

## ○ REVIEW OF *REVELATION: THE APOCALYPSE OF JESUS CHRIST*

Christina Petterson

*Christina Petterson lectures in biblical studies, theology and ethics at the University of Greenland in Nuuk.*

Christina Petterson reviews *Revelation: The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ*, by Christopher Rowland and Judith Kovacs (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).



Blackwell Bible Commentaries set out by dealing with the reception history of a text as important and serious as the Apocalypse. That makes the outcome equally important. However the final result, *Revelation: The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ* is so apologetic it frightens me.

From amongst the many problems in this book, I too must make a selection of which points to include and which to exclude for this review. I have settled on two major problems that are interrelated – namely, the tremendous effort put into detoxifying the Apocalypse, and a rather unfortunate usage of the term *Wirkungsgeschichte*.

*Revelation: The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ* by Judith Kovacs and Christopher Rowland is one of the first in the Blackwell Bible Commentaries series, which prioritises the reception history of the biblical text rather than the text in its ‘original’ setting. In the Preface to the series, the editor and the authors state that the premise is ‘that how people have interpreted, and have been influenced by, a sacred text like the bible is often as interesting and historically important as what it originally meant’ (xi). The series explores the biblical texts’ influences on a variety of cultural phenomena, as well as their political and social implications. In this sense this series is most definitely something new. But the genre chosen for this endeavour is very traditional, and these two aspects created, in my mind, a tension. On the one hand, the project wished to spread out into areas not usually visited by biblical scholars – namely art, music, film and literature – but on the other hand it is presented in one of the oldest genres in the field: the commentary. I will return to this tension later. Back to the Preface; the difference between this commentary series and all its precursors is that where the previous commentaries endeavoured to get behind centuries of Christian Jewish tradition to one single meaning, this one strives to ‘present readers with many different interpretations of each text, in such a way as to heighten their awareness of what a text, especially a sacred text, can mean and what it can do, what it has meant and what it has done, in the many contexts in which it operates’ (xi). And finally, the Preface recognises

the difficulty in excluding and including interpretations. However, the series as a whole does aim to give readers ‘a representative sampling of material’ and states that it ‘will be presented in such a way that the readers can make their own minds up on the value, morality, and validity of particular interpretations’ (xii).

The Preface to this volume introduces the concept of *Wirkungsgeschichte*, which seems to be used as a synonym for reception history. But German does distinguish between *Wirkungsgeschichte* and *Rezeptionsgeschichte*: where the former is reserved for the influence of the text on a given society and its role in shaping values, prejudices, and preconceptions, the latter may be characterised as an active reproduction or conscious appropriation of a given biblical text, which is what is presented in this commentary at the utmost expense of the *Wirkungsgeschichte* it advertises. This distinction and the problems briefly sketched here will be very important for some of my later criticism.

After the Introduction, which I will return to shortly, follows the commentary itself, which dives into the text more or less chapter after chapter. Each chapter is divided into two parts. The ancient literary context is followed by the interpretations, and the latter is, as promised, the substantial part of each chapter. For example, the chapter on Revelation 4 and John’s vision of God is first placed within the context of the Hebrew Bible, the Second Temple texts and the Dead Sea Scrolls. Thereafter follow the interpretations, which include:

- appropriations of the vision by Hildegard of Bingen and Joachim of Fiore;
- paradigmatic appropriations of the visionary experiences by Anna Trapnel and Anne Wentworth, who were two visionaries from seventeenth-century England;
- a non-visionary interpretation of the vision (Victorinus); and
- interpretations of certain motifs in the chapter by, among others, Irenaeus, Milton, Bunyan, and Shelley.

Two interpretations of the scene of the heavenly worship (Rev 4:9-11) are presented: Anna Trapnel’s, who substitutes the 24 elders with women in *Voice of the King of Saints*; and that of the African-American spiritual ‘Deep River’, in which the author will join in the heavenly liturgy.

