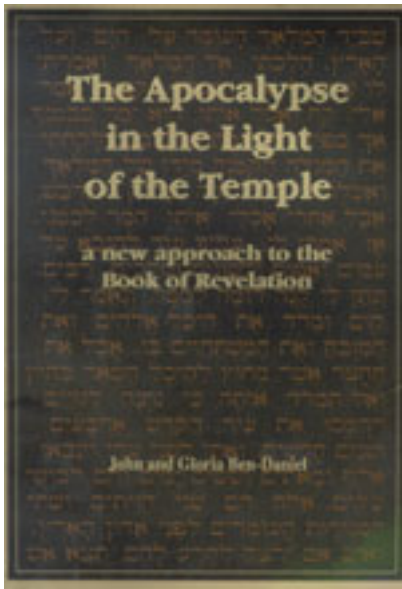


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Ben-Daniel, John, and Gloria Ben-Daniel

The Apocalypse in the Light of the Temple: A New Approach to the Book of Revelation

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The book of Revelation clearly has a very complex status both within the scholarly world of New Testament exegesis and within the worldwide community of Bible-reading laypeople of every denomination. On the one hand, there is no other book of the New Testament canon with a reputation for being so frightening and incomprehensible, a somewhat embarrassing addendum to the other books of the New Testament. On the other hand, there are hardly any other parts of the New Testament or even the Bible as a whole that have such a strong attraction for religious communities within the Christian churches and among sectarian groups, fueling their hopes for a dramatic overthrow of the present-day world and its often difficult living conditions.

The authors of the present study do not belong to either of those two extremes. Their way of approaching the book is sober and methodologically consistent. They are well acquainted with the scholarly discussion, old and new, surrounding the text. With respect to the ongoing task of seeking new ways of interpreting the last twenty-two chapters of the New Testament and understanding the meaning of the book as intended by its author(s), their contribution is manifold: First of all, the Ben-Daniels make a strong case for a nonpreterist understanding of the main parts of the book of Revelation, negatively by showing that the text is not consistent with an interpretation that defines it as a reflection of events at the end of the first century C.E. and positively by giving evidence

that the book is firmly rooted in the tradition of Old Testament prophetic texts focusing on eschatological themes. Perhaps the most ingenious and innovative aspect of the study is the broadly developed suggestion that the deep structure of the book, “the basic framework on which its various parts depend” (213 n. 269) can be coherently described and explained in terms of an analogy between the “Heavenly Liturgy,” on the one hand, and the daily morning service and the ritual of the Day of Atonement as they were performed in the (First and) Second Temple period, on the other hand. The comparative material for determining the salient elements of the daily morning service and of the ritual of the Day of Atonement is found not only in the Hebrew Bible, but also— and even more importantly—in the Mishnah. Similarly deviating from the *opinio communis* and opening new avenues of understanding is the interpretation of the command to measure the temple, the altar, and the worshipers in Rev 11:1–2 as a metaphorical expression for the commission of a new prophecy, a prophecy that is identified with the book of Revelation itself and that is proclaimed at the beginning of the last week of years by the two witnesses spoken of in Rev 11:3–12. Related to this is the suggestion that the revelation received by John is the “new Torah” and John himself the “second Moses,” “the prophet like Moses” announced in Deut 18:18.

Another element to mention is the treatment of well-known, often hotly debated issues such as the millennium, the 144,000 elect, the harlot Babylon, or the (new heaven and) new earth. The results presented by the Ben-Daniels are at times rather surprising or refreshing, depending on the reader’s expectations, but rarely are they elusive. This can be seen, for instance, with respect to the four subjects just mentioned: the millennium is defined as the period of the hidden reign of the Lord lasting from the resurrection until the Lord’s second coming at the time of the final judgment. The 144,000 elect are understood as 144,000 virgin men living at an unspecified place on earth, spiritually called “Mount Zion,” fully dedicated to the contemplation and service of the Lamb and protected in the desert during the seven-year period before the second coming of Christ and the final judgment. The harlot Babylon is identified with the central administration of the Roman Catholic Church; this identification is, however, combined with a double qualification: the title “Babylon” does not apply to the Church as a whole, neither in the past nor in the future, and at the crucial moment of God’s judgment of the harlot those working within the institution heed God’s call and flee outside the city of the Vatican/Babylon. The new earth, finally, is understood as a transformed and purified version of the existing planet, not as a different planet at another place of the universe.

