were produced by the leaders of the first generation. Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575), who succeeded Ulrich Zwingli as leader of the Reformation in Zurich, preached a series of one hundred sermons on Revelation that were bound together and soon translated into English.⁶ These sermons constitute one of the most important sources for the Reformation understanding of the book of Revelation.

Bullinger begins his treatment of Revelation by noting that many good theologians (including Erasmus, Luther, and Zwingli) have had doubts about its apostolic character. However, he gently corrects their opinions, noting that many authorities throughout the history of the church have defended the book as profitable for Christians. The key for understanding the book of Revelation, in Bullinger's view, is the recognition that the prophecies of the book were historically accomplished in his own time.

It is not difficult, then, to predict Bullinger's interpretation of the Babylonian harlot: in his view, she is none other than the Roman Catholic Church, an apostate church

that persecutes the true church of Christ. To Bullinger, all the details in Revelation regarding the Babylonian harlot have a double historical referent: they refer first of all to pagan imperial Rome; they refer secondly to the Roman Catholic Church, the “popish religion.” The proper interpretation of Revelation 17–18 yields, according to Bullinger, a message of responsibility and hope: (1) preachers should zealously assume their responsibility of preaching against Rome, urging all to break fellowship with the Roman church; and (2) Christians should rejoice in the confident hope that the papacy will ultimately be destroyed.

The antipapalism of Bullinger’s approach to the book of Revelation became one of the dominant strands of Protestant exegesis of Revelation until the late nineteenth century. Certainly, Bullinger and his peers were not the first to make such use of Revelation. We can identify late medieval individuals and groups that made use of Revelation’s antichrist rhetoric to criticize the papacy, but with the Protestant Reformation, the adoption of Revelation’s satanic imagery for the Catholic Church and the Roman bishop became ubiquitous.⁷ Even a peaceful soul such as Anabaptist leader Menno Simons frequently used Revelation’s harlot imagery to describe the papacy.⁸ In response to the Protestant attacks on the papacy, Roman Catholic interpreters of Revelation adopted one of three strategies: (1) they attempted to turn the tables by using antichrist/beast/harlot imagery in reference to Luther and the Protestant heretics; (2) they argued for a futurist interpretation of Revelation, claiming that the fulfillment of the prophecies lay not in the present but in the distant future; or (3) they argued for a preterist interpretation of Revelation, claiming that the prophecies were fulfilled in the distant past, in the first few centuries of the Christian era. The preterist strategy anticipated the approach taken by nineteenth- and twentieth-century historical-critical interpreters, who assumed that Revelation had to be understood exclusively in light of the hopes, fears, and experiences of an early Christian community.⁹

How did the early leaders of the Stone-Campbell Restoration movement understand and make use of Revelation? First of all, the book of Revelation did not occupy a place of critical importance. Neither Alexander Campbell nor any other first-generation leader authored a commentary on the book. It has been argued that the book of Revelation did not belong to Campbell’s inner canon.¹⁰ The neglect of Revelation among early Restoration movement leaders is also evident in that the slot for Revelation was never filled in commentary series such as *The New Testament Commentary* and the *Standard Bible Commentary*.

Jasper S. Hughes, a late-nineteenth-century Restoration movement commentator, decried this neglect in the preface to his commentary on Revelation:

This book has not yet found its way to an equal
**Neither Alexander Campbell nor any
 other first-generation leader
 authored a commentary on the
 book.**



place with the other books in our colleges, our pulpits or our press and is scarcely regarded as authority in religious controversy, and is quite generally tabooed, as a sphinx.¹¹

Insofar as early leaders of the Restoration movement made use of Revelation, they did so in ways that reflected the general anti-Catholic feeling of nineteenth-century American Protestants. In fact, they eagerly continued the Protestant practice of using antichrist rhetoric to denounce their papal enemies. So, for example, in the famous debate between Alexander Campbell and John Purcell, bishop of Cincinnati, Campbell proposed to prove that the Roman Catholic Church is “the Babylon of John, the Man of Sin of Paul, and the Empire of the Youngest Horn of Daniel’s Sea Monster.” In the course of the debate, Campbell argued that the second beast of Revelation 13 represents papal Rome and that the great harlot of Revelation 17 represents the Roman ecclesiastical establishment. To use Campbell’s words:

