The introduction (9–29) of this commentary on the book of Revelation discusses traditional introductory issues. Written in the genre of an apocalypse in the last decade of the first century C.E. by a well-known prophet in Asia, Revelation, according to Knight, reflects internal struggles in Asian congregations more than real persecution of Christians (28). He thus develops a theory of L. L. Thompson that the author created a crisis consciousness to demarcate social boundaries between his readers and their pagan neighbors, practically requiring them “to be a sectarian countercommunity in the midst of an unbelieving world” (29, 154). This theory attempts to explain the lack of evidence for (physical) persecution by Roman authorities in ancient sources from this period. John thus was not banished to Patmos, as is commonly accepted, but went there on a (form of) retreat (21). Similarly, references to martyrdom are symbolic.

The consequences of this analysis are severe: Revelation as a sectarian book “requires careful handling in any discussion of the place of the church in the world that might be undertaken today” (29). The sectarian mindset of the author and the lack of an overlap with extratextual “reality” demands further reflection on a comment of Bauer about the extremely confused religious outlook of the apocalyptist (29).

These remarks of the author will make sense to readers who feel that a crude persecution theory is often imposed on the text and who recognize the problem of the lack of evidence for official persecution in Domitianic times. Questions remain, however. Is it feasible to trace the extreme language (e.g., Rev.17–18) merely to the desperate attempts of a minority prophet to convince educated Christians (27) in his area to establish social boundaries against Gentiles? Even if the reference to Antipas’s death (Rev 2:13) does not reflect “official” persecution and is the only name of a martyr mentioned in the book (46), it does reveal the cheapness of Christian lives in the geographical context of this
letter, confirmed, among others, by Rev 18:24 and of radical pressures to which Christians may have been exposed. Moreover, Rev 1:9, where John speaks of himself as a co-sufferer and of his sojourn on Patmos (interpreted by scholars as banishment), remains a problem for a perceived persecution theory, even though Knight correctly points out how sober and restricted these references are. Extreme language could just as well suggest the existence of a highly exploitative social system with sometimes deadly consequences that the author experienced as threatening to the extreme and as representing a persecution of the faithful—whether official or not, sporadic or not. Social systems need not cause only or widespread physical persecution to be experienced as highly oppressive.

Whilst rightfully questioning the strong focus on “real” persecution and the preoccupation with Roman opponents in research, Knight’s own exposition of the crisis theory also evokes the question whether due recognition is given to the multifaceted picture of evil opposition in the book and to its complex nature. The seven letters focus not only on Christian divisions but also and especially on Jewish opponents. In the rest of the text pagan opposition is portrayed. Knight explains references to “synagogue of Satan” and to false Jews (Rev 3:9) as denoting “a pattern of behaviour and not primarily an ethnic and religious identity” (53). He does acknowledge, however, that the Jewish opponents could relate to Jewish opposition to Christians commonly found throughout the empire (44). If this is so, how does one convincingly prove that the “false Jews” of Rev 2:9 refer to “Christians who refuse to do what John says” rather than to such groups?

The crisis theory in this publication seems reductionist in nature, leading to the “relatively simple” message of Revelation being seen as a call to readers of the book to “stand their distance” from the pagan world (155–56). Such a message seems not less reductionist than the readings that interpret the book as a prophecy against Roman opponents. To put it differently: Do the author need as many as seven letters to convey this relatively simple message, or is the meaning of these letters reducible to a call to seek social boundaries? The complexities of the letters and of the book in general, with its positive and negative symbols and their many possible references, seem to require a more comprehensive explanation.

The introductory material is followed by an extensive commentary (30–142), characterized by a sensitive literary-critical approach. Though following the conventional chapter division in his exegesis, Knight develops links and a coherence between chapters and larger units in a mainly syntagmatic approach. This sensitivity for the text as literature is why, for example, he develops the meaningful comment of Ramsay that the famous invitation in Rev 3:19–22 functions as conclusion to all seven letters and why he can also integrate the seven letters with the following parts of the book (56–57).
literary approach also helps him use the much-neglected three woes mentioned in Rev 9:12 to explain the coherence of certain parts of the text that were previously regarded as incoherent.

In the conclusion (143–68) Knight analyzes the structure of Revelation, returns to the identity and interests of the author, and ends with an overview of the message and some seminal themes of the book. These include cosmology, theology, sin and salvation, Christology, trinitarianism, and eschatology. The strength of this publication is to be found in these insightful conclusions, especially in theological observations that are not always available in traditional commentaries, which often seem to focus almost exclusively on historical, linguistic, and form-critical issues.

Considerable progress in scholarship on Revelation over the last decade motivated this publication. “The time has come for a reading of Revelation that takes these new developments into account” (9). Knight’s response of 183 pages is more limited than the 1,354 pages of the massive and well-researched commentary on Revelation by David Aune in the Word Biblical Commentary series that appeared from 1997–1998. Given the restraints of the series in which it appears, Knight’s commentary nevertheless provides a useful reading of the text. In its theological and literary insights, it forms a necessary supplement to Aune’s work.

What is most useful in this commentary, though, is the way in which the integrity of the text and its symbolic nature is respected. Knight develops the allusive and ambiguous symbolism of Revelation (worked out by himself so succinctly, for example, in terms of the pronouncements on the Holy Spirit [166]). Sensitive to its highly symbolic language with its ambiguous nature, he rightly refrains from facile historical readings. Because he also works with perceptions and rhetorics of the text (the author creates a crisis and wants to convince his readers of this crisis), he realizes most of the time that there is not a simple line from the symbols in the text to a historical situation. While others would see the nightmarish imperial cult as a main threat behind many utterances and, certainly, behind the second beast, he finds no textual evidence of compulsory sacrifices to the emperor. He observes that Rev 13:14 (99) is one of the few, if not the only, reference to the imperial cult in this book. Miracles by the second beast criticize the divinization of emperors, “but we should beware of confusing John’s rhetoric with the actual situation addressed” (99). The same caution is evident when he discusses the notoriously difficult Rev 17:10–11 with its reference to seven kings. Unlike some other commentators, he finds it impossible to identify the kings: “The language is primarily symbolic and mythological and it does not necessarily offer a full historical precision” (118).
The understanding of symbolism advances an interpretation of the text in other ways. Where Knight discusses the meaning of the two witnesses, he notes that John does not name them “perhaps to tease his readers into thought,” adding quite perceptively that “his silence means we cannot be sure that the witnesses’ identity is precisely restricted to the two figures mentioned (i.e. Moses and Elijah). Symbolism comes first in the Apocalypse; identification follows behind” (86). Sentences later, he adds that these symbols “make a point on one level which can (and does) have meaning on a range of other levels.” Teasing the reader to think and having many meanings are tantalizing suggestions about the “fertile” mind and text of John, supporting and developing a growing belief that John’s symbolism is much more complicated than simply (and allegorically) referring to obvious Roman matters, issues and institutions, as has often been suggested in scholarly research.