

Review of Luis Menéndez-Antuña, *Thinking Sex with the Great Whore: Deviant Sexualities and Empire in the Book of Revelation*.

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Luis Menéndez-Antuña makes a significant contribution to the scholarly conversation about the figure of the Whore in Revelation 17-18 with this distinctly interdisciplinary monograph, moving beyond explorations of ancient constructions of gender by exploring how Foucauldian, postcolonial, and queer historiographies might offer liberative readings in the present. These critical and theoretical intersections make sense because, as Menéndez-Antuña notes in the introduction to the first chapter, “the Apocalypse of John is part of a long tradition (biblical and non-biblical) where the gendered, sexualized, and colonized Other must be destroyed, punished, or disciplined” (1).

Rather than a traditional introduction, the first chapter, “Thinking Resistance in the Age of Empire: Ethical Evaluations of the Apocalypse of John,” delves into the first analytical angle to be explored, which is how biblical scholars have understood Revelation’s relationship to empire. Menéndez-Antuña analyzes examples of two contrasting paradigms: Revelation as complicit with empire (exemplified by the work of Adela Yarbro Collins), and Revelation as resistant to empire (represented by the work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza). Menéndez-Antuña then summarizes and analyzes the work of those who have nuanced both paradigmatic perspectives. Ultimately, he concludes that “[b]oth strategies offer a thoroughly contextualized understanding of Revelation in the past” but the “reality of Empire [in the present] is undertheorized” (19). This first chapter is particularly helpful for situating biblical scholarship about Revelation’s relationship to Empire within a broader framework, while also pointing to the need for additional contextualization of Empire in the present.

In the second chapter, “Thinking Apocalyptic Resistance in the Age of Empire,” Menéndez-Antuña seeks to offer this contextualization by first drawing on the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, then turning to the work of Michael Foucault as it relates to subjectivity and questions of subject formation. Foucault’s historiography helps Menéndez-Antuña to “bridge the gap between the present and the past” in order to find ways to connect “bodily resistance to imperial economy” (31). Through historical explorations of “the self” and the body, Menéndez-Antuña highlights Revelation’s particular project of subject formation and the ways that purity becomes a central concern along with the conceptualization of desire.

The third chapter, “Thinking Sex with the Whore of Revelation,” examines connections between sexuality and bodily resistance under capitalism in order to analyze how sexual slurs function to oppose imperial structures throughout the Hebrew Bible and in Revelation. Specifically, Menéndez-Antuña focuses on instances of a foreign harlot within the context of colonial rule, including Gomer, Jezebel, and Rahab. He notes that all three women are depicted as having “disordered desire” (66). Desire, and especially excessive desire or lack of self-

control, functions as a crucial element of the figure of the whore, even though it also has the potential to destabilize gender binaries. Menéndez-Antuña then connects the semantic and representational levels of meaning related to the figure of the whore (particularly Gomer in the Hebrew Bible) to the ideological representation of the whore of Babylon in Revelation. In Hosea, the “desire of the prophet to contain the excessive desire of the harlot initiates in the reader the desire to contain unrestrained desire,” and in Revelation, the whore of Babylon seeks to activate in the reader a “disavowal of imperial [subject] formations” (68). Menéndez-Antuña once again calls for attention to the configuration of desire in the figure of the whore of Babylon, while also exploring the ways that a text that seeks to be anti-imperialist relies upon imperialist conceptions of gender and sexuality which must be deconstructed.

Chapter four, “Thinking Sex with the Whore in the Present,” seeks to offer a queer politics of desire in order to overcome the divide between the biblical past and the present. The chapter begins by drawing on the work of Foucault, David Halperin, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Madhavi Menon to expose the “undecidability of desire” and expand an unhistoricist framework. By exploring and deconstructing the concept of sexual orientation, Menéndez-Antuña complicates conceptions of both the past and the present. Menéndez-Antuña next turns to an examination of desire in Revelation, providing critical analysis of the work of three scholars representing feminist, queer/postcolonial, and rhetorical-emancipatory approaches. Tina Pippin (feminist approach) argues that women are only depicted as objects of desire in Revelation, and women’s real desires are erased. Yet as Menéndez-Antuña notes, this perspective essentializes gender and does not interrogate the text “beyond reading as a straight fe/male” (87). Stephen Moore represents the queer/postcolonial approach and highlights the connections between sexuality, empire, and gender performance and fluidity, but for Menéndez-Antuña, “the undecidability of gender calls for undecidability of desire and, in turn, for the undecidability of interpretation” (89). Although Menéndez-Antuña appreciates Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s movement away from using gender as the exclusive lens of analysis (rhetorical-emancipatory approach), he also pushes back against her assumptions of identity categories and her essentializing of the present context. The chapter concludes with Menéndez-Antuña’s attempt to offer a queer theory of desire that builds on the theopolitical approach of Erin Runions, ultimately sketching a framework for what he calls “queer biblical resistance” (94).

In the conclusion, “Manifesting Revelation among the Manifestos,” Menéndez-Antuña analyzes the relationship between the field of biblical studies, the relevance of the present for interpreting the past, and the arguments he has made about Revelation. He considers four manifestos about the status and future direction of biblical studies, including those by Dale Martin, Roland Boer, Stephen Moore and Yvonne Sherwood, and Fernando Segovia. In light of these critical evaluations of future directions for biblical studies, ranging from an emphasis on a more theological scope, political scope, theoretical scope, and global scope, Menéndez-Antuña examines the implications of the emancipatory potential of Revelation. He returns to the conception of desire, concluding that only “the decoupling of desire from sexual identity allows for the disavowal of imperial economy while identifying with the queer aspects of the desire routinely expressed in the text” (118). In this book focused on the figure of the whore of Babylon, desire, and empire in Revelation, Menéndez-Antuña raises critical questions about the relationship of

biblical studies to the present as well as the intersections between theory and ethical implications for flesh-and-blood readers. The particular attention to and insights about the conceptions of desire and subject formation could be (and in fact should be) extended to the interpretation of many other biblical texts.



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