

Kerux 26:1 (May 2011):41-42.

Nerses of Lambron. Commentary on the Revelation of Saint John. Translation of the Armenian Text, Notes, and Introduction by Robert W. Thomson. Hebrew University Armenian Studies 9. Lueven: Peeters, 2007. xi + 225 pages. \$63.

Nerses' commentary, here translated from the Armenian language into English for the first time, is a twelfth-century adaptation of the Greek commentary on the Apocalypse of Andrew of Caesarea in Cappadocia composed in the seventh century. Nerses picked and chose from Andrew what he wanted to include and exclude, and often added his own commentary. It is composed as a series of 24 homilies which extend from the very first to the very last verse of Revelation.

Nerses was born in 1153 AD, the third of eight children of the prince of Lambron, a city about fifty kilometers north of Tarsus. He entered monastic life at an early age, was ordained in 1176, and was appointed archbishop of Tarsus. Nerses composed this *Commentary on the Revelation of Saint John* in 1180.

To the Book of Revelation this bishop applies the “now-not yet” principle of Biblical prophecy, understanding some things as referring to historical events in the first century which will have their ultimate fulfillment in end time events related to the persecution of the Antichrist and the Second Coming of Christ. He expounds on his interpretive approach in his comments on Rev 6:14b-17:

The apostles questioned our Lord concerning the destruction of the temple and the end of the world, and as they were able to bear it he told them: first, the future events which we have seen in the days of Vespasian and Titus occurring to the Jews, slayers of God, as the Jew Josephus relates. The same commands of the Lord will again be fulfilled in the times of Antichrist, as the teachers demonstrated. (86)

On Rev 7:1-3 where the angel is commanded not to harm the earth, sea, and trees until the servants of God are sealed, he writes, “This also happened partially under Vespasian; for those who were ministers of Christ in Jerusalem fled from the Romans at the time of the destruction of the city...But it is fulfilled especially at the times of the Antichrist.” Nerses understands what happened under that emperor in the first century “as an image of the afflictions of Antichrist.” (88) As for the 144,000 he explains that “this number was fulfilled bodily regarding the salvation of those who took refuge with the Lord from the rule of the Romans at the destruction of Jerusalem,” and “likewise the spiritual offspring of the holy apostles will be saved from Antichrist throughout the whole world.” (88-89)

Following the opinion of many patristic writers, Nerses interprets the two witnesses of Rev 11 as Enoch and Elijah whom he says will return to rebuke “the deceit of Antichrist.” (101-110) On Rev 12 he rejects the interpretation of the woman as Mary, the mother of Christ, and prefers that of Methodius, that the woman is a figure of the church. (114-119) Her flight to the desert, he says, will be fulfilled literally during the three and a half year reign of Antichrist when the faithful flee to the desert for refuge

from his assault. (127) Concerning the name associated with the number of the beast, 666, Nerses reiterates three proposals put forth by Hippolytus: Lampetis, Titan, and Benedictus. (133)

Concerning the identity of Babylon in Rev 17-18, Nerses says that he is aware that old Jerusalem was called a harlot and that old Rome was called “Babylon” by Peter in his epistle. But he believes that Babylon is best interpreted as “all the kingdoms of the world.” (155) The seven kings of Rev 17:9-10 are not Roman emperors, as Andrew thinks, but seven world kingdoms from the ancient Assyrians to the Byzantine empire of his time. (153, 156-157) Revelation 19 he sees as a vision of the Second Coming of Christ.

On Rev 20, Nerses holds that Satan was bound at the crucifixion of Christ and that the thousand years are not an exact number, but figurative of the time “between the Incarnation of Christ up to the Antichrist.” (172-173) On Rev 20:4, the millennial reign is that of “the souls of the saints and of the martyred righteous” who “rose up to heaven with Christ.” (174) Nerses interprets the New Jerusalem in Rev 21:2 similarly. (181)

In my opinion Nerses’ application of the “now-not yet” principle of Biblical prophecy to the visions of Revelation is commendable. Modern interpreters of Revelation who hold to preterist interpretations of Rev 6 & 7 may find in Nerses’ commentary some correspondence with their own views about Vespasian and the 70 AD destruction of Jerusalem, as preterists have done with similar comments by Andrew of Caesarea. But the commentary makes no explicit reference about the date of the writing of the Apocalypse or under which emperor John was exiled, and references to the emperors Nero, Vitellus, Galba, and Otho who reigned in the 60s are entirely absent from the commentary. However, the “hour of trial” in Rev 3:10 Nerses interprets not as an end time tribulation, but as that which happened shortly after the writing of the Apocalypse in the persecution of Christians by the Roman emperors.

I tend to take a more idealist approach in my interpretation of the two witnesses than Nerses, but his interpretation of the woman of Rev 12 is probably correct, in contrast with the ever-popular dispensationalist interpretation that the woman is a figure of the remnant of Israel during the tribulation, since in their view the church will have been raptured out of the tribulation. On the number of the beast, an interpretation which to me has much merit, that 666 is symbolic of the imperfection and wickedness of man in contrast with the perfection and holiness of God whose number is seven, is not mentioned. I agree with Nerses’ interpretation of Babylon as ultimately symbolic of all the kingdoms of this world whose rebellion God will surely judge. I also compliment Nerses’ interpretation of the millennial reign as the souls of the saints presently reigning in heaven with Christ, a view that corresponds with several major contemporary amillennial commentators.

Those interested in the history of interpretation of Scripture, the Book of Revelation, and eschatology will most likely find, as I have, that this translation of and

introduction to Nerses' Apocalypse commentary is scholarly, informative, enlightening, and affordable.