

## *Augustine and the Trinity*

Lewis Ayres

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, xiv + 360pp., £50.00, hb, ISBN 978-0-521-83886-3

### SUMMARY

In recent decades it has become received wisdom in academic circles to portray Augustine as the source of much that is wrong in western accounts of the Trinity. Ayres provides a helpful counterbalance to this understanding. He suggests that a closer reading of Augustine reveals an insistence on the irreducibility of the three persons. He also argues that Augustine's doctrine of the Trinity cannot be reduced to one analogical model, but depends on a range of sources which combine to bring a rich interpretation of the Nicene formula.

### RÉSUMÉ

Ces dernières décennies, il est devenu de bon ton dans les milieux académiques de présenter Saint Augustin comme le responsable de bien des égarements dans la formulation occidentale de la doctrine de la Trinité. Ayres apporte un correctif utile à cette manière de voir. Il suggère qu'une lecture plus juste des ouvrages de Saint Augustin révèle une insistance sur le caractère irréductible de la distinction entre les trois personnes. Il montre aussi que la doctrine augustinienne de la Trinité ne peut se réduire à un unique modèle analogique, mais qu'elle dépend d'une diversité de sources qui se mêlent pour produire une riche interprétation de la formule nicéenne.

### ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

In vergangenen Jahrzehnten gehörte es zur akzeptierten Weisheit akademischer Kreise, Augustin als die Quelle vieler Falschaussagen in westlichen Darstellungen der Trinität zu bezeichnen. Ayres sorgt für ein hilfreiches Gegengewicht zu einem derartigen Verständnis. Er legt nahe, dass sich bei einer genaueren Lektüre Augustins dessen beharrliche Überzeugung erschließt, dass die drei göttlichen Personen nicht einzuschränken sind. Ayres behauptet ebenfalls, dass die augustinische Trinitätslehre nicht auf ein einziges, analoges Modell begrenzt werden kann, sondern auf einer Reihe von Quellen beruht, die zusammengekommen eine reiche Auslegung der Nizänischen Glaubensformel mit sich bringen.

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In recent decades it has become received wisdom in academic circles to portray Augustine as the source of much that is wrong in western accounts of the Trinity. He stands accused of over-emphasising the unity of God, primarily as a consequence of his use of neo-platonic categories, thus rendering personal Trinitarian distinctiveness problematic. Ayres offers a significant contribution to a growing field of literature seeking to revise this negative assessment. Rather than engaging at length with secondary work, Ayres traces the development of August-

tine's thought through a critical account of his own works. The first three chapters focus on the origins of Augustine's Trinitarian theology, much of which will be unfamiliar to most readers; Ayres considers such works as *De fide at symbolo* to be foundational yet 'a text whose importance has been consistently underrated'. Chapters 4-6 focus on *De Trinitate* and explore Augustine's attitude to Scripture and the way in which his understanding of analogical reasoning underpins his Christological epistemology. Chapters 7-10 give a detailed account of Augustine's mature Trinitarian ontology; the final two chapters focus on the practice of reflection detailed in the latter chapters of *De Trinitate*, suggesting that a simple account of Augustine's Trinitarianism as analogical is deeply problematic.

Three arguments are central to the argument Ayres seeks to sustain. Firstly, that Augustine insists throughout his work that the three persons of the Trinity are irreducible. The unity of God is grounded in the Father's eternal generation of the Son and the eternal procession of the Spirit; the divine communion results from the eternal intra-divine acts of the three persons in love. Here Ayres regards Augustine as offering an important and 'compelling' interpretation of Nicea's 'God from God'. Secondly, rather than imbibing unhelpful philosophical categories into Trinitarian theology, it is argued that Augustine draws upon a range of theological terms and metaphorical resources. This can only be fully appreciated by a chronological reading of the texts; Augustine's critics stand accused of failing to take into account this 'clear trajectory' of theological development.

Finally, it is argued that Augustine understood Christian growth as participation in the life of God which is both illuminating of the triune life, yet also an acknowledgement of the mystery of God; 'the foundational quality of a Scripture that points towards divine mystery... and our knowledge of human noetic fallenness and necessary humility all undergird the provisional and complex nature of Augustine's Trinitarian styles' (325).

This is clearly an academic book intended for serious students of theology, but the writing style is clear and the argument would be accessible to those with a limited grasp of the background (though the price is likely to prohibit many). As a contribution to debate, this is a robust and strongly argued reappraisal of Augustine's developments in Trinitarian theology. As such it should serve as a caution for those brought up to consider Augustine as the origin of all that is wrong in western accounts of the Trinity. Perhaps it is much more a matter of the way in which Augustine has been read and interpreted. The author is Professor of Catholic Theology at Durham (UK) and part of his intention is to relate the new revisionist approach to Augustine with modern Thomist theology. This perspective needs to be recognised when assessing the argument, but the importance of this book is far wider than the Catholic tradition. Teachers of theology ought to be aware of the moves to reconstruct our understanding of Augustine's doctrine

of the trinity; to that end this is a helpful and erudite contribution.

