

# *Reading Revelation. A Thematic Approach*

W. Gordon Campbell

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## RÉSUMÉ

Voici la version anglaise d'un ouvrage d'abord publié en français. L'auteur a une approche thématique de l'Apocalypse et montre comment les divers éléments de ce livre s'harmonisent en un ensemble qui fait sens. Il avertit le lecteur de l'Apocalypse contre des identifications historiques trop rapides. Tous ne seront pas convaincus sur tous les points, en particulier par la mise en doute de la pertinence des données historiques pour l'exégèse des chapitres 2 et 3, ou par l'identification proposée pour Babylone et Jérusalem. Cette étude apporte néanmoins bien des suggestions nouvelles intéressantes. Et Campbell nous offre ici une théologie biblique de l'Apocalypse complète et cohérente.

## SUMMARY

This is the English version of a study that was originally published in French. Gordon Campbell's thematic approach to Revelation shows how the different elements of the book fit together into a meaningful whole. Campbell warns the interpreter of Revelation not to make historical identifications too hastily. Even if not everyone will be convinced in all respects, particularly concerning his questioning of the relevance of historical information for the exegesis of chapters 2-3 or the proposed identification of Babylon and Jerusalem, this study provides many fresh insights. What Campbell offers is a complete and coherent biblical theology of Revelation.

## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Dies ist die englische Ausgabe einer Studie, die ursprünglich auf Französisch veröffentlicht wurde. Gordon Campbells thematischer Ansatz zur Offenbarung zeigt, wie sich die unterschiedlichen Elemente des Buches zu einem sinnvollen Ganzen zusammenfügen. Campbell warnt die Ausleger der Offenbarung davor, nicht zu eilig historische Identifikationen vorzunehmen. Nicht jeder mag von allen Aspekten überzeugt sein: Dies gilt insbesondere, wenn Campbell die Relevanz von historischen Informationen für die Exegese der Kapitel 2-3 infrage stellt, oder was die vorgeschlagene Identifikation von Babylon und Jerusalem angeht. Dennoch bietet diese Arbeit viele neue Einblicke. Was Campbell hier vorlegt, ist eine vollständige und stimmige biblische Theologie der Offenbarung.

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There exist several works providing useful theological approaches to Revelation. What could a 'thematic approach' add to such books? Gordon Campbell has spent more than fifteen years conducting research on the book of Revelation, resulting in a doctoral thesis and several articles written in French. In this present

work, he presents his approach in English to a broader public. Campbell is professor of New Testament Studies at Union Theological College, Belfast. The French original of this book appeared in 2007, at the time when the author was teaching New Testament at the Faculté Jean Calvin in Aix-en-Provence. He decided to translate his book into English, being both translator and author, and feeling free to improve the clarity or the force of the argument wherever this seemed appropriate. As a result, the present book now starts with four introductions: foreword and preface to the English edition, and foreword and preface to the French edition.

Campbell proposes to read the book of Revelation as though it were a symphony in three movements: God, Humanity and Covenant. 'Human beings may enjoy a free and true relation to God who is wholly other, and to the Lamb on condition that, in the various choices and commitments of their lives, they refuse idolatry with all it entails... God offers to humankind a way of living together with him, which is structured by a covenant.' (344) In seven chapters, Campbell explores interlaced thematic trajectories: divinity and pseudo-divinity, true sovereignty and usurped claims, legitimate adoration and bogus worship (part 1: God reveals himself); genuine testimony and counter-proclamation, faithful belonging and counter-allegiance, bride-city and whore-city (part 2: Humanity finds itself); broken covenant and new covenant (part 3: When God and humanity meet).

Again and again, Campbell warns the interpreter of Revelation not to make historical identifications too hastily, particularly in identifying Babylon and Rome. The most important issue concerning the name Babylon is its feminine-urban imagery, rooted in the Jewish Scriptures. This is a complex theme, the unfolding of which in Revelation is linked not to one city in particular: it is linked to the seven church-cities of Asia, to the great city introduced in 11:8 and to the controlling concept of the woman city in the rest of the book. The heavenly city is, according to Campbell, nothing short of a *Babylon rediviva* as she both neutralises the city on the Euphrates and becomes the more glorious with splendour of her own. By replacing Babylon, this Jerusalem-from-above puts an end to the revolt, tyranny and oppression of Babel or Sodom or Tyre. Campbell, then, defends the minority position that reads the cargoes for merchants and associates of Babylon in reference to biblical Jerusalem (Rev 18:12-13 referring to the trade of the Temple and bazaars of Jerusalem).

