The Apocalypse of JOHN

A COMMENTARY

Francis J. Moloney, SDB
e have sinned and done wrong, acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments [apo tôn entolôn sou] and ordinances. We have not heeded to your servants the prophets [tôn doulôn sou tôn prophêtôn].

—Daniel 9:5–6a (Theodotion)

It is he that made heaven and earth and fashioned man in the beginning, who is proclaimed through the law and the prophets, who was enbleshed upon a virgin, who was hung upon a tree, who was buried in the earth, who was raised from the dead and who went to the heights of heaven, who sits at the Father's right hand, who has power to save everyone, through whom the Father did his works from beginning to eternity [ap'archês mechri aiónôn].

—Melito of Sardis (On Pascha 104)

Il things are twofold in our Lord Jesus Christ. His birth is twofold, one of God before the ages [mia ek theou pro tôn aiónôn], and one of a virgin in the consummation of the ages [kai mia ek parthenou epi synetheiai tôn aiónôn].

—Cyril of Jerusalem (Catechesis 15.1)

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Foreword

Eugenio Corsini

I greet the publication of this study by Francis J. Moloney with gratitude and hope. Gratitude for the dedication he has given to my interpretation of the Apocalypse, translating a first version into English as far back as 1983 (The Apocalypse: The Perennial Revelation of Jesus Christ). He has returned to it as inspiration for his own reading of the Johannine text with this new publication. I greet it with hope that his efforts will continue to spread and deepen among those who approach John’s book, for motives of faith or scholarship, the central idea that we share. The “revelation” of the Apocalypse is not an obscure prophecy about the catastrophic end of the world and the second coming of Christ. On the contrary, it is the story of a past event that embraces the whole of the history of salvation, beginning with the creation of the world and culminating in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Professor Moloney, in his preface to this work, describes the task of the translator as “thankless.” But even more thankless is the task of questioning the centuries-long, deeply ingrained, interpretative prejudice that sees in the Apocalypse a foretelling of the end-time events. I trust that Professor Moloney’s careful, profound, and skillful capacity to capture the narrative shape of the text will reopen debate on John’s book, guided by the hermeneutic

Professor Eugenio Corsini dictated the Italian original of this foreword to his wife, Maria, a short time before his death in 2018. The English translation was provided by the author of this commentary. See the touching tribute to Prof. Corsini from his wife and son, Maria and Giovanni Corsini, “Grazie, Eugenio,” in Lombardi and Silvano, Apocalisse ieri oggi e domani, 9–10.
Eugenio Corsini, the former professor of ancient Christian literature at the University of Turin, had a distinguished career until his recent death on March 22, 2018, at ninety-four years of age. He had a special interest in the literature of the earliest Christian witnesses but eventually turned his attention to the Apocalypse, no doubt the most puzzling of NT documents. In 1980 he published an interesting study, Apocalisse prima e dopo. It made little impact. European scholarship rarely cites it. English-language commentaries have likewise taken little notice. A glance at the widely consulted works of David Aune, Ian Boxall, and Craig R. Koester indicates that Corsini’s work has made no impression. Only Aune’s commentary on Apocalypse 7:4–8 and 13:8 mentions it. Boxall’s work in the Black’s New Testament Commentary series never refers to it, while Koester’s outstanding Anchor Yale Bible commentary does not even list Corsini’s book in a 53-page general bibliography.¹

¹. It is not mentioned in Heinz Giesen’s 1997 commentary, Die Offenbarung des Johannes, nor in Pierre Prigent’s L’Apocalypse de Saint Jean. This edition was perhaps too soon after Corsini’s 1980 publication, but a completely rewritten version appeared as Prigent, Commentary on the Apocalypse of St. John. In it, Prigent never refers to Corsini’s study, not even in his 100-page introduction, “Overview and Syntheses of the Current State of Research.” Xavier Léon-Dufour strongly endorsed Corsini’s work in his foreword to a French translation, L’Apocalypse maintenant. Ugo Vanni (L’Apocalisse, 11n12) remarks that Corsini’s interesting work deserves attention, but he does not otherwise refer to it in his 390-page study. An exception is the commentary by Edmondo Lupieri, L’Apocalisse di Giovanni. Lupieri is now a professor at Loyola University in Chicago. An English version of his work is available: A Commentary on the Apocalypse of John.