The Introduction discusses, among other things, the place of the book of Revelation in Christian life and thought, and propounds the approach taken in this commentary – namely that the emphasis is on interpretations which articulate the text’s meaning for the present. This is what is characterised as ‘reception history’ (and indeed, what one brought up in a German theological tradition would characterise as *rezeptionsgeschichte*) and is set up as a contrast to historical criticism: ‘In a time when the most prominent interpretations of the book emphasize its meaning for the past (historical criticism) or the future (prognostications of the eschaton), we aim to round out the picture by calling attention to interpreters who seek to articulate the book’s meaning for the present’ (11). And the view of the commentary is that it is most likely that actual visions are the backbone of the text and that a re-appropriation of the visions, or seeing again of these visions, could ‘offer an understanding that is more faithful to the text’. Since the commentary thus states that John is a mere recorder of his visions, then one may not speak of authorial intention as John is then one visionary among many. And by reporting or recording his visions, he then provides the source of inspiration for future visionaries. It seems that instead of the one meaning usually associated with the author, we have many meanings, unfolded in visions, that

in turn have the same assumed source: God. This makes all the visions which John's visions generate part of that same source. Thereon, it follows that the commentary itself is enacting the divine will by picking out and displaying for the reader the visions which are more faithful to the text.

This adds an extra twist to the opening lines of the commentary's introduction, which begins by commenting on a British newspaper's use of the word 'Apocalypse' on September 12, 2001 to evaluate the event of the day before. By valuating these events as destruction, cataclysm and horror, the commentary recognises the dangerous potential of the apocalypse, and places a violent text within a context of violence.

In a compilation such as this, it is, as the authors themselves have highlighted, inevitable that some interpretations have not been selected for inclusion. And as a reviewer, it is certainly a cheap shot to fire away and spend the entire review lamenting what has not slipped through the selector's needle.

But it must be said that the text of Revelation as read through the eyes of Rowland/Kovacs reading through the eyes of the readers of Revelation comes forth as a de-toxified and edifying text. And here I return to the aforementioned tension between the new interpretative fields and the old genre, which is not sustained, in that the reception history explored in the commentary is always kept within a theologically acceptable framework. The aim of the authors to 'round out the picture by calling attention to interpreters who seek to articulate the book's meaning to the present' is kept well within the confinements of a solid Western cultural environment and theological history. And despite the distancing of the past and its chief exponent – historical criticism – the commentary on Revelation does remain a book of the past. Actualising interpretations it may be, but it is these interpretations (for example Iraeneus' and Joachim of Fiore's actualising interpretations) that, while very interesting and amusing, keep the book of Revelation firmly in the past. Thus the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of Revelation – such as its imperial overtones and its appropriation of the reinforcement of a violent Christianisation of the world – is completely neglected, as is Revelation's contribution to anti-Semitism, and feminist objections are dismissed.

The commentary takes a stand within a Western Christian worldview in whose hands the text of Revelation can be a dangerous instrument, which this commentary shows with remarkable clarity. The commentary seems intent on presenting Revelation as a divine source for visionary experience, which contrasts with the British newspaper's use of the term. So where does the destruction, cataclysm and violence come from then? In the commentary's view it certainly does not come from Revelation/God.

The whole book, it seems, is a rewriting of the Apocalypse within a tightly controlled theological and conservative framework. By ignoring the violence of the text and bypassing its *wirkungsgeschichtliche* history, it presents Christianity as a peaceful religion, in contrast with Islam, via the reference to September 11, 2001 in the first few lines of the Introduction. It is as if Kovacs and Rowland's *Revelation* is trying to wrestle away any possible political use/abuse of the text by presenting seemingly 'harmless' interpretations as more faithful to the text. Hereby one 'excessively suspicious person' could assume that the readings not presented are not faithful to the text and thus abuse the text and its meaning. But by uncritically reproducing the appropriations of the text within the Christian tradition the oppressive and violent interpretative history of the text remains untouched. One example will suffice.

Many feminist interpreters have pointed out the problematic nature of the presentation of women in the Apocalypse, not to mention its effect on Christian imagery of women in general in the aftermath of the text. This is what in German would be characterised as *Wirkungsgeschichte*: the impact of the book in forming the Christian/Western worldview and, in this case, women's place in it. This problem is very briefly mentioned in the interpretation of chapter 17, only to be dismissed with an argument referring to female prophets and mystics finding the visions a source of inspiration and appropriating these visions as 'a licence to transgress convention and function in a male domain' (p. 188). But does that really answer the question? That female prophets and mystics throughout centuries have used Revelation to transgress convention does not excuse the text from its portrayal of women. It is precisely such texts as Revelations that have sustained, if not produced, the patriarchal framework and reinforced the male domain that have made transgression necessary in the first place. And this is using a *rezeptionsgeschichtliche* argument to attempt to explain *wirkungsgeschichtliche* phenomena away.

The celebrated present thus constructed by the authors is a false theological construct, which has snapped the ties to contemporary biblical and cultural studies; and the commentary is politically insipid in its suppression of some of the larger issues in contemporary academic discussions. I find it highly disconcerting that the authors do not see these issues as theologically problematic.