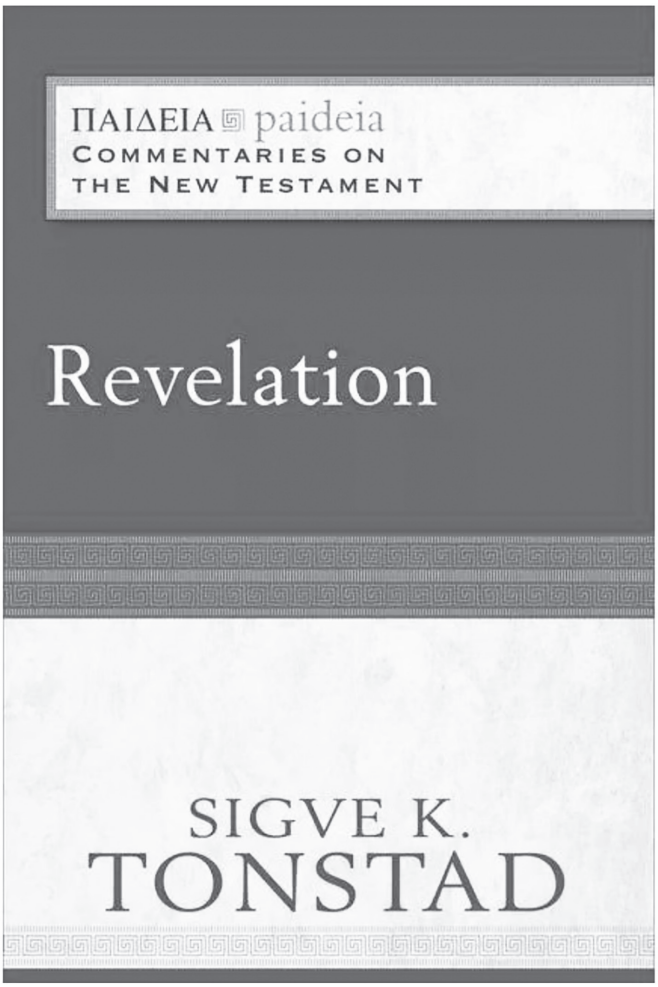

Sigve K. Tonstad, *Revelation*, Paidea Commentaries on the New Testament (Baker Academic, 2019), 416 pages

BOOK REVIEW:

Sigve Tonstad's Revelation

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KEYWORDS: book review, the "dark side" in Revelation, divine permission and demonic commission

This review was originally presented as part of a February 29, 2020 panel discussion in Loma Linda on Revelation: Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament.

Much of the current scholarship on the book of Revelation argues that the visions of the book are concerned with nothing more than a critique of the Roman imperial system. This perspective understands the beast from the sea (Rev. 13:1–10) as the Roman Empire; the wounded head is the emperor, most often Nero, in a thinly veiled reference to the myth of *Nero redivivus*;[1] and the beast from the earth (13:11–18) is the imperial cult or the imperial priesthood in Asia Minor. Writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, Wilhelm Bousset said that "the observation that the core of the prophecy in the Apocalypse refers to the then widely held expectation of *Nero redivivus* is in my opinion an immovable point that will not again be surrendered [in] contemporary historical interpretation."[2] In Richard Bauckham's judgment: "The gematria [referring to the number 666] does not merely assert that Nero is the beast: it demonstrates that he is."[3]

Sigve Tonstad's new commentary on Revelation in the Paidea Commentary series (Baker Academic) opens with a deft critique of this preterist, somewhat dominant interpretive framework for Revelation. He insists that Revelation's perspective is *cosmic* more than *Roman*, its story is shaped by the *biblical* narrative more than by imperial life in the first century, and it is truly prophetic and not only descriptive of first-century concerns (19–20). As an alternative, Tonstad argues for a "Cosmic Conflict View," which takes into account Roman imperial reality, yet deals with bigger concerns projected on a wider screen (20). This perspective allows for viewing Revelation's concerns as both universal and timeless, while at the same time related to events in the first century as much as to those in the twenty-first.

The cosmic view that Tonstad advocates influences three major areas of interpretation in Revelation: one's understanding of the book's genre, the connection between violence and God's reputation, and finally, the centrality of the Lamb for understanding the divine response highlighted in the book. This review will briefly address these three interpretive issues, then, in the end, will offer some remaining questions not fully addressed in the commentary.

