

6-2013

Book Review: Revelation and the Politics of Apocalyptic Interpretation

Ched E. Spellman

Cedarville University, cspellman@cedarville.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/
biblical_and_ministry_studies_publications](http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/biblical_and_ministry_studies_publications)

 Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Spellman, Ched E., "Book Review: Revelation and the Politics of Apocalyptic Interpretation" (2013). *Biblical and Theological Studies Faculty Publications*. 197.

http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/biblical_and_ministry_studies_publications/197

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Cedarville, a service of the Centennial Library. It has been accepted for inclusion in Biblical and Theological Studies Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Cedarville. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@cedarville.edu.

hearse the story of God's action on behalf of 1 Peter's audience" (p. 172–73). This final chapter focuses on the second layer of Joseph's narrative strategy, namely, the "story" constituting the narrative substructure of 1 Peter. Noting how previous narrative readings of 1 Peter have failed to elaborate the pattern of arrangement in the narrative substructure, Joseph attempts to demonstrate how election, suffering, faithful response, and vindication are arranged in various ways in 1 Peter as they structure the author's use of the OT and, in turn, shape the identity of the audience. Though helpfully noting the need for a clearer account of the actual ordering of the narrative substructure, Joseph's attempt to identify passages in 1 Peter where all four of the "elements" are at work lacks the depth of discussion that was offered in tracing the origin of the individual "elements" (this part of the study is only four pages in length). Whereas the work is successful in demonstrating the presence of these four "elements" in 1 Peter, more could be done to articulate the particular pattern of these "elements" and how such a pattern functions within 1 Peter.

Joseph's work stands among a growing number of narrative approaches successfully applied to NT epistles generally, and to 1 Peter in particular. Though Joseph claims his three-level narrative methodology possesses superior clarity over the so-called two-level methodologies, this claim is undercut by the inconsistent use of terminology throughout the work. Joseph defines "story" as the way the narrator orders the events of the "fabula," but much of the monograph discusses "the way the author manipulates the *elements* of the fabula to rehearse the story of God's action on behalf of 1 Peter's audience" (p. 172; emphasis added). Though Joseph offers a brief definition of "events" (pp. 44–45), he neither defines the term "element" nor discusses the relationship between an "event" and an "element" as they relate (or are interrelated) in the patterned "fabula" of 1 Peter. This lack of precision renders the thesis weak at just the point Joseph attempts to demonstrate the superiority of his method.

Even with this critique, Joseph's work is worthy of attention especially because of how he considers the theological implications of 1 Peter's use of the OT. The monograph is quite helpful in highlighting Peter's theological concerns in selecting and using OT passages in a text that seeks to shape the identity of his audience. This is a welcome addition to a growing library of narrative studies focused on 1 Peter.

Darian Lockett

Talbot School of Theology, Biola University, La Mirada, CA

Revelation and the Politics of Apocalyptic Interpretation. Edited by Richard B. Hays and Stefan Alkier. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012, vi + 233 pp., \$49.95.

G. K. Chesterton once wrote, "Though St John the Evangelist saw many strange monsters in his vision he saw no creature so wild as one of his own commentators" (*Orthodoxy* [New York: John Lang, 1908] 19). Chesterton's commentary on commentators highlights the wide-ranging ways in which the book of Revelation can be read. The contributors to this volume recognize the staggering interpre-

tive spectrum that the last book of the Bible typically generates and seek to provide a framework for navigating this apocalyptic terrain. These nine essays were first presented at a conference held at Duke University in 2010. Editors Richard B. Hays of Duke Divinity School and Stefan Alkier of Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität decided to publish the essays in the order in which they were originally presented.