². Aune, Revelation; Boxall, Revelation of Saint John; C. Koester, Revelation. It is not considered in the overview of Morton, Recent Research on Revelation. For Aune’s rejection of Corsini’s interpretation of Apoc. 11:4–8 and 13:8, see Revelation, 2:440, 447, 746–48. For
here are reasons for this neglect. Not only does Corsini challenge an ortant interpretative paradigm, but also his work is published in Italian. fset the latter difficulty, in 1983 I published an edited translation of his nial 1980 volume. On reading the Italian original, I found his quest of the more traditional interpretative paradigm fascinating. There were es in which his interpretation appeared to reach beyond the evidence, but overall case was impressive. Aware that his paradigm-questioning work ed receive little attention from English-speaking scholars in its Italian s, I produced my English translation so that an alternative voice might eard over the confused and confusing variety of interpretations that rest n what has long been a traditional interpretative paradigm. There may be widespread agreement that the document was produced to ress some form of imposed suffering on the Christian community in the and half of the first Christian century (or later), generally (but not always) tified with the Asian churches addressed in 2:1–3:22. However, there are us differences of opinion about what that suffering was, when it occurred, imed it, and the motivation and nature of the Christian response. tionally understood as Roman persecution and Christian martyrdom er Nero or Domitian, scarcity of evidence for such persecution has led lars to focus on the imposition of the emperor cult across the Roman xire. However, Steven Friesen has argued that, although strongly present sia, the cults may not have been a threat to nascent Christianity in the century. The use of an apocalyptic literary form and the clumsiness of ter’s bibliography, see Revelation, 153–206. I take this first of many references to Craig ter’s commentary as an occasion to share my admiration for it. His understanding of the social context—an eschatologically oriented appeal to Christians suffering persecution and the challenge of the Roman imperial cult (which the following study questions)—his reading of its logic, his careful and wide-ranging use of sources, his clarity in writing, and sound theological-pastoral applications make this commentary a classic.

6. G. K. Beale’s large commentary The Book of Revelation indicates a familiarity with the 1987 edition of Corsini’s work. However, he regards Corsini’s interpretation of the “silence” 1 as “unnatural” (p. 421), and his explanation of the thousand-year reign of 20:4–6 as “most ual and unconvincing” (p. 1017). Beale’s monograph John’s Use of the Old Testament rdition does not refer to Corsini. More than any other contemporary interpreter, like ini, Beale insists upon the biblical tradition as John’s basic source and inspiration, and rally looks beyond the Roman situation to a more universal history of good and evil in interpretations. This must also be said of the fine recent commentary of Sige T. Tonstad, dication. See his summary on pp. 3–29.
7. The seminal studies of Leonard L. Thompson (The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and ire) and Steven J. Friesen (Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation ltime) are important representatives of contemporary scholarship that questions the dign of a Christian response to the imperial cult and persecution. See also Wes Howard-k and Anthony Gwyther, Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now. In his the author’s use of the Greek language, shot through with relentless allusion to the Hebrew Bible but never a direct citation, generate further difficulty in formulating a coherent literary structure. Such a situation renders multiple interpretations inevitable.

As so few commentators devoted attention to his proposed reading of the Apocalypse, Eugenio Corsini returned to it in a second edition of his work in 2002. The work that follows is a further attempt, on my part, to draw his proposal into the broader discussion, especially for English-language readers of the Apocalypse. However, it is not a translation of his conclusions into an English-speaking context. Not everything in Corsini’s interpretation is convincing. But I am fascinated by, and indeed theologically attracted to, his hermeneutical key of the perennial impact, from before all time, of the saving effects of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the participation of the saints in the salvific event of the death of Jesus “before the foundation of the world” (13:8).

The cover created for this alternative commentary on the Apocalypse of John is representative of the widespread Eastern Christian iconographic theme of the anastasis portraying the crucified and risen Jesus’ descensus ad inferos (“descent into hell” or “harrowing of hell”). He raises Adam and Eve to life by taking their hands and leading them upward. Old Testament kings and prophets look on. Although the artistic tradition is associated with the temporal, indicating what happened in the silence of Holy Saturday (see 8:1), it can also be interpreted as an indication of the transtemporal saving presence of death and resurrection “from the foundation of the world” (13:8).
This iconographic tradition powerfully illustrates the transtemporal perspective of the Apocalypse. Although the document certainly addresses Christians, it overflows with the confidence that the saving action of Jesus’ death and resurrection has always been present. From the first page John acclaims the crucified and risen Christ and the kingdom of priests to which Jesus’ death and resurrection gave birth (see 1:5–8, 12–18; 5:6–14). He wishes to bare the truth that the saints from before the historical event of the death and resurrection of Jesus anticipated and participated in that saving action. He asks that Christians of all time be aware that their names can be written in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain from before the foundation of the world. They can confidently look forward to the one who will come quickly, and they can cry out, “Come, Lord Jesus” (22:20).