Genre

Helpfully, Tonstad emphasizes that the genre of Revelation is ambiguous in nature. Though often classified as an apocalyptic book, he argues that the nature of apocalyptic as *crisis literature* does not fit. Revelation, for Tonstad, can be described as an apocalyptic book if the purpose is to identify it as revelatory literature (30). Yet, rather than a pure apocalypse, if it should be classified at all, Revelation should be seen as a second Ezekiel because of its prophetic character, rather than a second Daniel. He concludes his discussion of genre arguing that "The potential of genre to help readers is in doubt unless one limits it to the claim announced in the opening word: a *disclosure* is in the making. Revelation resists a simple classification … [then quoting Gregory Linton] … Revelation is a text that 'refuses to stay in bounds,' from 'John's own stand point in the first century … something new and different from previous similar writings'" (30).

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It seems Tonstad wants to detach one's reading of Revelation from what might be the typical expectations of scholars' understanding of an apocalyptic text. Tonstad would have readers make this move so that there is greater awareness of the relationship between, in Auerbach's terms, "sensory appearance and meaning."[4] On this point, Tonstad's perspective on Revelation is nuanced and quite helpful. He encourages readers to be cautious about their preunderstandings regarding what the Revelation is about—and, perhaps especially with regard to the Book of Revelation, such preunderstandings are most deep-seated and controlling of interpretation. Assumptions of what an apocalypse is and how it delivers its message have just as much potential to distort as to clarify one's understanding of Revelation's communicative intent. This is a reminder that a *prima facie* reading is inadequate. Revelation's disclosures are reserved for "anyone who has an ear" (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22; 13:9), and it calls for a mind that has wisdom (13:18; 17:9). Tonstad urges readers to attend carefully to the "sensory appearance" of the text and to follow the trajectory of such appearances toward their intended and ultimate subject matter. He suggests that Revelation is in the business of "aural circumcision,"[5]—"he who has an ear, let him hear what that Spirit says …" is the refrain throughout the text. The disclosures of the text, which extend beyond identifying the genre, depend not only on what is said, but, perhaps even more, on what is heard by the (original or subsequent) audiences.

As mentioned in greater detail in the next section, Tonstad argues for a much larger role for the demonic in Revelation and he insists that "the remedy against someone who does not tell the truth [in the book] is *revelation*." He continues, "*Witness*, a key word in John as much as in Revelation, is a virtual synonym for the revealing errand (John 5:31–36; 8:13–18; 10:25; 18:37; 19:35; Rev. 1:9; 6:9; 11:7; 12:17; 19:10; 20:4; 22:16,18). Witness will make right what has gone wrong" (32). Tonstad hints at this direction at the very opening of his commentary as he poses the questions: "Does this mean that God's remedy for 'false speech' is 'more speech'? Does it mean that God's remedy is—*revelation*?" (25). Rather than staking great claims regarding the precise genre of Revelation, Tonstad encourages readers to listen to "more speech," the very revelation that is to be heard that constitutes the divine response to deception and lies.

Violence and God's Reputation

For anyone reading Revelation, the question of violence and its reflection upon God's character is unavoidable. Some would argue that the book shows no interest in transforming the world, but is only a program for destroying God's enemies.[6] Susan Hylen notes "Most scholarly interpreters treat the violence of Revelation as a problem to be addressed"[7] and John Phelan claims that "any appreciation for Revelation must be tempered by reflections on what some might call the 'dark side' of Revelation."[8] Perhaps one could divide interpreters of Revelation into two general categories: ones who justify how Revelation's violence makes theological and ethical sense, and those who call it out as problematic.[9] Poignantly, Paul Decock asks, "why this divine violence goes hand in hand with the nonviolence of the earthly Jesus and his followers."[10] Now, perhaps this assumes the ministry of the early Jesus was always nonviolent, but it does raise the issue of the violence in Revelation and that often this violence is assumed to originate from either God or Jesus.

Many interpreters understand that God himself is behind the violence in Revelation. These interpreters understand the divine passive—"it was given"—to refer to instances (at least sixteen out of twenty-one) where the divine agent gives permission to inflict harm.[11] For example, many commentators argue that the plagues come from heaven and are not caused by independent powers, but proceed ultimately from the sovereign hand of the one God. Therefore, the logic of *retribution* tends to dominate interpretations of Revelation, as when John J. Collins finds in Revelation "the projection into the future of what was unfulfilled in the past. Jesus did not destroy the wicked in his earthly life, but he would return with supernatural power to complete the task."[12] Tonstad would suggest that such a view is, at least in part, influenced by assigning the book to the apocalyptic genre.