She is the Man of Sin! Babylon the Great—a city, a beast, a woman, a state, a persecuting power; scarlet, purple, drunken with the blood of the saints, with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus! Mystery! By mystery she rose, she reigns;—her mystery of purgatory, transubstantiation, relics, miracles, signs, sacraments, and unfathomable doctrines, have given her power.¹²

Such rhetoric was used by many of the early Disciples leaders, who shared a general nineteenth-century American Protestant fear that the flood of Catholic immigrants would increase the influence of Rome on American institutions.¹³

The use of harlot imagery to characterize Roman Catholicism is also evident in formal published treatments

of the book of Revelation by Restoration movement authors. The first such publication seems to have been J. L. Martin's *Voice of the Seven Thunders: Or Lectures on the Apocalypse*, which appeared in 1873. In his lecture on Revelation 17, Martin equates the Babylonian harlot with the Roman Catholic Church, which "ruled over the kingdoms of the earth and has a numerous family. All the divisions of Christendom ... belong to the same family, and make up the Babylon, and will all go down together." More influential than Martin's lectures was B. W. Johnson's treatment of the book of Revelation, published in 1881 (and reissued at least five times) under the title *Vision of the Ages: or Lectures on the Apocalypse, A Complete View on the Book of Revelation*. In his preface, Johnson argues that Revelation cannot be understood unless it is studied "in the light of history." Almost everything predicted in Revelation, Johnson claims, belongs to the past. Therefore, no interpreter ignorant of church history will ever be able to make sense of the book. In Johnson's view, the "general

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scope" of Revelation is "to outline the history of the Church," and "it portrays the fortunes of the two great persecuting powers, Pagan and Papal Rome."¹⁴ With breathtaking boldness Johnson identifies the period of history A.D. 533–1793 as the epoch of the apostasy of the Catholic Church. In his understanding, the seven bowls of Revelation 16 refer to specific events in contemporary history such as the French Revolution, the Napoleonic wars in Italy, and the unification of Italy under Victor Emmanuel II. All of these events portend, according to Johnson, the reemergence in the nineteenth century of the true church of Christ after its long shadowy exile during the reign of the Roman Catholic Babylonian harlot, whose destruction is described in Revelation 18.¹⁵

Johnson's understanding of Revelation as a code for the continuous history of the church reflects the basic pattern for commentary treatments by Restoration movement authors from the late nineteenth century through the first

half of the twentieth century. This approach always includes the use of harlot, antichrist, and beast rhetoric to denounce Catholicism.¹⁶ The commentary by P. Jay Martin (*The Mystery Finished*, 1913) is noteworthy because its use of anti-Catholic harlot imagery soars to unprecedented heights. Here we find the most extreme, abusive interpretation of Revelation, which aims to whip up patriotic hatred of Catholicism. Martin uses the church-historical method of interpretation as a springboard for an extended discussion of the corruption of all things American by the nefarious papal beast. Martin holds Catholics responsible for the assassinations of Lincoln, Garfield, and McKinley, and argues that President Taft committed fornication with the Babylonian whore by allowing Catholic schools to operate in the Philippines and Puerto Rico. He also argues that the Catholic Church in America has armed itself "with the best repeating rifles and steel swords, stored in the basement of her churches."¹⁷

By the mid-twentieth century, such anti-Catholic rhetoric had become unfashionable among Restoration movement commentators on Revelation. Adopting the methods of historical-critical interpretation, these authors rooted their understanding of Revelation's meaning in its historical context. So, for example, James D. Strauss's commentary (first published in 1963) argues that the harlot imagery of Revelation must be understood in a way that would have made sense to its original audience; the Babylonian harlot, then, becomes a symbol of the oppressive, immoral Roman empire.¹⁸ Similarly, Paul Butler, professor at Ozark Bible College, argues in his commentary that the harlot cannot be understood as referring to Catholicism: "She is Rome. Babylon, the harlot, the woman is that great city which had dominion over the kings of the earth. It cannot [be] an apostate Roman Catholic Church—it is Rome, the mistress of nations."¹⁹

