

2.5 - Anti-supernatural Bias

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A watchful eye must be kept whenever referring to source material outside of Scripture, especially in regard to the attitudes and assumptions of the writers of same. Even those who think of themselves as fundamentally¹ conservative in outlook and upholders of evangelical distinctives (e.g., [inspiration](#), [inerrancy](#)) may be found proposing ideas which are at odds with these foundational understandings of the Scriptures. Couch identifies key elements of evangelicalism:

A great many within the evangelical camp hold strongly to the doctrines of revelation, inspiration, and even inerrancy of the original texts of Scripture. Since the Reformation, evangelicals as a whole claim to take the Word of God literally, reading the prophets and apostles in a literal manner and accepting the historicity of the Scriptures at face value.²

The importance of these evangelical distinctives has been recognized by Thomas:

Since about the middle of the twentieth century, a movement known as evangelicalism has had a considerable impact in thwarting the advance of liberalism in Christian circles. Evangelicals have been a major force in the creation of new organizations, seminaries, denominations, and local churches that honor the Bible as the inerrant Word of God.³

McGrath writes:

Evangelicalism is historic Christianity. Its beliefs correspond to the central doctrines of the Christian church down the ages . . . In its vigorous defense of the biblical foundations, theological legitimacy, and spiritual relevance of these doctrines, evangelicalism has shown itself to have every right to claim to be a modern standard bearer of historic, orthodox Christianity. . . . the future of Christianity may come increasingly to depend on evangelicalism.⁴

Whenever evangelical principles are compromised, there will always be serious repercussions. As is often the case where Satan is afoot, the results are typically subtle and take time to come to full fruition—like introducing a small amount of poison into a fresh cool drink which the drinker doesn't detect until it eventually takes its deadly toll. Nowhere is this implicit denial of evangelical distinctives more evident than in historical-critical discussions of authorship, the dependency of source material, and appeal to extra-biblical literature as the key to understanding the divine message.⁵ As Couch observes, the problem is not with the historical-critical approach itself, but with the bias of those who practice it. "Historical-critical interpretation in and of itself is not bad, it is an intelligent, research-oriented approach to the determination of Scripture. Many of the scholars who employed this method, however, held an **anti-supernatural bias**." [emphasis added]⁶ Because of the correlation between biblical Christianity and evangelicalism, some commentators realize it is advantageous to suppress their opposition to evangelical principles. Herein lies the danger: some commentators who claim to be evangelical in outlook endorse liberal *methodologies* which in essence deny evangelicalism. They often embrace rational skepticism which is the foundation of an anti-supernatural worldview. "By adopting the methodologies of those who are less friendly to a high view of Scripture, most evangelical specialists have surrendered traditional, orthodox understandings of historicity."⁷ Although Thomas deals primarily with the application of liberal principles to the synoptic gospels, many of the same principles populate popular commentaries on the book of Revelation in our day. This accommodation of liberal principles by those who claim to be evangelical was noted by Schaeffer: "The evangelical church has accommodated to the world spirit of the age. First, there has been accommodation on Scripture, so that many who call themselves evangelicals hold a weakened view of the Bible and no longer affirm the truth of all the Bible teaches- . . . As part of this, many evangelicals are now accepting the higher critical methods in the study of the Bible."⁸ Schaeffer recognizes the high view of Scripture as the dividing line between those who are truly evangelical and those who are not: "Holding to a strong view of Scripture or not holding to it is the watershed of the evangelical world. . . . evangelicalism is not consistently evangelical *unless there is a line drawn* between those who take a full view of Scripture and those who do not."⁹ **Let the reader beware!** Much of what would pass itself off as evangelical commentary on the book of Revelation is not truly so—having embraced anti-supernatural presuppositions which are rejected by evangelicalism. In accord with our stated [policy of inoculation](#), we will spend some time helping our reader to more easily identify when anti-supernatural bias is afoot so that he may be aware of its presence and avoid its consequences. By way of introduction, we offer the following example: "It seems likely that John has written his book carefully to signify the perfect plan of God and the completeness of his work."¹⁰ Can you identify the hint of anti-supernatural bias in the preceding quote discussing John's motive for writing the book? Although admittedly a subtle example, the anti-supernatural bias is evident in the word *carefully*. This commentator

is saying between the lines that the book of Revelation is a *carefully constructed literary work* which we are to implicitly assume is of *human origin, thought, purpose, and design*. Here we see one of the key characteristics (and dangers) of anti-supernaturalism: it communicates on two levels. On the surface level are explicit statements which may condone evangelical principles. Below the surface is an implicit denial of same. The effect is much like a friend, who upon gaining the reader's trust, sets about slowly and methodically to betray that trust.¹¹ Other cases are more easily detected. For example, it is fairly commonplace to encounter discussion concerning the authorship of John suggesting it was written by a person of *another name*. But this asks the reader to endorse the notion that God has packaged His message of divine perfection within a lie (claiming to be written by John, but actually written by someone with another name)! Another commonly-encountered attitude of academic sophistication is a blatant disregard for inerrancy, such as found in redaction-critical theories whose *implicit* denial of inspiration is exceeded only by their creativity and appeal to total speculation. Aune believes "the author composed several different apocalyptic tracts for a variety of reasons over twenty to thirty years and then decided to combine them into a single document."¹² Never mind the introduction to the Apocalypse which says otherwise.¹³ Those who spawn these elaborate constructions may have sincere intentions and believe they are performing a service for Christ, but such is the nature of deceivers who are more effective having been deceived themselves (2Ti. 3:13). History illustrates one of Satan's main tools against the church to be well-meaning believers who lacked an appreciation for the long-term effects of the fully-developed fruit of their 'contribution' to Christ.¹⁴ As has been observed: "The road to hell is paved with good intentions."

