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WHAT DO RECENT BOOKS *on The Revelation Reveal?*

BY REINDER BRUINSMA

Ranko Stefanovic. *Plain Revelation.* Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2013. 253 pp.

Sigve K. Tonstad. *Revelation (Paideia: Commentaries on the New Testament).* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019. 398 pp.

Herold Weiss. *The End of the Scroll: Biblical Apocalyptic Trajectories.* Gonzalez, FL: Energion Publications, 2020. 349 pp.

Seventh-day Adventists have inherited an enduring fascination with the books of Revelation and Daniel from Protestant interpreters in past centuries, and especially from their Millerite forebears. Countless books have been written about the prophetic messages in those Bible books, which provided important elements for the “present truth” of the “remnant church.” Many of the older books on this topic may still be found on the shelves of Adventist Book Centers, and many evangelists continue to use the Revelation seminars as a tool to recruit new members. On the right fringe of the Church, the traditional views, with their scary end-time scenarios and their aggressive anti-Catholicism—often tied to weird conspiracy theories—continue to hold sway.

Adventist biblical scholars who want to look with new eyes at the traditional views, and publish their findings, tend to face serious hurdles. The official denominational standpoint that the Church’s leadership wants to see

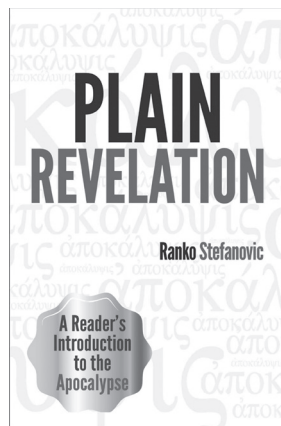
stressed demands that these scholars reject “higher-critical” approaches, strictly apply historicist principles, and follow the trajectory that Ellen G. White solidified into doctrine in *The Great Controversy* and some of her other writings. Many professors at denominational colleges and universities are reluctant to teach courses on Revelation, or, if they speak and write about it, they are very careful, lest they jeopardize their employment status. However, we definitely see developments in Adventist approaches to Daniel and the Revelation. The three books that I review in this article are proof of this; although it is important to note where these books were published. Ranko Stefanovic’s book was published by Andrews University Press, which is less restricted in publishing material that moves somewhat beyond what other presses, like Pacific Press, would feel able to print. Both Sigve Tonstad and Herold Weiss found non-Adventist publishers for their books!

Stefanovic uses the historicist approach and links the Bible text to historical periods, but also allows for a wider application.

Stefanovic: *Plain Revelation*

Dr. Ranko Stefanovic has taught New Testament at Andrews University since 1999. In 2002, Andrews University Press published his *Revelation of Jesus*, a 654-page commentary on the Book of Revelation. Without any doubt, it is one of the most significant Adventist publications on this topic to appear in the last few decades. Writing about the last book of the Bible, Adventist scholars must decide to what extent they want to follow the traditional historicist interpretation. In the introduction to the 2002 edition of his commentary, Ranko Stefanovic noted that he found the historicist approach “sometimes problematic,” because of the difficulty of fitting every detail of the text into a historical fulfillment (11), and, therefore, he did not totally abandon other approaches (preterist, futurist, and idealist), but called for making a case-by-case judgment how the text should govern the interpretation (12). This resulted in substantial negative criticism, and, in the later revised edition, the author somewhat modified this eclectic approach without, however, fully retracting his earlier position. And, although the historicist approach would, to a major extent, guide Stefanovic in his exposition of Revelation, the reader finds that, in many cases, he is not as specific in linking the symbols of Revelation to particular historical events and persons as most traditional Adventists authors.

When the leaders decided that the world Church would study the Book of Revelation during the first quarter of 2019, they turned to Dr. Stefanovic, who was considered one of the Church’s experts on this topic. In the process of preparing his manuscript for worldwide translation, production, and distribution, serious problems emerged, and twice the manuscript was recalled for “major revisions to correct numerous errors.” The main



objections seem to have focused on ensuring that only a strict historicist interpretation would be followed and that the traditional adversity toward Roman Catholicism would be maintained in full vigor.

