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AN INTERVIEW WITH M. EUGENE BORING



WITH DAVID L. MATSON, GUEST EDITOR

Editor's note: M. Eugene Boring is A. A. Bradford Professor of Religious Studies at the Disciples of Christ-affiliated Texas Christian University and a well-recognized authority on the book of Revelation. He is author of the commentary on Revelation in the Interpretation series, published by John Knox Press. Recently, our guest editor, David L. Matson, had the opportunity to pose a series of questions to Professor Boring for the benefit of *Leaven* readers. We are pleased to reproduce the substance of that interview below. (All page numbers cited refer to Boring's commentary.)

Precisely what role does suffering play in the book of Revelation, especially since recent research suggests that there was no universal, systematic persecution of Christians during the time the book was written? Does it make any real difference for interpretation whether the persecution envisaged in the book was real, anticipated, or imagined?

Revelation was written to a suffering community. This is true even though some individual Christians and congregations (Laodicea!) had apparently accommodated themselves to the prevailing culture and its values so as to be getting along quite well. But it does now seem that the Christian community to which Revelation was addressed did not as a whole have to endure the kind of general persecution John envisaged. This happened only later. Still and all, the kind of harassment and occasional imprisonment and even martyrdom reflected in Pliny's Letter to Trajan happened often enough even in the late first century to make such persecution a concern of all those to whom Revelation was addressed. I think the nature and extent of Roman persecution of Christians in John's time does make a difference for understanding Rev-

elation, just as the historical situation to which any New Testament letter was addressed is important for understanding it. This is the nature of a historical revelation (small r) and of the documents that bear witness to it, which are time-conditioned documents, not general principles.

You have emphasized that Revelation is written in non-propositional, non-referential, and non-objectifying language (pp. 51–59). Can you explain for the benefit of our general audience what you mean by these terms? Is Revelation written in some kind of code language, as popularly thought?

Revelation is not written in code language. A code can be decoded into some other language in which the mysterious code is expressed plainly, and once this is done, one no longer needs the code. The language of Revelation is primarily picture language. What John has to say deals with God and the divine purpose, with the meaning, purpose, and end of history—that is, with truths that cannot be expressed adequately in ordinary language. The pictures are not representations of objects that are “out there” someplace, in the sense that they can be measured and weighed. The golden streets and pearly gates of the new Jerusalem are pictures of the transcendent glory of God's final goal for history, but this language must not be objectified as though it pointed to objects in a particular place. Most of us already have trouble thinking of golden streets in this way. Anybody would have trouble thinking of the pearly gates in this way. Are the pearls real or artificial? If real, where is the oyster that produced them? If artificial, the heavenly world seems suddenly second-rate, the very opposite of the intent of the language. The language is not objectifiable. Calling language non-objectifying is approxi-

mately the same as what we usually mean by literalism, but there is an important difference. By non-objectifying I mean not only that the gates are not literally pearls, but that they are not literally gates, either. The whole picture of the transcendent world is composed of images from this world. The gates, streets, and walls of the new Jerusalem are images generated by John's language, images derived from this world and projected on a cosmic screen. The Bible's use of such pictorial language (often described by scholars as mythical language) is the appropriate way to speak of divine reality.

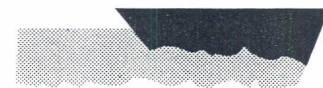
Just as literal or objectifying language does not do justice to the divine reality, neither does propositional language. The divine truth transcends our ability to express it adequately in mathematical or logical terms. Propositions must conform to the (human) laws of logic. Pictures do not. When propositions clash, they must be harmonized, or one must be rejected. But more than one picture of the same reality can exist without the compulsion to be harmonized. In terms of propositional language, the pagan kings of the earth are either destroyed, as in chapter 19, or included in the new Jerusalem, as in chapter 21. Either/or is the language of human logic. But John has both pictures! Each has its truth to declare, but not in such a way that the two can be logically harmonized as propositions.

Your question indicates that I consider Revelation's language to be non-referential. Actually, this is the reverse of my view. While John's language is pictorial rather than propositional and objectifying, it does refer to something real. It is not mere subjectivity. God is. The end of history will be. God will be victorious at the end of history, and when we pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done," we are praying for something that will really happen in the ultimate future. But this something can only be expressed in the pictorial language of Revelation, the Bible's language that points to the God whose judgment and mercy are both greater than we can imagine or express in neat propositional sentences.

Are the popular designations premillennial, postmillennial, and amillennial valid categories for understanding Revelation? Don't these categories really share the same presupposition about the nature of Revelation's language?

Yes, they do. I agree with the implication of your last comment that the argument should not be about whether Revelation teaches something objectifiable/literal about the millennium, but rather about how to understand this kind of language as such. At the literal, objectifying level, it does seem to me that John is a premillennialist, if we

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must impose these categories on him. Yet this is the same kind of question as whether the pearls of the pearly gates are real or artificial, the same kind of question as, Where did Cain get his wife? One can't get a right answer to a wrong question, a question that already starts off on the wrong foot (cf., Are you going to cheat on your income taxes again this year?). One is not hedging when one refuses to answer such wrongly put questions and wants to examine the assumptions inherent in the question itself. Thus rather than asking whether on the basis of Revelation we should be pre-, post- or amillennial, one might better ponder what John wants to say to us by picturing a world that finally gets to be devil-free, by picturing a this-worldly redemption before picturing the new heaven and new earth, by pondering why he limits participation in the thousand years to those who had been beheaded, and other such questions.