2.5.1 - Implicit Denial of Evangelical Principles

To aid the reader in his appreciation of the various ways in which anti-supernatural bias enters in, we offer the following examples from well-known commentators. We find Beckwith denying the historicity of Genesis and attributing the contents of Daniel to myth:

In the first period of biblical history, that contained in the first eleven chapters of the book of Genesis, we have a **legendary story** of a primitive age before the separation of mankind into the tribes that formed the nations of the earth. . . . In tracing the external features of the story to an **early legend** we do not, it must be observed, change the religious character of the narrative. [emphasis added]¹⁵

The figure of the Beast is **derived from tradition**. There ran through ancient mythologies and Hebrew folk-lore legends of a monster opposing itself to supreme powers in conflicts which symbolized the struggle of chaos against order, evil against good, death against life. **Some form of that myth suggested to the author of Daniel** (7) the figures of the beasts of his vision, and the same source furnished . . . our Apocalypticist's representation of Satan in the form of a dragon-monster. [emphasis added]¹⁶

Couch identifies such views as reflecting a low view of Scripture known as *limited inerrancy*:

The term *limited inerrancy* means that the Bible, when speaking of matters of faith and practice (i.e., salvation, principles relating to the Christian life, etc.), is free from error. But in matters of science, history, or biography, it can be supposed that there are mistakes. While God inspired the writers in matters of salvation and living for Christ, He left them on their own [without supernatural assistance] when it came to other matters. Characteristic beliefs associated with *limited inerrancy* are . . . the book of Daniel was written around 150 B.C. instead of 536 B.C.; Adam and Eve are not historical persons, but figures meant to reveal spiritual truths.¹⁷

Fiorenza and Beale attribute the motive for John's writing as being his own (but see Rev. 1:1 ⁺, 19⁺), that John fails to consider OT context, and supposed that John *deliberately transforms* the material to arrive at his *own thesis*:

Fiorenza points to the anthological style of John . . . "He does not interpret the OT but uses its words, images, phrases, and patterns as a language arsenal in order to make his own theological statement or express his own theological vision." Beale lists reasons why many believe John fails to consider the OT context: . . . [including] his prophetic spirit that causes him to center on his own authority rather than that of the OT . . . I argue . . . John is faithful on the whole to the OT context but nevertheless transforms it deliberately by applying it to his thesis.¹⁸

One can only wonder at the anti-supernatural nature of such statements which attribute the Revelation to the initiative and genius of John rather than what the text itself records: that John merely recorded what he was *told and shown*.¹⁹ The visions given John were dutifully recorded on-the-fly, as is evidenced by the need to interrupt John in the midst of writing in order to suppress certain facts from the record: "Now **when** the seven thunders uttered their voices, I was **about to write**: but I heard a voice from heaven saying, 'Seal up the things which the seven thunders uttered, and do not write them' " [emphasis added] (Rev. 10:4⁺). Swete tells us that the book of Daniel, an essential foundation for understanding the book of Revelation, was written *after* the events it records (committing a prophetic misdemeanor of some sort), and wasn't written by Daniel, regardless of the statement of Jesus to the contrary (Mat. 24:15; Mark 13:14):

[The book of Daniel] seems to belong to the interval B.C. 168-165, the years during which the hand of Antiochus Epiphanes lay

heavy on the Jewish people. The writer's purpose is to strengthen the religious section of the nation under this supremetest of their faith and loyalty. He is carried back in the Spirit to the days of the Exile, and identifies himself with Daniel, a Jewish captive at Babylon, who is represented as foreseeing a series of great visions . . . **From the standpoint of the writer all events later than the age of Daniel are ex hypothesi future.** [emphasis added]²⁰

Collins, in commentating on the five kings of Revelation 17:10⁺, seems incredulous that John might actually be recording *true prophecy*—prediction in advance of the actual events:

The five who have fallen would be the five emperors immediately preceding Domitian, namely, Galba, Otho, Vitellius, Vespasian, and Titus. The one who has not yet come must be Nerva, who indeed 'remained,' i.e., ruled, for only a short time (96-98 C.E.). This is the solution of Victorinus (comm. in apoc. 17:10). There are two problems with this solution. How did the author know that Nerva would remain a short time? **Was this genuine prophecy? Or was it eschatological dogma that happened to be historically accurate?** [emphasis added]²¹

