

Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now
Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther
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This addition to Orbis' Bible and Liberation Series 'attempts to combine scholarly investigation of the book of Revelation with inquiry into the practical consequences of Revelation for people attempting to follow Jesus on the way of discipleship' (xiii). The result of the attempt is not so much a furthering of scholarly investigation as a useful rehearsing of recent scholarship, on the one hand, and a stimulating challenge to further reflection on the message of the book of Revelation for today, on the other.

The first two chapters are a review of the modern phenomenon of premillennialism and its doctrine of the Rapture (ch. 1), and an exploration of the 'roots and branches of apocalyptic literature', in order to situate Revelation within its own tradition (ch. 2). It's good to have this information, but in my judgment it could have been reduced in volume and placed in an appendix. You have to wait for 83 pages until you get to the authors' reading of Revelation.

Chapter three provides a wealth of important background information on urban life in the Roman Province of Asia in the first century of the Christian Era: 'the political, economic, cultural, and mythic dimensions of Roman provincial society'. The imperial cult is given its due, as are local cults. More attention could have been paid to the Artemis cult, which was widespread within and without the Province of Asia and in its various manifestation was a tremendously influential socio-religious force, and to the religious demands of the trade guilds. The authors rightly maintain that persecution was not the major challenge facing Christians. Compromise was the problem.

The discussion in chapter four offers a view of time and space which should help to overcome the linear treatment of Revelation that has skewed much of the interpretation of the book. The authors speak of reality as being 'bifurcated' (= divided into two branches). 'Revelation reveals a bifurcated universe in which 'ordinary' life and 'divine' life coexist at all times and places' (121). Always there are two realities: Revelation calls the one reality 'heaven', which is 'good', and the other it calls 'earth', which is 'evil'. Heaven is the universe where God lives and reigns, and earth is the universe as perceived by the empire, the antigod. 'These two worlds are competing realities that stand in opposition to each other' (122). 'Empire', it should be noted, is the authors' shorthand for a dominant culture which typically 'claims that its own socially constructed reality is the ultimate one, thus displacing the truly ultimate reality-where God lives and reigns-from its rightful place. The genius of empire is that it is able to establish an aura around itself that says: 'the way the empire is, is the way things are supposed to be' (120, 121).

I applaud this discussion of time and space in Revelation, and in the main this understanding of 'empire'. I wonder, however, whether the idea of 'bifurcation' really hits

the mark. It seems to me that Revelation does not divide reality into two branches. There are not, as Howard-Brook and Gwyther claim, two realities, but only one reality seen through different glasses. The one view sees that the empire (Emperor, Artemis, Beast, Babylon, etc) appears to be in charge of life and death, blessing and destruction. If you want to prosper, you must conform to the empire, acknowledge the empire, worship the empire. Revelation urges Christians to put on God's glasses, to see the world according to God, to recognise the copycat nature of empire which pretends to be the ultimate. The reality which Revelation reveals is that through the Lamb That Was Slain God is creating all things new. The old is being dismantled, unmasked, and stripped of its power, both real and imaginary.

Furthermore, it is not satisfactory to label 'earth' as 'evil' and 'heaven' as 'good'. This does not recognise sufficiently the polyvalency of symbols in Revelation. For example, it is 'earth', the supposed symbol of evil, which actually rescues the people of God by swallowing the river which flowed from the mouth of the dragon (12:16). In much the same way, 'desert' is a symbol both of safety and of destruction in Revelation.

The authors offer an excellent discussion of the symbols 'Babylon' and 'New Jerusalem', showing how these two realities exist side by side, here and now, and that Christians cannot hold dual citizenship. New Jerusalem, they say, 'is found wherever human community rejects the lies and violence of empire and places God at the centre of its shared life' (158). In view of the fact that the authors are aware that 'New Jerusalem is both city and ³bride²' (159), it is surprising that they do not speak of the Lamb as the centre of the city's shared life, or that they do not confess, as does Revelation, that when we speak of God we speak of the Triune God-whose throne alone is perhaps the dominant symbol in Revelation.

The chapter on liturgy and worship in Revelation (ch. 7) is to my mind the weakest in the book. It does not reckon with the performative power of liturgy. Worship is going on 'day and night', without ceasing; it is the *cantus firmus* of Revelation; it actually sets in train the saving and judging activities which are described in the narratives. Worship dethrones 'empire', the idols and powers opposed to God and God's people. Worship is the Christians' declaration that they say No to empire (the antigod), and Yes to the One Who Sits on the Throne and to the Lamb, who is King of kings and Lord of lords.

The authors have not recognised that worship scenes in Revelation sometimes occur in pairs; thus they have failed to note several important worship scenes. For example, the lamentation in 6:9-11 is an act of worship (as Westermann pointed out years ago); like all proper lamentation it has its conclusion in the processional liturgy of 7:9-12. Part of the irony of the book is that the only worship scene by the followers of empire which John actually describes is a lamentation (ch. 18); the followers of empire can utter no subsequent expression of hope or shout of praise for deliverance (as Israel does in, say, Psalm 22); instead the lamentation by the worshippers of empire is followed by the exultant Hallelujah chorus of the worshippers of God who sits on the throne! (19:1-8).

Likewise, the authors have ignored the worship scene in 8:1-5, worship which is begun with silence in the presence of God. The prayers of the saints are placed on the 'golden altar that is before the throne of God'. The worship is led by the angel-priest, probably Christ himself. It is strange that Howard-Brook and Gwyther missed the liturgy of acclamation in 12:10-12, because the reminder of the existence and potency of heavenly liturgy is particularly appropriate at this point in John's narrative. They have also ignored the victory song in 16:5-7, a reprise of 15:1-4, and the final divine presentation and liturgical acclamation in 21:3-8.

An excellent chapter on myths and counter-myths in Revelation concludes the part of the book devoted chiefly to the 'scholarly investigation of the book of Revelation'. The final chapters reflect on the significance of Revelation for today. They focus chiefly on socio-economic aspects of modern 'empire'. This certainly is faithful to an important theme in Revelation. Other themes could legitimately have been explored, for example the legal murdering of the unborn and the aged, the manipulation of justice by the oppressors against the oppressed, the McDonaldisation of society, the worship of antigods.

I was disappointed that Anthony Gwyther, who introduces himself as an Australian writing in Australia, included no examples of the dominance of 'empire' in this part of the world. He says nothing about East Timor and Bougainville, nothing about mandatory sentencing, nothing about the plight of the minorities in Australia, and so forth. In fact, he says little about Australia, even though he bemoans the 'cultural cringe' which permits north American culture to dominate our thinking. In focusing on globalisation we risk overlooking local manifestations of empire.

On rereading this review I see that negatives dominate. That's not the impression I want to leave the reader with. This is a good book, a very helpful contribution to the reading of Revelation. My criticisms are meant only to indicate where here and there the authors might have done things better or differently; they are certainly not intended to discourage its use by pastors, Bible study leaders and all those interested in reading Revelation with blessing (Rev 1:3).