There is a similar effort to defuse the polemical, controversial use of Revelation in three recent commentaries authored by scholars who represent each of the three segments of the Restoration movement: J. W. Roberts, late professor at Abilene Christian College (now Abilene Christian University); Lewis Foster, professor at Cincinnati Bible Seminary; and M. Eugene Boring, professor at Texas Christian University. Each of these commentators adopts a methodology that may loosely be described as preterist, or historical-critical. However, both Roberts and Foster express significant reservations about modern historical-critical assumptions. They are worried about any approach that precludes the possibility of a truly prophetic element in Revelation. In other words, they want to limit Revelation's message to its original audience, but they also want to argue that future events were truly predicted (by

John) and truly fulfilled (in ancient history). Roberts, however, firmly rejects the continuous historical interpretation method because "it attaches too much importance to the Roman Catholic Church" and because "it sees the Reformation largely as the only great event since the time of Constantine, and it limits the history of the Christian movement to the West. What about the movements of the East and of Africa?" Identifying his own method as "right-wing preterist," Roberts argues that Revelation can be understood as predicting the history of the church, but only from the age of martyrs to the Edict of Toleration in A.D. 311.²⁰

Foster also rejects any preterist approach that "nullifies the predictive element of Revelation," because "it is difficult to believe that Revelation concerned only items that were confined to the first century and contained no message for all the generations that have followed." Labeling his own method as "cyclical," Foster argues that Revelation does not unfold a continuous series of predicted events but recapitulates in symbolic spirals concurrent events. When Foster treats the Babylonian harlot, he argues, to be sure, that she represents ancient Rome, but she also (and more importantly) functions as a timeless symbol of the wicked world whenever it seeks to oppress the church. Although Foster in his introduction criticizes the ahistorical "spiritual" school of interpretation, his search for contemporary relevance leads him to explain Revelation's satanic imagery in ways reminiscent of the medieval approach.²¹

Eugene Boring also criticizes the nonhistorical spiritual method because, in its disregard for Revelation's original context, it "reduces its message to generalities." Boring firmly expresses his commitment to the historical-critical method, arguing that "the legitimate interpretation must be responsible to and derived from the meaning the text had for its original readers." However, Boring, like Lewis, believes that Revelation can and should be preached; to do so, the preacher (or churchly commentator) must find a way to stimulate an encounter between the text and his or her present situation. Revelation, Boring argues, does not speak about the present-day church, but it does speak to the present-day church. What that means, of course, is that symbols like the Babylonian harlot can be understood not only for their historical referent (i.e., the Roman Empire) but also for their moral or spiritual significance. Thus Boring suggests that the Babylonian harlot represents "the perversion of culture into arrogant, idolatrous human empire"; preachers should press this theme by exposing "the seductive, demonic evil of human achievement."²²

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What does this survey of the history of interpretation of Revelation teach us? First, the opposite poles of neglect and abuse are apparent throughout the Christian tradition, including the Restoration movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Second, commentators who have attempted to overcome the neglect of Revelation in order to make the book relevant to the church have largely done so on the basis of the church-historical method of interpretation—a method that has discredited itself. It is not merely for the sake of Christian charity that we should jettison a method that has yielded such venomous exegesis. Even for the sake of coherence, we should abandon a method that has undermined its claims to usefulness by its own historically constrained perspective. Applied to the book of Revelation, the method yields exegesis that appears not simply quaint and outdated but wildly speculative and uncontrolled. Indeed, it is interesting to see how sober and controlled medieval exegesis appears in contrast to the later interpretations generated by the church-historical method. Third, this survey shows that the struggle for contemporary relevance of the book of Revelation continues to occupy recent commentators who have largely abandoned the church-historical model. Without necessarily abandoning its commitment to historical-critical tools, might the church not find the older spiritual method of interpretation helpful in Christian formation today? That question, it seems to me, is worth considering.

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Notes

¹ Citations from Dionysius come from Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 7.25. See 3.28 for Eusebius' discussion of Caius, an early third-century Roman presbyter who rejected the Revelation of John as the work of Cerinthus.

² Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.25.

³ For a helpful summary of the history of the canonical disputes, see A. W. Wainwright, "Revelation, Book of," in *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. John H. Hayes (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999).

⁴ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works* 35: 398–411.