You call the transposition of the Lion and the Lamb in Revelation 5 "the most mind-wrenching 'rebirth of images' in literature" (p. 108). How central is this image to understanding the overall theology of the book?

The image is crucial. I use the word advisedly. Crucial is of course related to cross. John understands the nature of God and the meaning of human existence and history only in the light of the definitive revelation of God in the crucified and risen Jesus. Among other things, it means that the terrible pictures of the wrath of God that seem to dominate Revelation are to be understood in this light, not as an alternative to it. It does not mean that such pictures are to be soft-peddled or ignored. The absolute reversal of our commonsense understanding of how things are and ought to be that took place at the cross actually sets us free to hear the awful pictures of judgment, to open ourselves to the reality of how terrible it is to reject one's Creator.

Hal Lindsey's The Late Great Planet Earth has had a phenomenal impact on the way Revelation is popularly received. If you

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and Lindsey were alone in a room together, what would you want to say to him?

I have in fact been in the same room with Hal Lindsey. I once met him in a restaurant in Israel, and we talked briefly and cordially. I had read his books. He had not read mine. The brief conversation did not encourage one to think that if we had a long conversation by ourselves, some sort of convergence might develop. I think the best approach to the modern Darby-Scofield dispensationalism, of which Lindsey has been the most successful marketer, is not to attempt to refute it. One can point out its history, having arrived on the theological scene only in the nineteenth century, and can point out its fundamentalist understanding of biblical inspiration and its lack of interest in seeking the historical meaning of biblical texts. Debating about particular texts or their interpretation is practically useless so long as presuppositions are not shared. Thus I think the best approach is simply to provide a positive, constructive, biblical alternative. In lecturing and preaching on Revelation, I rarely refer to Lindsey. Quite often, however, after I have interpreted texts from Revelation in a positive manner, those who have heard only of the Lindsey approach will ask appropriate questions that lead to good dialogue. It is important that mainline interpreters know both the Bible and solid historical approaches to it, such as are represented by Alexander Campbell's "Rules of Interpretation" and are now available in good critical commentaries. The best defense is a good offense. The popularity of the Darby-Scofield approach is partly due to the lack of a viable alternative among mainline churches.

How do you explain the general neglect of Revelation among mainline churches? Do you see any signs (no pun intended) on the horizon that might indicate that the situation is changing?

I think there are mainly two reasons. First, the popularization and sensationalization of eschatological themes

by TV evangelists and the wave of Lindsey-like booklets have caused many mainliners to back away from the whole subject. This is analogous to turning over all talk of the Holy Spirit to those who engage in charismatic and Pentecostal excesses, which also, of course, was a mistake. Second, most ministers and teachers educated in mainline colleges and seminaries have never learned to interpret eschatology and apocalyptic themselves, mistakenly believing that it is confined to Revelation and part of Daniel. Thus when teaching or preaching from Isaiah, the Gospels, or Paul, the eschatological aspects are ignored. It is supposed that one gets a grasp of the basic principles of Jesus' teaching and example or the like (love, liberation, inclusiveness, justice, etc.) and these become the actual basis for preaching.

I'm afraid that much of this will simply continue and that whatever the text, the sermon will be an elaboration of the preacher's conservative, liberal, or moderate ideology. This is certainly the easier and more popular way, even among preachers who have had a good education and know better. But there are signs of hope. In my own contacts with students and ministers, I find an increasing number who take their responsibility as resident theologians in the congregation seriously, who use the lectionary or some other guide that helps to eliminate one's own agenda, who study extensively and deeply, and who wish to allow their congregations to hear week by week the message of the text. When preaching from any New Testament book (not only from Revelation), this means that the preacher and teacher must come to terms with how responsibly to interpret the language of eschatology and apocalyptic.

What advice would you give to preachers who find Revelation less than congenial for the preaching task? How can the church produce a generation of preachers who are adept at handling apocalyptic texts?

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I suppose most of what I would say in response to this question is already implicit in the above. I think there is no magic formula. There must be a recovery on the part of both congregation and preacher that (a) authentic biblical preaching means the systematic mediation of the Bible's message on a book-by-book and text-by-text basis, and therefore neither topical discussions or ideological affirmations based on a text nor the lacing of a sermon with a conglomeration of texts from all over the Bible; and (b) study is ministry. Biblical documents come from a strange and faraway world, the "Strange New World within the Bible," as Karl Barth designated his own rediscovery of biblical study and preaching. These documents cannot be understood easily. The ordained minister has

as part of his or her responsibility becoming the translator and tour guide for the congregation. Fulfilling this responsibility takes time and work. Both congregation and preacher must understand this. There are good books on interpreting apocalyptic (I've listed some of them in my commentary), and they should be studied, but only within the context of an ongoing study program that covers the whole Bible in breadth and depth, and good theological literature about it. There is no help for the person who wants three easy rules for interpreting apocalyptic.

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