Beale, G. K.
The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text

New International Greek Testament Commentary


Russell Morton
Ashland Theological Seminary
Ashland, OH 44805

The culmination of over a decade of research and writing on the Apocalypse, Beale's work makes a significant contribution to our understanding of Revelation. While the reader may not necessarily agree on all points, the commentary will certainly provide considerable insight into John's often perplexing vision. In particular, Beale's grasp of the Greek grammar of Revelation is outstanding. Too few scholars today have the linguistic expertise to furnish the reader with such extensive and thoughtful notes. At the same time, Beale does not assume all readers understand he technical terms, and he defines them upon first usage. Furthermore, Beale's often repeated insight, first noted with comments on 1:4a (p. 188), that John's use of solecisms may be a means of calling the reader/hearer's attention to allusions in the Hebrew Bible, is most helpful.

A second major contribution is the discussion of Revelation's structure. Recapitulation is accepted, as is the literary unity of the book (pp. 108-144). Thus, John arranges his vision not in chronological, but in topical order, emphasizing three motifs: judgment, persecution, and salvation (p. 144). While noting there is little unanimity among scholars regarding Revelation's structure, Beale's own opinion is that a sevenfold or eightfold division of the book is most plausible (p. 114). Nevertheless, this arrangement may be subordinate to a broader fourfold structure of (1) 1:19 (20); (2) 1:19 (20)-3:22; (3) 4:1-22:5 and 22:6-21. Linguistic markers from Daniel 2 (p. 115) denote these sections. "A model for the compatibility of the multiple viable structures" (p. 115) is possible because John arranges his account by overlying interdependent elements, where earlier parts of the book are supplemented and explained by succeeding events and vice versa (pp. 115-116).

Insightful analysis is also provided concerning the non-literal, symbolic nature of John's vision. This is emphasized at many points, including the explanation of the topical, rather than chronological arrangement of the book, the metaphors in Rev 11:1-2 (pp. 557-
571), the description of Babylon in chap. 17 (pp. 847-889), and the interpretation of the millennium in Rev 20:1-6 (pp. 972-1021). Nevertheless, in the course of these discussions the reader is sometimes distracted by Beale's references to the inadequacies of the literalist interpretations, such as those provided by John Walvoord and Hal Lindsey. While agreeing with Beale's conclusions, one sometimes wonders if a dialogue with these authors, particularly Lindsey, might not be better served, and more accessible to a general public, in a popular treatment.

Beale also provides the reader with a rich collection of intertextual references from the Hebrew Bible, rabbinic literature, Jewish apocalyptic, and early Christian texts. His discussion of chap. 14 (pp. 730-784, see especially the excurses on pp. 776-780) is masterful. Yet, this impressive strength, demonstrating great depth of learning, is also, at times, the commentary's greatest weakness. Beale does not seem inclined to nuance his references, especially when using later rabbinic materials, and sometimes he approaches "parallelomania." Thus, the reader is left with the illusion of a "normative Judaism," embracing the apocalyptic and the rabbinic, when, in fact, there are significant differences between the two. While Revelation may be on a trajectory of the development of thought later found in rabbinic sources, this fact is not spelled out more adequately.

One should also note that in his allusions to the HB, Beale is unclear whether he is dating Daniel in the second century BCE or the sixth. Similarly, the reader is sometimes left wondering how Beale understands Daniel's relationship to apocalyptic Judaism as a whole. And when citing NT references, the reader is almost given the impression that John was exegeting texts, rather than, as was more likely, sharing in a common tradition.

Likewise, Beale's dedication to John's very real dependence upon and reinterpretation of Jewish and Christian traditions leads to neglect, if not express rejection of the existence of Hellenistic/Roman influences upon Revelation. While mentioning in fine print that the crown of the first rider of Rev 6:2 has been understood as reflective of Apollo (p. 378), John's use of combat myth in Rev 12-13 is gratuitously dismissed in one short paragraph (p. 634). Yet, the following paragraph notes that John filters extrabiblical myths through a sieve of biblical thought, especially Dan. 7, thereby transforming them. John undoubtedly transforms his imagery. Nevertheless, he engages in a process of "remythologization" typical of the apocalyptic genre, as noted by P. D. Hanson. The result is that ancient mythology is incorporated and reinterpreted in the light of the faith of Israel as well as current crises. It is telling that H. Gunkel's seminal works on this issue are not even listed in the bibliography, perhaps indicating unwillingness on Beale's part to dialogue on this issue.

Finally, it is inevitable that in a work as massive as Beale's commentary, occasional misprints and mistakes crop up. One of the most glaring is on p. 950, when the villain of
3 Maccabees is wrongly identified as Antiochus instead of Ptolomey IV Philopator. It is hoped that in future printings or editions these mistakes can be corrected.

Despite the above reservations, however, Beale has written a truly important work which should be consulted as a reference by serious scholars of the Apocalypse. While lacking some nuancing, his study provides a starting point for others to pursue intertextuality in more detail. His grammatical analysis is superb. Finally, Beale's understanding of the multi-layered character of John's structure is an important insight, which helps readers as they attempt to come to terms with John's vision.