After the introduction, Michael J. Gorman discusses the reception history (or “impact history”) of the book of Revelation. Gorman explains that the reception/impact history of a text takes into account “a broader range of responses and effects—in and upon music and other arts, politics, liturgy, Christian practices, and so on, as well as on theology” (p. 13). This line of inquiry is especially appropriate for studying Revelation, as this work “has given rise to a wonderful, if sometimes bizarre, story of reception and impact” (p. 16). The “incredible multivalence” of interpretive responses to Revelation flows from the book’s symbolism, hybrid of genre characteristics, highly intertextual character, its “symbiosis of otherworldly and this-worldly phenomena,” and its position and function in the canon (pp. 18–20). The presence of these factors within the scope of one composition, Gorman observes, “creates a perfect storm for polyvalence” (p. 20).

In the next essay, Steve Moyise investigates various “models for intertextual interpretation of Revelation” (pp. 31–45). In intertextual theory, “texts are not viewed as isolated units of meaning but are interpreted in the light of other texts (canon) and traditions (‘rule of faith,’ creeds)” (p. 31). Moyise delineates the major options for understanding John’s use of other biblical texts. Some interpretations focus on the *author’s* intertexts (e.g. Genesis 1–3, Daniel 7), while others focus on the *reader’s* intertexts (e.g. apocryphal writings or canonical texts John does not draw upon). Moyise surveys the work of scholars across this spectrum and highlights the echoes of intertextuality they have uncovered. He concludes by affirming the value of “naming the intertexts and the weight that is being accorded to them” (p. 45). This methodological transparency, Moyise contends, will help readers sift through the sometimes wildly divergent readings of the Apocalypse.

The essays that follow investigate specific aspects of John’s compositional strategy. Thomas Hieke examines the importance and reception of Daniel 7 throughout the book. Richard Hays lays out the intertextual matrix by which John characterizes Jesus as the “faithful witness” and the “Alpha and Omega.” Through intertextual narration, according to Hays, John paradoxically portrays Jesus as one who shares in the divine identity yet still suffers to create a redeemed community of worshipers. Joseph Mangina highlights the role of the *ekklesia* in the Apocalypse and examines the mysterious relationship between Israel and the church as the one people of God.

With a slight shift of emphasis, N. T. Wright outlines the present political implications that John’s Revelation has for the notion of Christian hope. For Wright, John’s message is that “the coming of God’s kingdom on earth as in heaven” has “already been inaugurated through the victory of the sacrificed Lamb who is also the Lion” (p. 106). In a similar vein, Stefan Alkier seeks to explain how Revelation “can help Christians live their political lives” (p. 125). Alkier’s thesis is that “Revelation’s pragmatic model of *Zeugenschaft* (witness) could be a political model for Chris-

tian life today" (p. 127). In short, Alkier avers that the Apocalypse encourages its readers to remain witnesses rather than warriors.

Tobias Nicklas follows these essays by considering the Apocalypse within the "framework of an already existing canon" (p. 143). Nicklas asks, "What is the import of Revelation's voice in the 'choir' of voices we hear in the canon of the Christian Bible? What would be missing if the Apocalypse did not stand at the end of the canon of Old and New Testaments?" (p. 143). The Apocalypse, argues Nicklas, provides a distinctive tenor to the NT's witness to God's action in the world, the church's role in society, the relationship between the Testaments, and God's faithful yet mysterious relationship with his people. In sum, "the Christian Bible would lose a decisive dimension without Revelation" (p. 151).

Marianne Meye Thompson concludes the volume with a series of reflections on the "theological interpretation of the book of Revelation today" (p. 155). For her, "What we are interested in is interpretation of certain kinds of texts, namely, theologically interested texts" (p. 159). More specifically, she considers "how we might allow the book of Revelation itself to shape our understanding of theological interpretation" (p. 161). Readers of the book are "not only to see *what* John sees or to hear *what* he heard, but also to see *as* John sees, and to hear *as* John hears" (p. 164). Thompson argues that "John calls not for sight but for insight, not just for hearing but for understanding" (p. 164). For Thompson, this understanding can take place when readers view the book as a word addressed to them, as a message designed to renew their minds, to invoke their worship, and to be read within the context of the canon.

