

**Schreiner, Thomas R. *Revelation*. BECNT. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2023. 771pp. + 22pp. (front matter) + 102pp. (back matter).**

Thomas Schreiner, a professor of NT interpretation and biblical theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, contributed this commentary on Revelation as a replacement for Grant Osborne's commentary in the Baker Exegetical Commentary series.

While Osborne identified his commentary as prioritizing the futurist, rather than the idealist or preterist approaches,<sup>1</sup> Schreiner prioritizes idealist perspective (though he does read chapters 19–22 as predicting the future). Within that framework Schreiner has produced an excellent commentary. G. K. Beale's commentary in the New International Greek Testament Commentary series has been, and remains, the definitive idealist commentary since its publication in 1999. Schreiner notes, "I have not attempted to write the kind of in-depth commentary that we find in Aune (1997, 1998a, 1998b), Beale (1999), and Koester (2014). My hope is that my commentary is substantial enough for serious exegesis but short enough for the busy pastor to read. I have tried to write in an accessible style for readers so that they can grasp what is being said in scholarship" (xi). Schreiner succeeded in these goals. Thus, while this commentary does not displace Beale, it presents the idealist position in sufficient depth but with greater clarity than Beale. In addition, Schreiner at times exercises more restraint in his interpretation of the symbolism of the book. For instance, in the fifth trumpet judgment Schreiner notes, "Beale (1999: 494) says the darkness symbolizes deception, but that is likely an overreading and too specific. Darkness symbolizes the evil atmosphere pervading the scene" (338). Finally, unlike Beale and most other idealists, Schreiner does not adopt an amillennial position but instead proposes new-creation millennialism as a mediating millennial view. In short, for those looking for a commentary on Revelation in the idealist vein, this would be an excellent purchase.

Most readers of this journal likely subscribe to a futurist approach to Revelation.<sup>2</sup> The remainder of this review will therefore examine Schreiner's objections to a futurist approach, evaluate his idealistic approach, and examine his new-creation millennialism.

First, Schreiner is correct to critique the claim that Revelation "must be read as literally as possible" (45). The goal of literal interpretation is not to be as literal as possible but to discern what the author intended. Those advocating an "as literally as possible" approach have conflated two senses of the word *literal*. *Literal* in the sense of author-intended meaning as discerned by grammatical, historical, theological exegesis should be affirmed. Accurate reflection of authorial intent does not exist on a spectrum. One either does this or does not do it. *Literal* in the sense of without metaphor or symbolism is not the standard that the futurist ought or need aspire to. If the author employed symbolism or metaphor, the careful futurist will want to recognize this fact and interpret accordingly. Thus, this critique is not against futurism per se but against particular futurist interpreters. Second, Schreiner is correct to critique "newspaper eschatology" but wrong to link it with futurism (5). Those doing "newspaper eschatology" are practicing a species of historicism, not futurism. At best they are fusing

<sup>1</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 21–22.

<sup>2</sup> For a defense of a futurist reading of Revelation, see Brian Collins, "The Futurist Interpretation of Revelation: Intertextual Evidence from the Prologue," *JBTW* 2, no. 1 (Fall 2021): 33–52.

the two, and the “arbitrary and capricious” nature of their interpretations is due to their historicist approach. Their errors should not be used as an argument against futurism.<sup>3</sup> The true futurist believes that the events of the ultimate Day of the Lord described in the book could begin to happen at any time—tomorrow or millennia hence—and that they will happen in such a way as to catch people completely unawares. Therefore, the approach of the Day of the Lord cannot be discerned by looking for signs of the times in the news. Third, the argument that futurism negates the book’s significance to all but the final generation of readers is a curious claim (5). The OT is full of prophecies about the coming Day of Yhwh. Are those passages irrelevant to all believers from the time they were given until the final generation? Schreiner recognizes that at least the final chapters of Revelation are about the Second Coming and the new creation. Are those chapters irrelevant to believers throughout history? I do not think Schreiner would say so. Thus, while some of Schreiner’s critiques are valid, they are not necessarily critiques of futurism; his direct critique of futurism is not valid.

