Book Review


When I researched the role of τὸ πνεῦμα in the Book of Revelation, which resulted in a doctorate from the Faculty of Protestant Theology in Brussels in 2018, I discovered that at least a dozen SDA scholars are participating in the Revelation discussion in the wider academic arena. Sigve Tonstad is one of them. His breakthrough is his published doctoral thesis “Saving God’s Reputation: The Theological Function of Pistis Iesou in the Cosmic Narratives of Revelation” (2006). Other SDA scholars who have contributed significantly in the field of Revelation-studies, and are mentioned by Tonstad, are D. F. Mazzaferri, L. Gallusz, J. Paulien, R. Stefanovic, K. H. Valentine, S. Thompson, H. K. LaRondelle, W. H. Shea, K. Strand. The fact that Tonstad was invited to write a 398-page commentary on Revelation in the Paideia Series on the New Testament is a further step in this development of SDA contributions. From the Foreword to this series we read that “the primary focus remains on the text and not its historical context or its interpretations in the secondary literature” (p. x). That is probably the reason why the vast area of intertext such as from Qumran and other Jewish Second Temple literature is absent. The commentary of Tonstad succeeds, however, in dealing with the three main goals set out by the general editors for the different blocks of text: “(1) introductory matters; (2) tracing the train of thought or narrative or rhetorical flow of the argument; and (3) theological issues raised by the text that are of interest to the contemporary Christian” (p. x). This approach opens up the rich meanings of the text as it stands and prevents preconceived ideas or mere interpretations from specific religious traditions claiming unique “copyright.” In this way, Tonstad has done a great favour, not only to the academic community, but also to the general student of the fascinating last book of the Scriptures. Firmly set in this hermeneutical frame, Tonstad, paradoxically is able to show a few gems, which echo his Adventist background. For example: the Lord’s day of Revelation 1:10 is
mainly interpreted in light of OT allusions: “my holy day” in Isaiah meaning the Sabbath (Isa. 58:13) and “the Day of the Lord” in an eschatological sense (pp. 53, 54). Also, the phrase that John was on Patmos because of “the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (a favourite term in SDA interpretation of Revelation) is highlighted, as Tonstad says “this phrase and its variants epitomize the message of the book” (p. 52). The echo of SDA tradition is heard in his tongue in cheek comment: “When we factor in that the one who is seen ‘in the middle of the lampstands’ (Revelation 1:12) will also appear ‘in the middle of the throne’ (Revelation 5:6), the connection between heaven and earth is firm and decisive” (p. 56). The words “firm and decisive” come near to “close and decided” as one of the Adventist pioneers used to pinpoint the message of Revelation.

Tonstad has captured the height, length and depth of this intriguing apocalyptic book. By scrutinizing many ancient and contemporary sources he is able to show that the author of Revelation has written a piece of art, like Bach’s Matthäus-Passion. Tonstad places the apocalyptic narrative in the context of a cosmic conflict between God and Mudslinger (as the devil is translated). The weapons to conquer Satan, the Deceiver, are revelation and witness. This commentary is full of new insights, which are born in a setting of (1) rereading the narrative, (2) discovering the allusions to the OT and (3) realizing that God is not the only One at work in this world. Tonstad does not correlate apocalyptic symbols directly with any specific historical place or event. The seven hills do not refer to Rome. 666 is not Nero, or better said: it is more than Nero. But that does not mean that the cosmic conflict is not fought in specific instances. The whole tenure of Tonstad’s superb approach is best put in these words of L. Thompson, quoted by Tonstad on page 216:

“‘There is a permanence to the crucified Lamb that cannot be captured by locating the crucifixion in time, for example under ‘Pontius Pilate’ or ‘in the first century of the Common Era.’ To put it differently, the crucifixion is much more than a momentary event in history. That permanence is captured in the book of Revelation through spatial, not temporal imagery. The ‘slain Lamb’ appears not only on earth but also in heaven, close to the throne (5:6). The Lamb was not slain at a particular moment in time; rather the Lamb was slain before time. The seer describes that time in spatial language ‘from the foundation of the world’ (13:8; cf. 17:8). The crucifixion is enfolded in the ‘deep’ permanent structures of the seer’s vision and it unfolds in the life of

I like the surprising links Tonstad makes with the Book of Genesis and the Gospel of John, as well as with powerful stories from world literature (Dostoevsky) and wisdom from psychiatry (Jung). I also appreciate the repeated strong suggestion that Jesus was not only incarnated as a human but also as an angel. For a book like Revelation that is an important notion.

Obviously, this opus magnum was developed over the years with old and new wine in its skins. The rich Revelation library over the years (including the AEC: Aune, Bauckham, and Charles) is fully present plus I noticed at least 46 books published after 2010 in Tonstad’s bibliography. Kudos.

Among the many strengths, we also note some weaker points. A few relevant SDA contributions I find missing in Tonstad’s commentary: L. Hongisto (former president of Middle East University), with his in-depth study of the communication riddle between sender and receiver in the Book of Revelation (Experiencing the Apocalypse at the Limits of Alterity. Leiden: Brill, 2010) and E. Müller, who wrote his Andrews University dissertation on “Microstructural Analysis of Revelation 4–11” (1996). Especially Hongisto’s unique work has a lot to offer in those areas the Paideia Commentaries want to focus on: “reader-centered literary approaches … with careful attention to the extratext of the original readers …” (p. ix).

I was somewhat baffled that the concept of spirit seems lacking in this commentary. As someone who has given so much attention to τὸ πνεῦμα in the Book of Revelation I am certainly biased. And that will explain part of my disappointment. On the other hand, the inner revelation of God is not limited to the Lamb but is also through the seven spirits (1:4; 3:1; 4:5; 5:6). This commentary seems to say: no comment. A superb intertext with the seven spirits (of truth and wickedness) in the Qumran literature would have enriched the author’s intentions. And the link of “word of God”/”testimony of Jesus” with “Spirit of prophecy” (19:10) is not elaborated upon. When there is a tendency to overlook the role of the Spirit, then the vocabulary of the Revelator’s theology has not been fully exploited.

All in all, I warmly recommend Tonstad’s intelligent masterpiece. It opens up a book which wants to be revealed. Tonstad’s heart beats in harmony with the central message of the gospel when he says: “For sin in all its
expressions, the violent death of Jesus is the means of deliverance. God’s love comes first, however, and the self-giving of Jesus is the expression of God’s love. The converse is false. God’s love is the cause, not the result, of Jesus’s self-giving” (p. 47).

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