In 2013, the leadership of Andrews University urged Stefanovic to produce an introduction to his 2002 commentary. Its purpose was to explain Revelation in “plain language.” This book is the first part of this combined review. It stands to reason that its content very much resembles that of Stefanovic’s earlier work.

In the introduction of *Plain Revelation*, the author discusses such elements as authorship, date, and structure, but focuses, in particular, on the various interpretative schools. He concludes that they all are inadequate, but that the historicist approach “does the best job of discovering the Revelation’s message for all generations, even until the end of the age” (16). This includes also the rule concerning prophetic time, in which a day is believed to stand for a year.

Right from the beginning, Stefanovic emphasized that the theme of John’s book is that “the Revelation is Jesus Christ” (22). It is “gospel as much as the four gospels are” (23). The purpose of the Apocalypse is not to provide us with a “fortune-telling book. Nor are these prophecies given to satisfy our obsessive curiosity about the future. Their primary purpose is to assure us of Jesus’s presence with His people, throughout history and its final events” (25).

The treatment of the letters to the seven churches (chapters 2 and 3) follows the interpretation that Adventists have traditionally espoused; the messages apply to seven periods of Christian history: from Ephesus, which stands for the apostolic first-century church, to Laodicea, which pictures a church that is “self-sufficient and lukewarm, struggling with its authenticity. Christ’s warning to this church has a far-reaching implication for all who are part of that church at the closing period of this earth’s history” (65). It is noteworthy that the author refrains from making a direct application to the Adventist Church. Furthermore, every one of these messages is also applicable to other churches and to “different types of Christians in certain

periods of history and locations” (42).

In Revelation chapters 4 and 5, the focus is on how Christ has overcome the evil one and joins the Father on his throne. The next chapter, about the seven seals, describes God’s people in the process of overcoming, so that they may share the throne with Jesus, which culminates in chapter 7, where we see how God’s people share the throne with Jesus (74).

The sealed scroll is a symbolic reference to the divine plan of salvation, which is gradually “unsealed” in the time between John’s writing and the Second Coming (76). Seals 1–4 picture “the means God uses to keep His people on track”; seal 5 refers to God’s people being “harmed and martyred by hostile enemies”; while seals 6 and 7 concern God who comes “in judgment against those who harmed his people.”

“There is a correlation between the seven seals and different epochs in Christian history,” but “it is important not to limit the realities of the four horsemen (seals 1–4) to one particular period” (92). This parallels the approach to the seven churches; Stefanovic uses the historicist approach and links the Bible text to historical periods, but also allows for a wider application. This is seen time and again in his commentary, but the historicist interpretation is dominant. And thus, the supernatural events connected with the opening of the sixth seal are linked to the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, the “dark day” in New England of May 19, 1780, and the meteor shower of November 13, 1833 (96).

The seven trumpets “refer to God’s intervention in history in response to the prayers of His oppressed people.” They are a warning that the final judgment will come. Like the churches and the seals, they cover all of Christian history (110). But, while Stefanovic attaches timeslots to the first four trumpets, the temporal application of the sixth and seventh trumpet is not specified—in stark contrast with many earlier Adventist commentaries. However, in chapter 11 the traditional historicist interpretation returns.

With chapter 12 we are at the core of the Revelation: the great cosmic controversy between Christ and his church and Satan and his rebellious allies. John refers to the beginning of the controversy—the war in heaven—and points to the efforts of Satan to kill the Redeemer and, later, to persecute the church. Chapter 13 introduces the powers that Satan enlists in his devious campaign against the people of God. The beast from the sea,

which is identical with Daniel’s little horn, is identified as the medieval church (157). The “deadly wound” that is inflicted on the beast symbolizes the serious reduction of the power of Roman Catholicism at the time of the French Revolution (158). Stefanovic remains much vaguer about what comes next. “The religious-political power that Satan used in the Middle Ages, which came to an end in the French Revolution, will rise again and exercise its oppressive power over the world at the end of time” (158). The “beast from the earth” is identified (in just a short paragraph) as the United States of America. It will play a key role in the distribution of the “mark of the beast,” which is a sign of allegiance to the Satanic forces. Sunday observance will eventually become that “mark” (164). The traditional Adventist interpretation of 666 as a Latin title of the pope is rejected. The number has a Babylonian connotation and refers symbolically to “humanity apart from God” (167).