The dialogue in these presentations demonstrates the eclectic array of interpretations that the book of Revelation is capable of provoking. Assembled here are textual, theological, historical, and ideological/political insights, and most of the contributions have a mix of these elements. There are also valuable introductions to the disciplines of reception history (pp. 13–16), intertextuality (pp. 31–33, 138–40), and theological interpretation (pp. 158–61). Further, the first two essays provide a helpful hermeneutical orientation to the various issues raised in the subsequent discussions.

Within this broad diversity, Hays and Alkier argue that the essays "embody a significant convergence of perspective" that shares "an appreciation for the symbolic and 'theo-poetic' power and complexity of the Apocalypse, a resistance to narrowly literalistic predictive readings, a disposition to read the text as calling followers of Jesus to nonviolent resistance of secular power, and a deep engagement with the Christocentric message of the book" (p. 9). While each analysis maintains its distinctive features, these interdisciplinary essays do bear this methodological family resemblance. The volume as a whole is thus a substantive example of the reception history of Revelation that it seeks to describe.

The contributors present a compelling case that there are real political implications in the interpretation and identification of the main message of the Apocalypse (pp. 1–2, 8–9). For instance, Gorman characterizes Revelation as "a theopolitical text" (p. 27). This is true, he says, "because the heart of Revelation is worship, and worship is a theopolitical practice" (p. 27). However, the book lacks a direct

interaction with the method and nature of ideological or political interpretation. The essays demonstrate that the Apocalypse has political *implications*, but some readers might have lingering questions about the nature of political *interpretation*. Though the contributors are typically mild in their ideological assertions, the futurist perspective, historical criticism, and American foreign policy do receive a consistently negative characterization (e.g. pp. 2–3, 94, 118–19, 123, 127, 156–57, 164). However, on the whole, these sections are muted and do not dominate the discussions like they might have. Given the prominence of the topic in the title and introduction, a brief outline of the basic tenets of ideological interpretation in one of the essays might have strengthened the volume.

Accordingly, perhaps a more accurate title for this work would have been “Revelation and the Intertextual Interpretation of the Apocalypse.” Indeed, discussion of the intertextual references woven into the fabric of John’s composition and the question of their canonical function is more prominent than the title suggests. Even the two overtly political essays draw extensively on intertextual connections to make their point. More specifically, in this volume there is an assumed connection between the study of intertextuality and the question of canon. Hays and Alkier note that “to ask about the role of the book of Revelation within the canon, we must consider not only how the author may have been influenced by his sources and precursors; we must also consider literary issues about the interplay of images, and we must assess the theological impact of the juxtaposition of diverse ways of conceptualizing God’s action in history” (p. 3). They are convinced that “in order to understand the Apocalypse well, we need to understand the complex way in which the author is reading these books and employing their ideas and images” (p. 5). This textual emphasis on the connective nature and canonical function of John’s compositional work is a welcome feature of a substantive and thought-provoking collection of essays.

Ched Spellman

Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, TX

The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology. Edited by Russell Re Manning. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, xiv + 632 pp. \$150.00 cloth.

In this timely volume, Russell Re Manning, Lord Gifford Fellow in the School of Divinity, History, and Philosophy at the University of Aberdeen, serves up an impressive array of articles on the topic of natural theology. And what is natural theology? Re Manning responds: “There is no easy answer to this question; indeed it is one of the primary aims of this *Handbook* to highlight the rich diversity of approaches to, and definitions of, natural theology. The lack of a fixed consensus on the definition of natural theology is due, in part, to its inherently interdisciplinary character and the inevitable limitations of definitions that belong firmly within particular disciplines” (p. 1). Each contributor, then, gives their own definition of natural theology, “reflect[ing] the plurality of contexts within which the study of natural theology must be situated” (p. 1). Carving out space for conversa-