

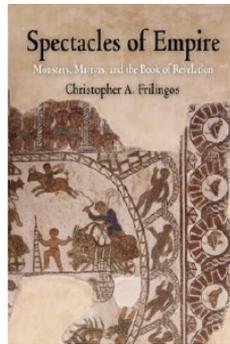
## ○ REVIEW OF CHRISTOPHER A. FRILINGOS' *SPECTACLES OF EMPIRE*

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Milena Kirova reviews Christopher A. Frilingos' *Spectacles of Empire: Monsters, Martyrs, and the Book of Revelation* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University Of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).



In his sophisticated revision of a dissertation, Christopher Frilingos has produced a book, *Spectacles of Empire*, which is representative of the new academic trends in New Testament studies. In other words, his book is exemplary for the new cultural awareness of the West that took place in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century within the frames of a paradigm, which we – for the sake of clarity – often call ‘postmodern’. The frequent use of concepts such as *desire, gaze, subjectivity, production of knowledge, discourse...* unmistakably disposes the study in the lines, initiated by Michel Foucault and developed further in French New Historicism and in certain streams of postcolonial and gender studies.

*Spectacles of Empire* is culturally oriented, historically sensitive, intelligent, excellently written, with a confidence that sometimes leaves no room for healthy suspicion. Although the text is scientifically proficient, the book remains an engaging presentation that is interesting not only for the biblical scholars, but also for a broader audience of students in the Humanities. It delivers clearly the insurmountable break up between science and belief as well as the purposeful unwillingness of the new academy to abide by the canons of religious thinking. Frilingos’ reading is not far from what devoted Christians would call a ‘blasphemy’. The author deconstructs the ideological boundaries of the religious text; he denies its uniqueness and makes explicit its intimacy with other, ‘pagan’ cultural mechanisms and suggestions that are undoubtedly out of place in light of the orthodox belief.

Precisely what kind of ‘blasphemy’ – or, at least, anti-traditional character – does the book carry? In methodological aspect, it convinces that no text can/must be comprehended and considered beyond the general cultural context of its time, since even the most idiosyncratic poetics derive from the broader strategies and mechanisms, which dominate the invention of meanings in a certain epoch. In historical aspect, Frilingos’ work includes *Revelation* in the cultural practices

that are specific for the greatest enemy of Early Christianity – Imperial Rome. According to the traditional scholarly consensus in New Testament studies the ideological and poetic strength of the Apocalypse stems from its fiery opposition to the Roman world, from the rejection of everything ‘Roman’ for the sake of one completely new worldview and world viewing practices. Frilingos begins from quite different premises: in the poetic system of John’s work – overpowered by images of monsters and martyrs – he detects writing techniques and reading desires that were formed and caught fire in the spectacles of the Roman world.

It is from the Roman spirit of spectacle precisely, that *Revelation* inherits a specific dialectic of desires in the act of viewing: ‘Ancient spectators, seated in an arena or ‘standing far off’ as ‘Babylon’ burns (Rev.18:9) frequently discovered that they had themselves become part of the performance’ (2). Considering this process of viewing/participating constructs the identity of the viewer, we might move toward the deduction that early Christian identity (far from being unique) had been produced through ‘pagan’, ‘imperial’ techniques and cultural strategies.

John’s *Revelation* – like all of Roman culture – privileges the sight; its ‘textual viewers’ are persistently watching out and reacting to the ‘apocalyptic shows’; what is more, they not only gaze upon but also take part in ‘the gruesome tableaux’ according to the principle of religious identification, and in harmony with their social upbringing. The culture of each epoch is a complete mechanism, a system for production of meanings and identities in which vastly different kinds of textuality can interrelate and work together in a common direction and with a common goal. That way it comes out that the Christian Apocalypse suggests meanings and builds up structures of identities in a general format with spectacles such as the staged hunts of wild beasts, the public execution of criminals and prisoners of war, or the gladiators’ combats. It is this ‘mixing up’ of ideological traditions that would seem an unbearable profanation of faith to many Christian readers of Frilingos. Naturally, the author displays his analogies relating to other literary works: the Greek romance, the Roman novel, Christian stories of martyrs but also the imperial cult - the practice of exhibiting images of the Roman emperors and their families, the Sebastoi. It is true that Frilingos aims for analogies, which predominantly gravitate to the centre of the Roman Imperial culture, but the work could have also opened a door to the earlier Jewish tradition to which *Revelation* is inseparably linked. It would have been plain then that the obsession with viewing derives to a not lesser degree from that tradition. An almost random example would be the apocryphal Book of Enoch. Its first part is structured as a crossway of different viewing angles and strategies: the main character, Enoch, watches the wonders of the world, guided by angels; the Heavenly Watchers have the duty of constant gazing upon the earth; God watches everybody and everything from his fiery throne... John’s *Revelation* is not only a ‘Roman produced’ text; the ‘Roman’ more often works interactively with other traditions, including those from different epochs. This strongly emphasises the polyphony of his suggestions. It is the cultural polyphony precisely that eludes Frilingos’ research – not because of insufficient efforts on his side, but because of the methodological line, which he follows very strictly.

Soon after the opening chapters, in which the dominant problematic is the one of viewing, the second thematic direction emerges. It concerns the representations of masculinity in *Revelation* and the production of gendered subjectivity by means of them. The ‘gender line’ is focused on the image of the Lamb – central for *Revelation* as well as for Frilingos’ metatext. John’s Lamb turns out to be a figure of deep ambiguity. On one side, ‘standing as if slain’, it seems to contradict an ideal of manliness based on domination’ (76). Its open wound, its body – pierced and exposed

to viewing and curiosity – suggest passivity and effeminacy; s/he is among the martyrs of the text. However, the sacred strength and honour it is assigned to, ‘stands at odds with its physical bearing’ (76). The Lamb, what is more, possesses a hyper ability of watching – it is viewing the eternal agonies of the tormented sinners. The seven eyes which crown the body ‘as if slain’, make him rank among the monsters of the text. It is obvious that the s/he figure of the Lamb presupposes a significant deviation from the traditional representations of the masculine-feminine opposition. ‘Precisely by juxtaposing these contrasting images, John forges a symbol of conquest by sacrificial death, which is essentially a new symbol’ – this is what another interpreter of the book says.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, defying the uniqueness of John’s mythological representation, Frilingos asserts that his symbol ‘parallels in striking ways other figures of masculinity to be found in the texts and institutions of the Roman Empire, which all traded on the capacity of viewing relations to problematize masculinity’ (77). Old and new, tradition and scientific experiment may probably converge, if we draw an amenable conclusion: while creating a new tradition, *Revelation* at the same time puts to tension the borders of its own cultural context; it goes beyond the codes of what counts as ‘Roman’, but after all even this experiment turns out to be ‘genetically’ implanted in the symbolical productivity of the epoch.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Bauckham, Richard J. 1993. *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies in the Book of Revelation*. Edinburgh: T and T Clark, p. 183.