⁵ These medieval commentaries are printed in various volumes of J. P. Migne, ed., *Patrologia cursus completus*, Series Latina, 221 vols. (Paris, 1844–90). Commentators surveyed include Primasius (vol. 68), Cassiodorus (vol. 70), Haymo of Auxerre (vol. 117), Bruno of Segni (vol. 165), Rupert of Deutz (vol. 169), the Glossa Ordinaria (vol. 114), and Richard of St. Victor (vol. 196).

⁶ Heinrich Bullinger, *A Hundred Sermons upon the Apocalyps of Jesu Christe* (London, 1561). Bullinger preached this series of sermons in the years 1555 and 1556.

⁷ The publication of *Exposition of the Apocalypse* by Joachim of Fiore (ca.1135–1202) marked a turning point in the history of Revelation interpretation, giving rise to the practice of treating Revelation as a detailed chart of the course of past and contemporary history. The use of antichrist rhetoric is found not only among the Franciscan Spirituals, but also among the Beguines, Waldensians, Hussites, and Lollards. See Arthur W. Wainwright, *Mysterious Apocalypse* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 49–60.

⁸ Menno Simons, *The Complete Writings*, ed. J. C. Wenger (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald, 1956), 111, 517.

⁹ Wainwright, *Mysterious Apocalypse*, 61–66.

¹⁰ M. Eugene Boring, *Disciples and the Bible: A History of Disciples Biblical Interpretation in North America* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1997), 72. Boring argues that Campbell's inner canon extended from Acts to Jude, excluding the Gospels and Revelation.

¹¹ Jasper Seaton Hughes, *Mystery of the Golden Cloth; or, the Riven Veil* (Chicago: White Star, 1898), v.

¹² Alexander Campbell, *A Debate on the Roman Catholic Religion* (Nashville: McQuiddy, 1914), 291.

¹³ David E. Harrell, *Quest for a Christian America* (Nashville: The Disciples of Christ Historical Society), 214–215.

¹⁴ B. W. Johnson, *A Vision of the Ages* (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication, 1915), 28, 30.

¹⁵ B. W. Johnson, *A Vision of the Ages*, 294–330. See also Johnson's explanatory notes on Revelation in *The People's New Testament*, vol. 2 (Delight, AR: Gospel Light Publishing Co., 1889).

¹⁶ To make this generalization I have consulted the following commentaries: A. M. Overstreet, *Revelation Read, or An Exposition of the Apocalypse of John* (St. Louis: John Burns, 1884); Jasper Seaton Hughes, *Mystery of the Gold Cloth, or, the Riven Veil* (Chicago: White Star, 1898); James Gist Encell, *The Exiled Prophet, or, What John Saw on the Isle of Patmos* (St. Louis: Christian Publishing, 1898); Ashley S. Johnson, *Opening the Book of the Seven Seals* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1902); Jasper Seaton Hughes, *The Revelation* (Holland, MI: 1910); P. Jay Martin, *The Mystery Finished, or the New Heaven and the New Earth* (Nashville: McQuiddy, 1913); John Adam Battenfield and Philip Y. Pendleton, *The Great Demonstration: A Harmony of all the Prophetic Visions of the Holy Bible* (Cincinnati: Standard, 1914); Henry Clay Williams, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ: A Study of the Apocalypse* (Cincinnati: Standard, 1917); Francis Asa Wight, *Revelation--Christ's Return* (Harrisburg, PA: The Evangelical Press, 1931); R. H. Boll, *The Revelation* (Louisville: Word and Work, 1947); Lee Tomlinson, *The Wonder Book of the Bible: A Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1963).

¹⁷ P. Jay Martin, *The Mystery Finished*, 51, 128–135.

¹⁸ James D. Strauss, *The Seer, the Saviour, and the Saved: The Lord of the Future* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1984), 211, 244–245, 252. Strauss's commentary went through at least two revisions and five printings, the last in 1984.

¹⁹ Paul T. Butler, *Twenty-six Lessons on Revelation* (Joplin, Mo: College Press, 1982), 67.

²⁰ J. W. Roberts, *The Revelation to John* (The Apocalypse) (Austin: Sweet, 1974), 15–19.

²¹ Lewis Foster, *Revelation* (Cincinnati: Standard, 1991), 15–16, 246–52.

²² M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation, Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox, 1989), 47–51, 179–84. It should be noted that Boring also argues that preachers can find other passages in the New Testament that would allow a celebration of culture and politics.