At this stage of my academic life, I do not have the energies required to return to the thankless task of translation. The following reading of the pocalypse is my rethinking and rewriting of the interpretation of Eugenio Corsini, guided by the questions he poses to the traditional interpretative paradigm, represented in various ways by contemporary commentary on the Apocalypse. I also indicate that contemporary study of the Apocalypse is moving away from the traditional interpretative paradigm. I am unable to enter into debate with the entire commentary tradition, the monographs, and the never-ending journal literature. My main discussion partners will be the contemporary commentators already mentioned: David Aune, Pierre Rigogli, Heinz Giesen, G. K. Beale, Eduard Lupieri, Ian Boxall, and Craig Keener. I have also included regular reference to the more accessible, but very influential, studies of Adela Y. Collins, M. Eugene Boring, Charles Brütsch, Richard Bauckham, and James L. Resseguie.

I differ from Corsini’s reading of the Apocalypse in my adoption of a narrative approach to the reading/listening experience. As a fine literary and historical critic, Corsini moves across the document, drawing parallels and resonances from later passages as he builds his case. This is a solid traditional way of supporting philological, rhetorical, and theological interpretations. In general, however, I will allow the narrative to unfold word by word, verse by verse, and chapter by chapter. This means that I will only look back to what an implicit reader has already encountered in the reading/listening experience to that point. Only rarely do I have recourse to elements in the narrative that he has read. This standard narrative-critical practice has marked my approach to narratives for some decades.

I leave it to those better-informed, the result of a lifetime of professional involvement with the complexities of the Apocalypse and Jewish apocalyptic literature (especially 1 Enoch, 2 Enoch, 1 Efrain, 2 Baruch, Jubilees, Life of Adam and Eve, Apocalypse of Moses, Liber antiquitatum biblicarum, Psalms of Solomon, Sibylline Oracles, and the Dead Sea Scrolls), to decide whether this study has anything to add to contemporary conversations about the canonical book the Apocalypse.
My major, lifelong interests have been elsewhere,¹⁵ but the chord amplified here has been sounding in the back of my mind since 1982. As a Roman Catholic priest whose daily prayer across the Easter season is marked by a rite of reading of the book of the Apocalypse, I also hope that what follows might serve as a helpful guide for many who tell me each year that reading the document from the church’s Sacred Scriptures as we celebrate Easter does not make sense. Maybe the Apocalypse does make sense, provided one is the key to unlocking its secrets. I am not, of course, the first to attempt it,¹⁶ but I trust that what follows may raise an alternative, even if challenging, voice to which both lay readers and my colleagues might devote some attention. Leonard Thompson justifiably remarks about the interpretation of the Apocalypse, “We all have our axes to grind.”¹⁷ I certainly have mine! I remain in great debt to Professor Eugenio Corsini, who first fired my interest in this possible alternative reading of the Apocalypse during a patristic conference in Rome in 1980. He supported this interest over the years, licated by his forceful yet gracious endorsement of this book, dictated to wife, Maria Robino, before his death in March 2018. I thank my former student Stuart Moran, who has a professional fascination with the Apocalypse and an awareness of the contribution of Corsini. I also thank Patrick “Flags” nagan, a long-standing friend with a passion for the role of the Word of God in the life and practice of the Christian church. Stuart and Flags have accompanied the work that produced what follows. Stuart has guided me in my critical use of Corsini, and Flags has insisted that what I write make Christian sense. I am very grateful to an anonymous peer-reviewer who read work respectfully and carefully, making some important suggestions that greatly improved what follows. I thank the library manager and the staff of the Manix Library at Catholic Theological College in Melbourne, especially Kacie Burn and Lisa Gerber, for their never-failing support, purchasing specialized studies, and accessing rarer publications through the interlibrary loan system. It would have been impossible to research and write what follows without their support. I thank Baker Academic and senior acquisitions editor Bryan Dyer for making this fine production possible. I am also in debt to Tim West, whose editorial support and skill have been unparalleled in my now-lengthy publishing career.

I dedicate this book to the several thousand Salesians of Don Bosco and Daughters of Mary, Help of Christians, who work for the young, especially the poor and abandoned, in the East Asia–Oceania region of my religious congregation. They are in Pakistan, Myanmar, Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, Mongolia, the Philippines, Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, Timor-Leste, Solomon Islands, Australia, New Zealand, Fiji Islands, and Samoa. Traditionally, Salesians do not read many books like the one that follows. However, these women and men are living signs that the Lord has truly risen.

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¹⁶. See, among many, the parallel remarks from Giesen, Offenbarung, 11. For a rich survey of these attempts, down to 1965, see Brütsch, La Clarté. At the end of his study of each intersection of the Apocalypse, Brütsch provides fascinating reflections on the reception of the work across the centuries. One can find comprehensive surveys of interpretations across the centuries in the three volumes of Aune, Revelation, and especially in C. Koester, Revelation. All of these studies, however, accept that the Apocalypse appeared during the persecutions of the first century to address suffering Christians in Asia, most likely the suffering Christian churches addressed in Apoc. 2:1–3:22.

¹⁷. Thompson, Book of Revelation, 2. See his valuable remarks regarding pluralist reading on pp. 1–5.