However, along with Anton Vögtle, Tonstad argues that God "is not the only one who is at work in this world—as the Apocalypse makes so abundantly clear."[13] For Tonstad, this is one of the most important observations for interpreting the book. He understands that the devastation which unfolds in the sequence of the seals (6:1–8:1), increases in the sequence of the trumpets (8:2–11:19), and finally is completely unrestrained in the sequence of the bowls (16:1–21), is not an indirect way of

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articulating divine activity. In another publication, Tonstad notes that John goes out of his way not only to show the demonic quality of the action but also to link the action and the acting subject with such clarity that the reader virtually finds the passport, driver's license, fingerprints, and copious amounts of DNA of the acting subject at the scene.[14] And of course, for Tonstad, the acting subject is not God, but demonic agents. He argues that "The calamities of the seal sequence occur at the point where divine *permission* intersects with demonic *commission*" (140). And rather than be understood as Messianic judgments, "The exposé of demonic agency continues in greater detail in two more cycles, the trumpets (8:2–11:19) and the bowls (15:1–16:21)" (140).

Raising the issue of divine permission and its relationship to demonic commission is a helpful and nuanced theological reading of the text. This of course is tricky territory, but territory nonetheless through which pastors must capably and confidently lead their congregants. Though Tonstad does not provide a systematic discussion of God's will vis-à-vis evil at work in the world, the fact that he raises the theological issue will alert pastors and Christian interpreters that the text is actually referring to these necessary theological realities. This is a deft example of connecting "sensory appearance" to the theological "meaning" of the text. Again, the strength here is not so much that Tonstad solves or even attempts to solve the tension as such, but that he raises the issue as a logical consequence of reading the text in the way he has suggested.

The cosmic approach allows Tonstad to read Revelation as an exposé of demonic agency and this understanding of the role of demonic power directly influences the text's depiction of God's reputation. The divine reputation looks better if one sees the calamities of Revelation as unambiguous, unmitigated demonic activity. The implication is that divine permission must be distinguished from divine agency. Though divine permission poses problems of its own, Tonstad claims that these problems are ameliorated by the recognition that the acting subject in Revelation's relentless portrayal of destruction is not God himself, but the demonic.

This is an intriguing and thought-provoking approach to the problem of violence in Revelation and this reviewer appreciates how the cosmic approach provides such an alternative interpretive option. However, it is not clear that Tonstad can substantiate the claim that all problems of divine agency and responsibility are ameliorated by his approach. Though it is a great strength, especially in a commentary, that Tonstad raises the theological issue of divine permission versus demonic commission, the commentary itself does not resolve whether the "divine enablement" or permission refers to a positive or negative activity. Thus, it seems not all the problems are ameliorated. However, the commentary is to be commended because it builds a solid bridge from careful exegesis to thoughtful theological reflection—even if it has not solved the theological problem itself.

The Central Role of The Lamb

A final issue is the centrality of the Lamb: "Then I saw one like a slaughtered lamb standing in the [middle] of the throne and [in the middle] of the four living creatures and [in the middle of] the elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent into all the earth" (Rev 5:6). Tonstad argues that this is the pivotal scene and the foremost revelation in the entire book. The fact that the lamb is standing as slain in the middle of the throne, in the middle of the four living creatures, and in the middle of the elders does not escape Tonstad's notice. He connects a preoccupation with the middle to Ezekiel and concludes:

> This is easily the most critical issue in the book and the key to its theology. To focus on the Lamb that breaks the seals matters more than the content of the seals, especially when we concede that the content, in qualified terms, brings very little that is new. The entrenched scenario of retribution yields the ground to scenes of revelation, and the Revealer is in his own person the one who transforms perceptions. (140).

Corresponding to the concern with God's reputation already noted, Tonstad emphasizes God's way of power is not through violence, but through the absorption and extinguishing of violence in the person of the Lamb.

Revelation's Lamb Christology consists of three major points: 1) he is worthy because he is slaughtered (5:9); 2) the fact that the Lamb is slaughtered is essential to his identity—it is not just something that happens to him, it is constitutive of how he is (5:12; 13:8); and 3) the slaughter is not an image from the sacrificial cult, but one of butchery and murder. Tonstad argues that though often translated "slaughtered," the connotation of the verb is of violence. He notes that the passage announces the lamb "has won the war" (5:5). In the context of battle and warfare, being killed with violence usually indicates defeat, of losing the war, but here, by absorbing violence in himself, the Lamb is the paradoxical winner. Being killed by violence, therefore, is part and parcel of the Lamb's identity (116).