It hardly need be said that an expositor who denies supernatural prophecy is a most unlikely guide to the most prophetic book of the New Testament! A common element among these skeptical guides to the book of Revelation is their refusal to accept the source of John's visions as being determined and provided by God. They consistently attempt to attribute the visions to John's *own motives and creative abilities* working from borrowed sources:

In many cases it is difficult, if not impossible, to identify the source of John's imagery. Some find the raw material for this plague [Rev. 8:8⁺] in the volcanic action of the area. . . . Others look to Jewish apocalyptic for the source of the imagery.²²

What a contrast are the comments of those who truly represent the evangelical viewpoint. For example, Thomas undercuts the oft-heard anti-supernatural sophistry concerning John's literary borrowing of the apocalyptic [genre](#): "the literary genre of inspired writings was **not the choice** of the human author, but was an inevitable result of the manner in which **God chose** to reveal his message to that prophet. This, of course, distinguishes them from uninspired but similar works whose writers did, in fact, choose a particular genre." [emphasis added]²³ Seiss also recognizes the dangers of reliance upon the theories of men. We would do well to adopt his approach when reading what John recorded: "Candid readers will hardly deny [this work] the merit of . . . straightforwardness in the treatment of Divine things, simplicity . . . direct leaning on the Sacred Word over against the stilted theories and rationalistic systems of men."²⁴ Is it any wonder that it is the "common man," whom academics often look down on with scorn, whom God has trusted to carry forward the common-sense meaning of His Word? Academies will come and go, theories will incessantly rise to be debunked, but the simple meaning of the Word once entrusted to the saints (Jude 1:3) will be faithfully carried forward by those who seek God in simplicity and are guided by His Spirit into all truth (John 14:26; 16:13-14; 1Cor. 2:10-13; Eph. 3:5; 1Jn. 2:20, 27). As we discuss the [date](#) of the book of Revelation, its [authorship](#), and its [audience and purpose](#), the attentive reader will notice the anti-supernatural biases of many who attempt to contribute to an understanding of the book. Let us be wary of such speculation and cling to the basic elements as set forth by the very Word of God.

Notes

¹"In 1910, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church issued the Five Fundamentals of the Faith, which included: *first*, the inspiration of the Scriptures; *second*, the Virgin Birth; *third*, the substitutionary atonement; *fourth*, the resurrection of Jesus; and *fifth*, the miracles of Jesus. Those who subscribed to these five points were labeled 'Fundamentalists,' and so a new word was coined. . . . The General Assembly issued these in 1910 and reaffirmed them in 1916 and 1923."—Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, [The Footsteps of Messiah](#), rev ed (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 2003), 73.

²Mal Couch, [Classical Evangelical Hermeneutics](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications), 11.

³Robert L. Thomas, "[The 'Jesus Crisis': What Is It?](#)," in Robert L. Thomas and F. David Farnell, eds., [The Jesus Crisis: The Inroads of Historical Criticism into Evangelical Scholarship](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1998), 13.

⁴Ibid.

⁵For an excellent treatment of this topic, see [Thomas, [The "Jesus Crisis": What Is It?](#)] and [Gerhard Maier, [The End of the Historical-Critical Method](#) (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1977)]

⁶Couch, [Classical Evangelical Hermeneutics](#), 20.

⁷Thomas, [The "Jesus Crisis": What Is It?](#), 13.

⁸Francis A. Schaeffer, [The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1982), 5:320-321.

⁹Ibid., 333.

¹⁰Grant R. Osborne, [Revelation](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 17.

¹¹Perhaps the most powerful weapon of Satan is the packaging of truth with deadly error. As we take in the truth, we often fail to spit out the error which rides along with it.

¹²Ibid., 28.

¹³Compare Aune's elaborate construction with Osborne: "The unity of language and thought in the book is so extensive that many recent commentators assume unity and do not even discuss redactional theories."—Ibid., 27.

¹⁴One wonders how often these contributions are fueled by pride rather than a godly reverence for and belief in the sufficiency of what God has set forth. How many modern-day paraphrases of God's verbally inspired Word fall prey to this very error?

¹⁵Isbon T. Beckwith, [The Apocalypse of John](#) (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), 4.

¹⁶Ibid., 393.

¹⁷Couch, [Classical Evangelical Hermeneutics](#), 18.

¹⁸Osborne, [Revelation](#), 25-26.

¹⁹How would such rational skepticism fly when faced with the need to explain the *personal motives* and *natural origin* of Isaiah in writing his 53rd chapter?

²⁰Henry Barclay Swete, [The Apocalypse of St. John](#) (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998, 1906), xx.

²¹Adela Yarbro Collins, "[Book of Revelation](#)," in David Noel Freeman, ed., [The Anchor Bible Dictionary](#) (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1996, c1992), 5:700.

²²Robert H. Mounce, [The Book of Revelation](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), 186.

²³Robert L. Thomas, [Revelation 1-7](#) (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1992), 29.

²⁴J. A. Seiss, [The Apocalypse: Lectures on the Book of Revelation](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1966), v.

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