For Campbell, the Bible is not to be used for satisfying whatever curiosity we may have. Even in the case of the seven Asian cities in chapters 2-3, he is reluctant to use historical data for the exegesis. He states that it is not certain that the historical import of the cities is anything more than circumstantial, incidental or secondary; their worth is not simply to calculate in historical terms, it is also representative and symbolic. Revelation, as an apocalyptic book, creates its own symbolic universe, including the oracles of chapters 2-3.



This thorough reading of Revelation led Campbell ultimately to break with the current interpretative consensus. As he himself puts it, Revelation's narrative is not, as is usually assumed, 'a rhetorical position fundamentally at loggerheads, politically or religiously, with the ancient Roman status quo, but instead manifestations of a distinctly inner-Jewish debate, conducted on the basis of rival readings of the Old Testament current at the time. Consequently, a provisional reconstruction of the cognitive and rhetorical situation that gave rise to Revelation would suggest a context linked to the synagogues of the Jewish Diaspora'. (25)

Hermeneutically significant is Revelation's ever present use of antithesis, because 1. we are dealing, here, with a skilfully woven part of the compositional web; 2. the numerous antithetical phrases, figures and images are carefully interlinked within the narrative; 3. these very motifs, with their positive and negative poles, both regulate and punctuate the developing narrative.

To give one example of careful thematic reading: Revelation uses the variable but always fourfold formula 'peoples, multitudes, nations and languages' (5:9; 7:9; 10:11; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6; 17:15) to denote humanity as a whole, so it is almost synonymous with universality. However, the formula never recurs in identical fashion twice and this is more than simply matter of form. Allowing for two shifts in meaning, it has three distinct nuances in all. The first is positive, the second is neutral, the third and final nuance is negative. By highlighting these nuances, Campbell shows that the formula in question undergoes a very subtle evolution as Revelation's plot moves forward.

In conclusion, Campbell's 'thematic approach' proves to be an account of how the different elements of the book of Revelation fit together into a meaningful whole. Even if not everyone will be convinced in all respects, particularly concerning the questioning of the relevance of historical information for the exegesis of chapters 2-3 or the proposed identification of Babylon and Jerusalem, this book provides many fresh insights. What Campbell offers is a complete and coherent biblical theology of Revelation, undoubtedly useful to theological students, teachers and researchers, so that contemporary readers become competent readers.

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## *Ancient Christian Interpretations of "Violent Texts" in the Apocalypse*

Novum Testamentum et Orbis Antiquus / Studien zur Umwelt des Neuen Testaments 92

Joseph Verheyden, Andreas Merkt, Tobias Nicklas (eds)

Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011; 313 pp, hb, € 69,95, ISBN 978-3-647-53976-8

### ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Dieses Werk für Spezialisten enthält sehr unterschiedliche Beiträge. Einige der dreizehn Aufsätze (auf Deutsch und Englisch) konzentrieren sich auf die Schriften von Kirchenvätern wie Origenes, Victorinus, Lactantius und Tyconius zum Thema Gewalt im Buch der Offenbarung, andere wiederum nicht. Es ist zu begrüßen, dass Wissenschaftler aus ganz Europa an diesem Werk beteiligt sind.

### RÉSUMÉ

Cet ouvrage qui rassemble des contributions très diverses s'adresse aux spécialistes. Une partie des treize contributions, en allemand et en anglais, traitent de ce que les pères de l'Église comme Origène, Victorin, Lactance et Tyconius ont écrit concernant la violence dans l'Apocalypse. Il est appréciable qu'on ait fait ici appel à des auteurs de toute l'Europe.

### SUMMARY

This is a book for the specialists which contains very diverse contributions. Some of the thirteen essays (in German and English) do focus on what church fathers such as Origen, Victorinus, Lactantius and Tyconius wrote about the violence in Revelation, others do not. It is good that scholars from all over Europe are involved.

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This book presents itself as a collection of studies written in preparation for a commentary on the Book of Revelation based on the Fathers of the Church, the *Novum Testamentum Patristicum* project. We already have the series Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (IVP) and the Blackwell Bible Commentaries which focus on the reception history of the Bible, but it seems that NTP will provide more complete overviews of what the Fathers wrote.

Anyway, the essays in the present book, written by scholars from many countries, are a rather mixed collection and not many deal with the three elements Revelation, Fathers and violence. There are thirteen essays, seven in English and six in German. Luca Arcari (Italy) opens with an essay on the Jewish background of the war scenes in Revelation. He introduces the Book of Enoch, the War Scroll (1QM) and 2 Baruch, thus sketching the general milieu in which Revelation may have originated, but fails to establish any direct links between these texts and Revelation. Tobias Nicklas (Germany) dialogues with Charles E. Hill on the reception of Revelation