The adequacy of the idealist approach can be tested by examining Schreiner’s treatment of the trumpet judgments. First, the idealist approach involves a tension between the symbolism employed and the proposed referent. Schreiner, like all idealist interpreters, recognizes that the trumpet judgments allude to the plagues of the exodus. Indeed, Revelation presents the trumpet judgments as intensifying and universalizing the Egyptian plagues. The idealist, however, must place these events in the inter-advent period and must locate the referents within the normal range of human experience. Thus, the idealist interpretations are much less intense than the plagues on Egypt even as Revelation presents the judgments as intensifications of the exodus plagues. Second, idealist interpretations are often very general: “Life on earth is constantly beset by danger,” “Life on the seas isn’t what it could be and what it would be if it were not for human sin,” “The spatial realm is also touched by God’s judgment so that life isn’t all that it should be for the flourishing of the human race. The fall touches every part of the created order” (329, 330, 333). For all the energy of the imagery and language in Revelation, these are fairly banal conclusions. Again, there is a mismatch between what Revelation says and what the idealist says it means. Third, when Schreiner’s referents become more specific, they do not escape the problems of “newspaper exegesis.” The newspaper exegetes he criticized saw, for instance, the locusts as representing attack helicopters (imagery that made sense against the background of the Vietnam War). However, identifying water pollution as the referent of the third trumpet and psychological issues as the referent of the fifth trumpet also reads the imagery in light of modern concerns and experiences. The futurist interpretation is less strained and more faithful to John’s original context: bitter waters are bitter waters. And a scorpion-like sting is a sting that brings physical pain. These interpretations are also more consonant with the Exodus narrative to which they allude. Fourth, idealist interpretations run counter to the analogy of Scripture. Plausible interpretations of Revelation should align with the ways that similar kinds of symbolism were used in the OT. When the OT interprets imagery like that found in Revelation, the symbols refer to specific historical persons, kingdoms, and events. For instance, the goat in Daniel chapter 8 is identified as the

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<sup>3</sup> To be fair to Schreiner, the error of confusing “newspaper exegesis” and futurism occurs among professed futurists as well.

king of Greece (now known to have been Alexander the Great). Neither the goat of Daniel 8 nor the beasts in chapter 7 represent abstract ideals. The historicists were not wrong to think that the symbolism of Revelation should be applied to concrete historical events. Their error was in attempting to relate that symbolism to the events of the inter-advent period. The futurist follows the lead of the OT in seeing the referents as concrete, historical persons, institutions, or events.

Finally, something must be said about Schreiner's approach to the millennium. In his first commentary on Revelation, he spoke highly of both premillennialism and amillennialism, but he gave the edge to amillennialism.<sup>4</sup> In this commentary, Schreiner opts for a third way between premillennialism and amillennialism—new-creation millennialism. In this view, the millennium is the first stage of the new creation. There are no unglorified people living during the millennium. The nations who attack the saints at the end of the millennial period are the resurrected unrighteous dead, who will subsequently be judged and condemned to the lake of fire.

The claim that the millennium is the first stage of the new creation fits well with the biblical evidence; however, the claim that there are no unglorified sinners living on earth during the millennium is difficult to square with Isaiah 65:17–25 or Zechariah 14:16–19. Further, Schreiner's interpretation of Revelation 20:7–10 is not entirely convincing.

Schreiner's commentary on Revelation provides readers with a well-executed commentary on Revelation from an idealist perspective. It also presents readers with an intriguing interpretation of Revelation 20, which gestures in the right direction on many points but which ultimately fails to satisfy. The commentary is worth buying as the now clearest in-depth exposition of the book from an idealist perspective. However, for those who believe a futurist perspective is correct, Grant Osborne's contribution to the Baker Exegetical Commentary (which remains available) and Buist Fanning's recent commentary in the Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament series are to be preferred.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, "Revelation," in *Hebrews–Revelation*, ESV Expository Commentary (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018), 724–25.

<sup>5</sup> See Brian Collins, review of *Revelation*, by Buist Fanning, in *JBTW* 2, no. 2 (Spring 2022): 98.