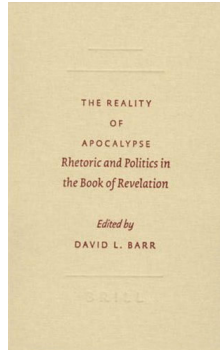


○ REVIEW OF DAVID L. BARR (ED.), *THE REALITY OF APOCALYPSE: RHETORIC AND POLITICS IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION*

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Simon Staffell, University of Sheffield, England



What does it mean to say that the apocalypse is real? Such a question is as pertinent, as political and as powerful now as ever. Voltaire described the circular quality and authorizing power of Revelation:

Each Christian community has applied to itself the prophecies contained in this book; the English have found in the revolutions of Great Britain; the Lutherans the troubles of Germany; the French Protestants the reign of Charles IX and the regency of Catharine de Medicis. They are all equally right (Voltaire 2005 (1764): 14–15).

This book contains selected essays given at the ‘Seminar on the Apocalypse: The Intersection of Literary and Social Methods’ at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature. The essays each explore what David Barr terms ‘the reality of the Apocalypse’. He insists that ‘far from being a fantasy of what will never be, the Apocalypse represents a reality that already existed, creating a social world that provided both community and individual identity to its audience’ (1).

As well as literary criticism the contributions employ methods from the political and social sciences and discourse analysis. The first three essays apply genre criticism to the Apocalypse and ‘incorporate and seek to extend’ the work of the SBL Genres project.¹ Gregory L. Linton’s essay argues for the importance of genre to literary analysis of Revelation, which he explains, establish the ‘horizons of expectation’ of readers, and are ‘models of writing’ for authors (15). Exploring the intertextuality of Apocalypse, Linton finds that texts rarely conform to genres; they are often hybrid, serving the author’s purposes and opening ‘multiple opportunities’ to the readers’ ‘selective attention’ (24). The liminal Apocalypse text confounds scholars’ attempts to

fix generic boundaries. Critical analysis is therefore selective, backgrounding and foregrounding elements of the text in order to make it conform to genre categories, which are inevitably constructed and circular. The liminality that Linton describes is key to the authorizing power of the apocalyptic imagination in ideology, rhetoric and politics.

In his essay 'Apocalypse Renewed' David E. Aune offers an intertextual reading of Revelation from the perspective of a hypothesized original circle of readers. It is a forensic and painstaking search for precursor texts and literary conventions that may have guided readers during late first and early second centuries C.E. The piece provides rich detail but also raises important questions about the nature of intertextuality. Given the cyclical nature of establishing intertextual links (which Linton has described), it would seem in the vain of this book to ask: What are the politics of the links Aune finds?

As David Barr explores in the third essay 'Beyond Genre' images and events within the text can only be understood with reference to the social and historical worlds behind the text and those of interpreters and interpretations that stand in front of the text. Barr's reading considers the Apocalypse alongside Homeric epic, omens and oracles, not for textual comparison, but to assess social impact. The common quest in each is the desire to pull aside the veil of human limits and see what is really going on. For Barr this unveiling is a social act. This essay is refreshing in its desire to look beyond the text and explore its socially embedded reality, revealing that the most important aspect of hearing the Apocalypse is its transformative action in the present.

Barr's point has resonance with both ancient and modern contexts. This is the theme that underpins the second part of the book, which oscillates, with varying degrees of success, between text and context. Jan Willem van Henten offers a detailed and insightful contextualised reading of how propaganda functions when utopic visions collide. He reads the dragon and two beasts of Rev 12–13 in the context of Hellenic and Egyptian combat myth imperial propaganda, as read in Asian Minor's cities. In such a reading, van Henten claims, the visions of Rev 12–13 involve the utter deconstruction of a Roman imperial ideology, which lays claim to being restorer of order and saviour of the world. The text inverts this imperial ideology, making the dragon the agent of chaos and destruction.

In contrast to Van Henten's efforts to explore context Paul B. Duff, although purporting to uncover the ancient context of the Apocalypse, focuses almost entirely on the text. He suggests that the 'synagogue of Satan' referred to in Revelation 2:9 and 3:9, was a rhetorical construction by John intended to exacerbate tensions between churches and synagogues and discourage defections. The overwhelmingly textual evidence used begs the question whether politics and rhetoric can be satisfactorily analysed without context and reflexivity.