Understood in this way, the Lamb's role in Revelation is revelatory. The slaughtered Lamb appears "in the middle of" the divine throne in heaven (5:6, KJV; cf. 7:17) in order to show that, in Richard Bauckham's words, "Christ's sacrificial death *belongs to the way God rules the world.*"[15] Tonstad adds: "If this is 'the way God rules the world,' we must add that this is how God defeats the opposing side in the cosmic conflict. Looking beyond the symbols, the Lamb that has been 'killed with violence' must be a self-giving person" (116). And it is in this ultimate act of self-giving that God wins the cosmic conflict.

Tonstad's concluding comments are worth quoting in full: "Few images put the Roman paradigm under pressure as much as the idea that the Lamb 'was killed with violence from the foundation of the world' (13:8); few images deserve more to have the final say concerning the theology of the book." Then quoting Leonard Thompson, Tonstad concludes:

> 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 "from the foundation of the world" (13:8; cf. 17:8). The crucifixion is enfolded in the "deep," permanent structure of the seer's vision, and it unfolds in the life of Jesus and those who are his faithful followers (L. Thompson 1990, 85), (216).

This, more than any other example, demonstrates the theological power of the cosmic-conflict view. The relevance of Revelation extends far beyond the mundane events of the first or twenty-first century to the universal

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conflict settled by God's final work in Christ.

However, it is just here that questions arise. First, does this perspective relegate Revelation to an other-worldly and world-denying vision that has little to do with the practical evils encountered by God's people? Perhaps the cosmic view offers a "pie in the sky" salvation rather than a vision for living in the world. Although Tonstad carefully connects his understanding of the text to its historical setting, and at many points he considers how the text relates to contemporary issues, the question remains as to whether his approach too quickly moves past these mundane issues to the cosmic.

Second, there are several questions that will arise regarding how the cosmic view relates to the ways Revelation has traditionally been understood in particular communities. In what ways might the cosmic view be jarring to readers who are more likely to see direct connections between Revelation and current events? The commentary clearly seems to be offered as a guide in helping just these kinds of communities understand Revelation, while holding off unexamined assumptions about the focus and content of the text. There is much in the commentary to appreciate, yet some will find such appreciation hard because Tonstad challenges long-held notions of what Revelation is all about.

These last questions are intended as constructive means of probing the strength and relevance of Tonstad's work. The commentary was a joy to read—well-written and clearly pastoral. Tonstad has provided a commentary that is both accessible (and useful in the church!) and academically rigorous at the same time. For this reviewer, the commentary is an example of the best of scholarship, academic learning put in service of the church.

Endnotes

1. The *Nero Redivivus* legend was a popular belief during the last part of the first century. It held that the Roman emperor Nero would return sometime after his death in AD 68. See, Hans-Josef Klauck, "Do They Never Come Back? *Nero Redivivus* and the Apocalypse of John," *CBQ* 63 (2001): 683–698.

2. Wilhelm Bousset, *Die Offenbarung Johannis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1906), 120.

3. Richard J. Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy* (London: T&T Clark, 1993) 389.

4. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 49. In another publication Tonstad draws attention to Auerbach in this regard.

5. The term is borrowed from Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 3.

6. Catherine Keller, *God and Power: Counter-Apocalyptic Journeys* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 36.

7. Susan Hylen, "Metaphor Matters: Violence and Ethics in Revelation," *CBQ* 73 (2011): 777–96.

8. John E. Phelan Jr., "Revelation, Empire, and the Violence of God," *ExAud* 20 (2004): 66.

9. Hylen, "Metaphor Matters," 777.

10. Paul B. Decock, "Images of War and Creation, of Violence and Non-Violence in the Revelation of John," in *Coping with Violence in the New Testament*, ed. Pieter G. R. De Villiers and Jan Willem van Henten, STAR 16 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 185.

11. The term ἐδόθη is used a total of twenty-one times in Revelation: 6:2; 6:4 (twice); 6:8; 6:11; 7:2; 8:3; 9:1; 9:3; 9:5; 11:1; 11:2; 13:5 (twice); 13:7 (twice); 13:14; 13:15; 16:8; 19:8; 20:4. Five of these occurrences are "positive" (6:11; 8:3; 11:1; 19:8; 20:4), describing privileges given to the redeemed. One is ambivalent (7:2). The remaining instances refer to permission to inflict harm.

12. John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 278.

13. Anton Vögtle, "Der Gott der Apocalypse," in *La Notion biblique de Dieu*, ed. J. Coppens (Gembloux: Éditions J. Duculot, 1976), 383.

14. Sigve K. Tonstad, *Saving God's Reputation: The Theological Function of Pistis Iesou in the Cosmic Narratives of Revelation*, LNTS 337 (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 108–114.

15. Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (NTT; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 64.

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