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**Revelation. A New Covenant Commentary**  
**New Covenant Commentary Series, 18**  
**Gordon D. Fee**

Eugene, OR: Cascade Books (Wipf & Stock), 2011;  
332 pp, \$ 37, pb, ISBN 978-1-60899-431-1

RÉSUMÉ

Ce commentaire sur l'Apocalypse constitue un manuel clair et utile, qui se lit facilement. Il n'entre pas dans la discussion sur les diverses interprétations. Fee considère que l'empire romain est la cible principale de la critique prophétique dans l'Apocalypse. Malgré l'objectif annoncé de la série, ce volume ne sera pas d'une grande utilité aux pasteurs et enseignants.

SUMMARY

Gordon Fee's commentary on Revelation is a clear and helpful support which reads fluently and does not interact with other interpreters. The Roman Empire is seen as the main object of Revelation's prophetic criticism. Despite the ostensible aim of the series in which it appears, the commentary does not contain much help for preachers and teachers.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Gordon Fees Kommentar zum Buch der Offenbarung erweist sich als verständlicher, hilfreicher Beitrag. Er läßt sich flüssig lesen und setzt sich nicht mit anderen Auslegern auseinander. Als Hauptziel der prophetischen Kritik in der Offenbarung wird das Römische Weltreich angesehen. Trotz des offensichtlichen Zieles der Reihe, in welcher der Kommentar erscheint, enthält er keine große Hilfe für Prediger und Lehrer.

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When I picked up this commentary, my first response was: 'No, not another commentary series!?' There are now more series of commentaries on the New Testament than any person can reasonably consult. Every publishing company wants to have its own series and some run several series. The *New Covenant Commentary Series* is announced as a series with contributors from all continents which will explicitly pay attention to the meaning of the text for the people of God. It is the first series by American publishers Wipf and Stock.

Gordon Fee's introduction to the volume on Revelation is surprisingly short. On just 11 pages he says a few (very useful) things about the book's genre, authorship, reason for writing and date – but more thorny issues

such as the book's structure and its social and historical background are not touched upon. Fee merely states that he thinks some elements of Revelation have already occurred but will occur again. One also expects some discussion of John's use of the Old Testament and intertestamental literature as well as an overview of the main schools of interpretation in the introduction – but these are absent

The commentary itself is written in running style with the words under discussion in bold print so that it reads fluently. Fee entirely refrains from interacting with other commentators; as a result the book has few footnotes. He systematically shows how John uses elements from the Old Testament to describe his visions and he often expresses his admiration for John's 'literary artistry'. Fee frequently comments on the rendering of the Greek text by the NIV but in such a way that no knowledge of Greek is necessary to understand the comment. If the meaning of a word or phrase is unclear, he is not ashamed to admit this. The translation that Fee uses as basis for his work, the NIV 2011, is printed in full. He regularly discusses the decisions made by the revisers of this edition, of whom he was one; apart from these places, in my opinion the translation merely uses up valuable space.

Fee states that he divides Revelation into two main parts, chapters 1-11 and 12-22. Yet more importantly he seems to take everything up to chapter 16 as 'prelude' to the last, eschatological battle which is described in chapters 17-20. In line with this, chapters 15-16 are described as concerning the 'penultimate' events (207); 14:14-20 is taken as a separate section of which 14:14-16 anticipates chapters 21-22 and 14:17-20 anticipates chapters 17-20. The notorious passage 20:1-6 is treated as describing no more than 'an interlude' in the 'last battle' in between 'the divine overthrow of the unholy triumvirate' and 'the final judgement of all evil' (280).

The main target of John's criticism throughout the book, according to Fee, is the Roman Empire. Not that there is already much persecution of Christians at the time of writing, but as a prophet John foresees persecution in the near future – which indeed came in the second and third centuries AD. Fee argues that Revelation was written at the end of the first century and that 8:8-9 reflect the eruption of the Vesuvius in AD 79.

Within the exposition there are not many hints at what the text means for contemporary believers although after three sections (chs. 2-3; 4-6; 21:1 – 22:5) there is a brief separate unit called 'Fusing the horizons'. I wonder why there are not more such units, especially given the series' aim of paying attention to the meaning of the text as mentioned above. At the end of the book one finds a short bibliography and an index of texts.

Fee's commentary is one of several good, medium sized commentaries that have already appeared this century. Of the others I want to mention Ben Witherington's (2003) and Joseph Mangina's recent volume in the series of SCM Theological Commentaries. The latter is