After this, the pace of the book picks up. The author needs only about seventy pages to deal with the last nine chapters of Revelation. From a traditional Adventist perspective there are but few surprises. He interprets the judgment in the message of the first angel as the pre-Advent judgment (175). “Babylon,” in the message of the second angel, represents “the satanic trinity” (Satan, the beast from the sea, and the beast from the earth)—an expression that several Adventist interpreters have begun to use (175). The seven plagues of Revelation 16 are “reserved exclusively for those who rejected God and received the mark of the beast” (183). We must expect these future plagues to be literal but should be reluctant to be specific about the details (186). However, somewhat inconsistently, the battle of Armageddon is clearly spiritual (196, 207).

John continues with a section about the Fall of Babylon. This is followed by a depiction of the contrasting futures for the saved and the lost through the image of the two suppers, and by Christ’s glorious Second Coming, and the thousand-year period—with Satan bound, the earth in utter chaos and the saints in heaven, and the execution of the final judgement at the end of the thousand years. Finally, John gives glimpses of the recreated new earth, with its capital, the new Jerusalem. Contrary to the symbolic interpretation of “Babylon,” this cube-form city will be “a real place inhabited by real people” (237). The Revelation ends with an affirmation of the Second Coming.

This “introduction” to the author’s more comprehensive commentary on the Revelation might, perhaps, be better characterized as an *abbreviated* edition of the commentary, since it offers far more than just an introduction. Whether the reader of the book feels that it does full justice to its title (*Plain Revelation*) probably depends on whether or not he/she has an Adventist background. For a novice in apocalyptic subjects, it may pose quite a challenge.

Stefanovic is in line with other recent Adventist authors who wrote books on the Revelation (e.g., Jon Paulien and Jacques Doukhan and, to a lesser extent, Norman Gulley) in being more circumspect in referring to historical events and persons than earlier generations of interpreters were. Direct references to Roman Catholicism and negative comments about other churches are avoided and sensationalist speculation about end-time events are left to writers and DVD-producers on the right fringe of the Church. But, as we shall see below, Stefanovic’s views differ very much from those of Sigve Tonstad and Herold Weiss.

Sigve K. Tonstad, *Revelation*

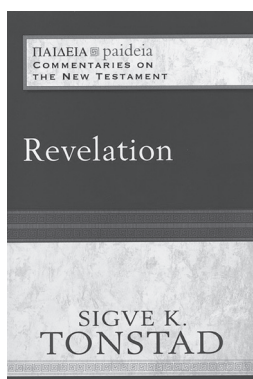
Sigve Tonstad, who hails from Norway, is a medical doctor as well as a creative and competent New Testament scholar. He earned his doctorate in theology from St. Andrews University in Scotland. In recent years, he taught at the School of Religion of Loma Linda University. Tonstad has written a number of thought-provoking books. His most notable publications are a book on the Sabbath (*The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day*, Andrews University Press, 2009) and a commentary on the Book of Romans (*The Letter to the Romans: Paul Among the Ecologists*, Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2016). But he has also written numerous articles (notably in *Spectrum*) and is active on Facebook, where he frequently publishes poems. He is one of the truly innovative thinkers in Adventism, for whom I have a great admiration.