The authors understand the book of Revelation as the word of the Lord in the tradition of Old Testament prophecy and as a text “based on a true account of the visions granted to the author through mystical experience” (17 n. 22). This view is, of course, at odds with a Grotian approach to the world, but it is, as the authors point out, the view supported by

the text itself. Whatever the reader's judgment regarding questions of basic worldview, there is no doubt that the stand taken by the authors does not in any way hinder a strictly scientific approach to the text. The same is true with respect to the fact that the authors place themselves openly within the Roman Catholic tradition. The reviewer, himself not being Catholic, finds their insights to be truly the result of a profound study of the texts and free from the echoes of dogmas that function as premises of a denominationally defined group. The guiding principle is always the open eye of the interested and attentive reader in search of the meaning of the original author and his text. The vein of interpretation followed throughout the book is literal but not fundamentalist; this is evident, for instance, in the rejection of a futurist understanding of the millennium and in the avoidance of an amalgamation of eschatological passages from the Old Testament and the Apocalypse in a way that would enable these texts to be read on the same level.

Given the complexities and the often inherently enigmatic character of apocalyptic literature, it goes without saying that not all the interpretations proposed by the authors will be endorsed by every reader—even if he or she shares the basic suppositions informing the study. The subsequent survey lists some of the major issues open to debate, in addition to those already mentioned: On page 12 the authors claim that Jesus fulfills the Law and the Prophets “through, and by means of” the revelation given to John. This seems to be too narrow an interpretation of what is meant by the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets, certainly as understood within the New Testament canon as a whole, and most probably also within the book of Revelation itself. On page 28 the slaughtering of the lamb as part of the feast of Passover is hinted at, but quite surprisingly it is not elaborated at all in the subsequent paragraphs; instead, the slain Lamb is compared exclusively to the Tamid sacrifice, the whole burnt offering, on the Day of Atonement. The identification of the breaking of the first four seals in Rev 6:1–8 with the recital of the Ten Commandments, the Shema Israel, and other passages of the Law in the liturgy of the ancient temple as proposed on page 46 does not seem to be compelling, especially since it is hard to identify the many positive aspects of the recital of the texts in the opening of the four seals. The defining of the millennium on pages 76–79 and 191–92 as the present age of salvation from the resurrection of Christ until his second coming, though not forming a central piece in the authors' arguments, is certainly one of the issues that will—and must—cause intense discussion. Many aspects pertaining to this question remain unfleshed, and it is to be hoped that the authors will elaborate this controversial theme in an additional article. It may be worthwhile to refer readers to another study on the book of Revelation published in 2003, written by Ben Witherington III, which presents good arguments for a premillennialist understanding of Rev 20:4–6 (see page 291 of his commentary). On page 83 (n. 94) the Ben-Daniels claim that after the advent of Jesus Christ it is “no longer legitimate to consult the prophets of the Old

Testament for information regarding the future.” The phrasing of this remark seems overly harsh. Why should it not be legitimate, even in the context of a “biblical theology” approach, to consult eschatological texts of the Old Testament, granted that the reading is done through the lens of the new situation brought about by the advent of Jesus Christ, just as it is the case with the law or wisdom texts? On the other hand, this remark, harsh though it may be, functions as an important reminder that eschatological texts must not be treated in a simplistic manner by giving them equal weight without taking into account their specific contexts. On page 142 the appearance of the two signs in heaven described in Rev 12 is explained as a revelation of Jesus Christ from within the souls of the 144,000 followers of the Lamb, and it is further stated that “through the ‘heavenly birth’, the one who sees the signs comes to be identified with Zion, the woman in the vision.” This interpretation may appear to be rather “speculative,” operating with categories that are not visible on the surface of the text. Revelation 12 is given an interpretation that stresses the mystical character of the passage in a way that the reviewer finds hard to follow. This chapter, in which many clues to the understanding of the book are hidden, is certainly one of the most crucial parts of the book of Revelation. Although the authors offer an interesting explanation, the last word on this chapter has not yet been said. It is certainly very bold to connect the character of the false religion of the pseudomessianic kingdom with Orthodox Judaism, as happens on pages 152 and 154 (nn. 184–85); other options should probably not be excluded out of hand. However, the reference to Orthodox Judaism is found only in the footnotes, which shows that the authors avoid undue stress on this point.

On only a few occasions the boundary between exegetical interpretation and homiletic actualization is not as strictly respected as one would expect in a study such as this, as on page 61, where the authors state that “the blasphemous logic of Satan” is already present in our society, or on pages 74–75, where “every intention or attempt to reconstruct the Temple and re-establish the cult” is declared as being “opposed to the truth of God revealed in Jesus Christ.”

The book is written in a very understandable, straightforward, and—perhaps with the exception of part 2 (81–123), where there is some redundancy—concise way. This is one of the most brilliant, exciting, and illuminating studies dealing with the book of Revelation as a whole that has been published in recent years. It is highly recommended for both New Testament scholars and students of the Bible regardless of their scientific or denominational background, and it will surely advance in a very positive way the interest in the text of the book of Revelation itself.