Despite his earlier emphasis on 'the world in front of the text' (71), David Barr's second essay *The Lamb Who Looks Like a Dragon* is also hampered by complete absorption in the text. His reading of Revelation aims to harmonise, which places Barr in an ethical quandary as he is faced with the violently unethical language of the text. The resolution, he believes, is that prevailing readings of the book of Revelation have been wrong because they invert the actual imagery of revelation in which Jesus is represented by the lamb and the Emperor the dragon. For Barr, despite the unsettlingly violent symbolism, the actual message of the story is a complete rejection of force, 'the Lamb is ever a Lamb'.

In the most successful section Barr sees the power of the Apocalypse narrative in taking hold the reigns of socially constructed power as it existed in the symbols of Roman Imperial world

order. But at the root of Barr's ethical dilemma is an inconsistent use of the theory of social construction (Berger and Luckmann 1999; Hacking 1999), which he applies to the ancient – but not to his own present – world. Barr claims that 'the text constrains our readings' (213). He acknowledges that there 'is not one, or even a best, interpretation of a work of literature', but insists that there are 'wrong interpretations and worse interpretations' (219). Barr's reading at once requires that there can be an authoritative reading, and yet is resigned to accept that there is no such thing. These narrative analytical meanderings fail to do justice to the ethical questions, which relate to *how* the power of texts is interpreted and applied in the world. How the polysamy of the text is actualised in practise. If (as in constructivism) texts are understood in terms of the processes through which they shape present reality – and particularly power – it is nonsensical to say that a text can be misread. To return to Voltaire, in this sense they are all equally right. There is no such thing as a 'poor reading', which Barr laments (209), if we understand reading as the processes of constructing present realities.

The point is well made by Fiorenza in her essay 'Babylon the Great: A Rhetorical Political Reading of Revelation 17–18'. In the rhetorical-political paradigm interpretation she claims 'one does not need to claim that one interpretation is correct and all the others are wrong' (245). Such an approach leads to the realisation that interpretative differences are discursively constructed both in the rhetoric of the text and in the interpretation of the readers.

In 'Symptoms of Resistance' Greg Carey lays out a sound theoretical approach grounded in reflexivity. 'Should we resist Revelation on account of its authoritarianism, violence, and misogyny, or should we embrace it as a voice that inspires resistance against injustice?' (169) The question cuts to the heart of the politics of interpretation and the answer, for Carey, is neither: The question is too complex for ethically univocal conclusions. Too often postcolonial and other normative biblical criticism over-simplifies in order to find a more ethically appealing voice in the text and the Apocalypse is a good example. The problem of course is that the ethically univocal liberating message retains the circular textual authorization that has been and will continue to be used by their (un)ethical opponents.

Placing his reading of Revelation in the post 11 September 2001 political context, Carey problematises such ethically simplistic use of the biblical text. For Carey, to point to Revelation as resistance literature is not to delineate 'good', 'bad', liberating' and 'oppressive' but to acknowledge ambiguity and disrupted certitude. The approach is applied to a thought provoking analysis of the identity politics and rhetorical framing in the Apocalypse discourse. The 'symptoms of resistance' found within the text, he argues, is a discourse of rage that runs deep and can help to explain disorder among reading communities ancient and modern.

Both Carey and Fiorenza's contributions demonstrate that normative analysis must move beyond text and ask epistemological questions: How is the text read, and to what effect? Fiorenza for example argues that in order to decide whether the discourses of Revelation are misogynist requires reflexive consideration of the politics of interpretation. To fail to do so, Fiorenza argues, is to fail to take responsibility for one's own political assumptions and interests (250). It would be impossible here to do justice to Fiorenza's rhetorical-political approach that is carefully outlined and then applied to a stimulating reading of Revelation 17–18. However, it is useful to cite at length two questions asked by Fiorenza:

When respectable academics come to rhetoric's abode, have they really abandoned their faith in the mythical value-freedom of academic discourse? Or do they entertain a hope of transforming rhetoric into a practice that pious expositivists can embrace in good conscience, while they continue to devalue the passions and logic of the political (and religious) economy?

I should leave it open as to how these questions might be applied to the authors in this volume. If Fiorenza's 'rhetorical-political' paradigm shift is to occur, it has not done so consistently here. There is much to recommend the book for those who seek a detailed selection of readings of the text of Revelation and other comparable ancient apocalyptic texts. However, the title of this book, *The Reality of Apocalypse: Rhetoric and Politics in the Book of Revelation*, promises much that is unrealised because analysis of the implications of the politics and rhetoric of the biblical text can only truly begin with Carey's and Fiorenza's move to reflexive and epistemological questions.

ENDNOTES

¹ See Semeia 14 (1979).

REFERENCES

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