Many Adventist readers may wonder

whether Tonstad’s book *Revelation* is in fact an *Adventist* commentary, or how it should be classified. Tonstad was invited to write the commentary for the *Paideia: Commentaries on the New Testament* “that sets out to comment on the final form of the New Testament text in a way that pays due attention both to the cultural, literary, and theological settings in which the text took form and to the interests of the contemporary readers to whom the commentaries are addressed” (p. ix in the Foreword to Tonstad’s book). The series is aimed students in theological studies programs, seminarians, and upper-division undergraduates.

Tonstad does not follow one of the traditional models for interpreting the Revelation, applying it neither to the first century, with the Roman Empire as the great villain, nor to the end of time with some monstrous Antichrist as the world’s ruler. He shies away from the view that sees the prophecies of the Apocalypse fulfilled in the course of history and puts the papacy in a sinister “beastly” role. That certainly is a break with the Adventist tradition. In doing so, he follows a path where many of his scholarly colleagues in the Church still fear to tread. Openly denying the historicist approach to the Revelation usually spells trouble for Adventist theologians who work within an Adventist academic environment, even though many of them have their doubts about the validity of many of the traditional explanations of the prophecies of Daniel and the Revelation.

To follow this non-orthodox path was a difficult choice, considering the fact that Tonstad was connected with the School of Religion at Loma Linda University when he wrote his commentary (and continues to have this connection). Would he come under heavy criticism from church leaders and conservative Adventist academics, who regard the historicist approach as a *sine qua non* for denominationally employed scholars? Tonstad is to be admired for his courage to deviate from the traditional Adventist approach and suggest a different way of



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understanding the Apocalypse. However, it may well be argued that Tonstad's commentary is definitely within the Adventist tradition. It consistently emphasizes how the great controversy theme is the thread that runs through this entire Bible book. He sees one overarching theme in John's revelation: the great conflict between God and Satan, God's accuser, whom he refers to as the *Mudslinger* (23).

Tonstad is not a historicist, but neither is he a preterist or futurist. He is adamant that Revelation "does not specify a certain roadmap of events" but "claims a temporal horizon that covers all of history, past, present and future" (28). After careful analysis, Tonstad concludes that the content of Revelation "surpasses historical contingencies" (xiii). What it describes is much bigger than the exploits of the Roman Empire, and Emperor Nero in particular, and the characterization of the false worship that Revelation focuses on cannot be made to fit the historical realities of the cult of emperor worship (5–11). The perspective in Revelation is cosmic rather than Roman (19).

After addressing such introductory matters as authorship and date, language and literary structure, and the role of Old Testament allusions, the book takes us, section by section, through the text of Revelation, often providing the author's own translation of the Greek original. The message of Revelation is addressed to the seven churches, which are "types and representatives of the condition, needs and aspirations of the church universal" (54). The issues that John enumerates in these letters are "internal, intra-Christian issues" and have been relevant throughout Christian history (101).

After these first chapters, the reader is introduced to the heavenly drama of the opening of the scroll, which is sealed with seven seals. The subject matter of the scroll is one of "the most vexing realities in human experience" (103). It shows the archenemy at work. God allows the *Mudslinger* to take away the peace from the world and to show his true colors (125). But this permission is only "temporary and apparent" (128). The seals show "what happens to the cosmos if God steps away" (129).

Revelation 7 reports that the saints are "sealed." Tonstad argues that "to receive the seal of the living God is best understood as an inward matter" (132). It is a prelude to the "homecoming of the 144,000 and the great multitude" of the saved. The "exposé of the demonic agency then continues in greater detail in two

more cycles" (140), namely that of the trumpets and the bowls with the plagues.

Wherever the *Mudslinger* "moves, destruction and mayhem follow" (148). The trumpets show "a power at work other than God. The author of the Revelation spares no effort to bring out the demonic identity of this power" (171). The bowls with the plagues, in chapter 16, parallels the "trumpet sequence point by point, except for being more severe" (217).

