

Four Views on the Book of Revelation, edited by C. Marvin Pate. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998. Pp. 252.*

This is yet another addition to the popular Counterpoint series published by Zondervan. By providing a representative exposition of major viewpoints on a given topic, this series provides a forum for comparison and critique of different views on important theological issues. C. Marvin Pate, the general editor (Moody Bible Institute), represents the progressive dispensationalist view; Kenneth Gentry (Bahnsen Theological Seminary) advocates the preterist position; Sam Hamstra (Trinity Christian College) presents an idealist interpretation; and Robert Thomas (Master's Seminary) holds to a classical dispensationalist view.

In his introduction to the book, Pate comments that most Christians find themselves somewhere between the extremes of obsession with end-time prophecy and indifference. When they approach the Book of Revelation, they do so with "dutiful, but hesitant" concern. By publishing the present work, Pate and his fellow authors hope to encourage many ordinary Christians, who may feel intimidated or even defeated in interpreting the Book of Revelation, to take up the book again. In setting the stage for the remainder of the book, Pate identifies Revelation as a prophetic-apocalyptic epistle, written by the apostle John during either Nero's (A.D. 54-68) or Domitian's reign (A.D. 81-96). Regarding the book's structure, Pate points out that there are four series of sevens (seven letters, seals, trumpets, and bowls) interrupted by several interludes. In total, Revelation consists of four visions, each of which involves John's being translated "in the Spirit."

Pate then surveys the four major approaches to interpreting the Book of Revelation. The *preterist* view understands the events of Revelation for the most part as fulfilled in the first centuries of the Christian era. The *historicist* school, popular particularly with the Reformers, views the events of Revelation as progressively unfolding throughout history. The *futurist* interpretation contends that the majority of the events described in the book still await fulfillment (esp. chs. 4-22). The *idealist* viewpoint, finally, believes that Revelation sets forth timeless spiritual truths concerning the battle between good and evil in symbolic terms without seeking to pinpoint historical points of reference. Pate then provides very helpful summary discussions of each of these four major positions.

Overall, this work serves as a helpful compendium (some of) the major interpretations of the Book of Revelation. Few will read this book cover-to-cover (though this could be done and would be very helpful). In some ways, *Four Views on the Book of Revelation* represents the equivalent of a college (or even a seminary) course on eschatology (which, for less than twenty dollars, is certainly a great bargain). Each author surveys the entire book section by section, which means considerable overlap and repetition.

Personally, I found the essay on the idealist viewpoint the most lightweight of the four contributions. The shortest contribution at thirty-six pages (almost twenty pages shorter than the preterist essay), it does not engage the scholarly literature to the same extent as do the other articles. It is generally less concerned with the original languages and is less thorough exegetically.

Moreover, the piece is by its own admission not fully representative of the idealist viewpoint, since the author considers chapters 20-21 to be prophetic (pp. 127-28). With regard to the book's genre, the author unduly pits prophetic against apocalyptic. Consider the unfortunate dichotomy reflected in the following statement: "The heart and soul of

the idealist approach is that Revelation is an apocalyptic book that presents spiritual precepts through symbols, *rather than* a book of predictive prophecy. . ." (p. 129; emphasis mine). However, Revelation arguably combines both elements and should therefore be classified as prophetic-apocalyptic (see G. Ladd's famous article with that title). Finally, again by his own admission, this author hardly interacts with any of the other viewpoints during the bulk of his discussion (p. 127). In a puzzling statement, the author says that "this omission is by design" (p. 127), even though it is clearly at odds with the basic concept underlying the Counterpoint series.

Regarding the overall format of the book, it may have been better to reverse the order of the final two essays, dealing with the progressive and classical dispensationalist approach respectively, since the progressive dispensationalist stance represents a further development of the classical dispensationalist viewpoint. Also, progressive dispensationalists hardly have a monopoly on detecting an "already/not yet" dimension in the Book of Revelation as the reader might conclude from reading Pate's piece on the progressive dispensationalist position.

Thomas's final chapter on classical dispensationalism, while not persuasive to this reviewer, is helpful in that it identifies hermeneutics as the crucial issue in interpreting Revelation. Labeling all opposing viewpoints as "nonliteral," Thomas argues that the book is "primarily prophetic rather than apocalyptic" and that biblical prophecy must be interpreted literally (p.224). However, this approach seems unduly simplistic when applied to a phenomenon as complex as apocalyptic literature. Nevertheless, Thomas includes one of the most helpful interactions with other viewpoints (pp.224-29).

In the end, one wonders whether reading this book may not leave many readers more bewildered than when they started. Contrary to the general editor's claim that the book is designed to assist readers in achieving clarity on this issue, the actual outcome may rather be bewilderment if not despair of ever arriving at a satisfactory interpretation of the Book of Revelation. This may be largely due to the stilted format of the Counterpoint Series where four viewpoints are presented which may not actually exhaust all of the available options on a given topic. Thus one wonders why two of the four essays are dispensational in orientation while a non-dispensational moderate futurist approach is not represented.

When all is said and done, there is no substitute for working through the Book of Revelation on one's own. In his preface, the general editor cites one sage's definition of a classic as "a book everybody talks about, but which almost nobody reads" (p.7). May this not be the case in your and my reading of the Book of Revelation. As the book's inspired author himself reminds us, "Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near" (Rev. 1:3).

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