Chapters 12 through 14 are the center of the Revelation. Tonstad's chapter that deals with these chapters is appropriately titled "The Cosmic Conflict from A to Z" (174). There is no tidy timeline (179) for this battle of ideas (180). We should refrain from attempts to put historical labels on the demonic powers that are depicted. Even the "number of the beast" does not allow for that. "The number 666 signifies an imitation that is stunning incompleteness" and shows "the fake, ersatz character" of the demonic project (198). The modern reader must always remember that "Revelation operates at the level of symbols and representations. Drawing lines from the symbols to historical realities is a fraught enterprise, as all dominant schools of interpretation prove" (215).

In chapters 17 and 18, the story of the dragon's war against "the woman" and "the rest of her offspring" continues, with an alliance of political entities (the beast and Babylon, "the seductress-in-chief" (266). However, this is followed by the good news of Revelation, with the marriage feast of the Lamb, the arrival of the Rider on a white horse, who is "called Faithful and Truth," and the ensuing judgment over the wicked. Then follows the millennium of chapter 20 and the arrival of a new creation. Satan's plot of deceit is coming to its end and the "final showdown in the cosmic conflict will take place" (289). In the end, there will be a "new" world, which is more easily described in terms of what will no longer be, than in terms of what this renewed reality will be like (304). "The earth is damaged, but it is not doomed. Revelation does not envision a replacement earth. *Renewed* is the meaning of *new*, *healed* is the remedy for *broken*. Even more important, *heaven* is not the address at journey's end. The final address, resoundingly, is *earth*" (305).

Tonstad has had the courage to read the Revelation with new eyes. The book he has written gives evidence, page after page, that he is thoroughly conversant with the

relevant literature. After carefully weighing the different viewpoints, he proposes his own interpretations, which results in a fascinating book, full of new insights. If his views will not replace the more traditional views of an Adventist reader, at the very least they will deepen his understanding of the spiritual meaning of this often so enigmatic part of the Scriptures.

Herold Weiss: *The End of the Scroll*

The third book in this combined review differs in many ways from the other two. Where the studies of Ranko Stefanovic and Sigve Tonstad deal exclusively with the Book of Revelation, *The End of the Scroll: Biblical Apocalyptic Trajectories* by Herold Weiss devotes just under forty pages to the last book of the Bible. The aim of Weiss is to analyze all Bible books that have a significant interest in apocalypics, and to sketch the different approaches that are taken by the different biblical authors.

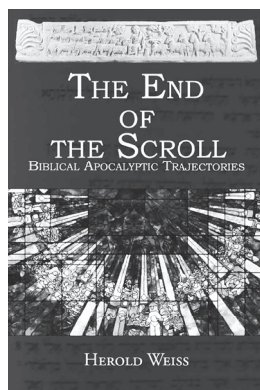
The fact that Weiss follows the consensus of most New Testament scholars about the dating and authorship of the New Testament writings, rather than adhering to the conservative views of traditional Adventist scholarship, with its dislike for the methods of historical-criticism, was no surprise to me. When I attended the theological seminary at Andrews University in the academic year 1965–1966, I thoroughly enjoyed the class in New Testament Introduction, which was team-taught by Sakae Kubo, Earle Hilgert, and Herold Weiss, who was the youngest of this gifted trio. All three of them came under heavy criticism and left Andrews University at the end of that academic year. Kubo was demoted to a post in the seminary library of Andrews University, and Hilgert and Weiss went to pursue their academic careers elsewhere: at St Mary's College (Notre Dame University) and McCormick Seminary, respectively.

It was in their class that I first became acquainted with the views of most scholars regarding the origin and development of the biblical (especially New Testament) writings. In his tracing of the apocalyptic trajectories in

the Bible, Weiss follows what he considers the most likely chronological sequence. After looking at apocalyptic sections in the prophetic writings, with special attention for Jeremiah, Deutero-Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah, he takes the reader to the “Book of the Watchers.” This apocalyptic document is incorporated in the First Book of Enoch, which most Protestants now consider as apocryphal, but was very popular among early Christians, and related to 1 and 2 Peter and the letter of Jude. From there, the author moves on to Daniel, an unknown writer who tried to establish his credentials through Daniel's reputation, whom (unsurprisingly) he dates in the second century BC, in the time of the troubles caused by the Seleucid king Antiochus Epiphanes IV.

Weiss recognizes only seven letters as Pauline (Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon.) The other letters traditionally attributed to Paul, the essay that was addressed to “the Hebrews,” and the “general” letters, which are mostly dated later in the first century or even a little later, follow, after the “apocalyptic trajectories” of the three synoptic gospels have been discussed. And towards the end of this apocalyptic tour through the Bible, the book of Revelation is put under the magnifying glass.

Throughout the book, Weiss points to several common characteristics of the apocalyptic Bible portions. But his main intention is not to search for similarities, but to show how apocalyptic thinking developed as circumstances changed. His fundamental thesis is that the apocalyptic writers did not have foretelling the future as their goal. They want “to tell confused believers who cannot make sense of their present in a fallen world to persevere with patience so as to receive their just award in the end” (28, 29). The “trajectories,” which are sketched in different times, under differing circumstances, differ significantly from each other. In the earlier Old Testament apocalyptic texts, the focus tends to be on Israel's national restoration, often after dramatic end-time military battles. Although we find as a common thread in the various apocalyptic agendas that God is just and powerful, Paul's apocalyptic theology “does not culminate in gory battles with armies led by a Dragon coming out of a bottomless pit, but in the love of God that never ends” (132). “His apocalypticism is radically transformed by his certainty of the resurrection of Christ as the already established foundation of the New Creation” (127). The author of Hebrews draws the future



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into the present and emphasizes how the believer can already access the new reality, in which Christ as the High Priest officiates in a heavenly sanctuary (152). For John the Revelator, the conflict that is going on is not a cosmic conflict. The battle is in the minds of the people who must decide whether or not they are going to worship the beast and its image (259).

In the section that is devoted to the Book of Revelation, there is very little that reminds the reader of the traditional Adventist interpretation of this Bible book. Weiss disagrees with the basic premise of both Stefanovic and Tonstad. Weiss does not mention the term preterism, but in fact he supports a form of preterism. John does not write for later generations. “To read the Book of Revelation as a chart with which to find the meaning of historical events in the twenty-first century, or in any previous century, is a travesty of its message” (289). This applies to the other “apocalyptic trajectories” as well; their goal is not to offer an escape from present hardships, or inform about the future, but to provide “guidance for how to live well in the present” (334). John wrote for his contemporaries in the Roman world of emperor worship and periods of persecution. He wanted to “give comfort and warnings to those who are being tested and have to decide who they are going to worship” (264). God is just and is powerful. The “throne” is the central icon of the Revelation. And believers have received the promise that they will sit on the throne of the Lamb and rule over the nations (281).

What does an Adventist reader take away from reading Weiss’s fascinating book? The way in which the author explains how “apocalyptic trajectories” change over time and must always be understood against the background of the time in which the prophets spoke and wrote, is something members of the Adventist Church do not always realize. And when reading the book of Daniel and John’s Apocalypse it is important to appreciate that their messages are first and

foremost not to predict a future end-time scenario, but to assure God’s people that God is in charge and will ensure that, “in the end,” justice and divine mercy will prevail.

I do not claim to have the expertise to judge whether all standpoints of the three authors whose books I reviewed are fully defensible. However, I applaud any attempt, by any Adventist scholar, to take a fresh look at this part of the Bible that is so important to our faith community. For those who want to survey the “official” Adventist position, but have it presented in a more positive, irenic, and spiritual way than they find in many older books, *Plain Revelation* by Ranko Stefanovic is highly recommended. For those who are willing to be challenged with respect to what they used to hear, and who perhaps have wondered what alternative approaches to Revelation might appeal to them, and which they might find intellectually more acceptable, the two other books have much to offer. I hope these books will stimulate many of my fellow Adventist believers to take a new look at old views and traditions and gain a new understanding of which are relevant for their spiritual journey in the twenty-first century.



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