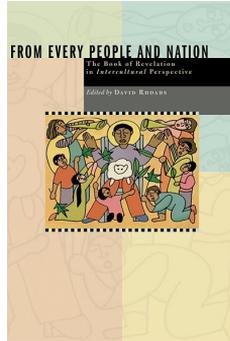


○ REVIEW OF DAVID RHOADS, *FROM EVERY PEOPLE AND NATION: THE BOOK OF REVELATION IN INTERCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE*

Robun Park, Vanderbilt University



From Every People and Nation, a collaboration of New Testament scholars and theologians, brings together a wide diversity of cultural interpretations of the Book of Revelation for today. The origins and purposes of the volume are explained in an extended preface by the editor, David Rhoads.

The volume embodies key proceedings from the conference of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago in the spring of 2001, entitled ‘The Bible in a Multicultural Context: Reading the Book of Revelation from Your Place.’ The number and range of contributors was expanded, however, from the original number at the conference to provide a wider engagement from different worlds, cultures and genders such that it builds up to the ten contributors currently residing and teaching in the United States and Canada. As the subtitle indicates, the present volume emerges from a particular and unifying focus in mind – that is, reading *Revelation* in a cross-cultural perspective.

The volume is mostly tied to the model for reading the Bible with others, seeking to address a diverse cultural reality in biblical interpretation and discern its ethical and religious ramifications. According to Rhoads, reading from one’s own time and space can be highly rewarding, insofar as it empowers people ‘to clarify their own cultural location and thereby find their distinctive voice in reading and interpreting the Bible’ (2). For the most part, the commentators seek to disclose their own contexts and the native cultures from which they read the Bible and to reveal the significance of aspects of the biblical text that readers in other worlds have often taken for granted or overlooked. By reading with others from diverse social locations, readers should be able to learn from them and in so doing to be transformed in the process.

The volume compares and contrasts the differing ways people make sense of the same biblical book, undertaking both comparative and transformative explorations. It is comparative because such engagement acknowledges a multiplicity of readings which does not confront readers with an ‘imperative’ objectivity. The reading model not only brings to light readings from other cultures

and social locations, but challenges ‘the political, economic, social, and religious hegemony both within U.S. society and from the West generally’ (11). It is also transformative because each reading involves making explicit meanings and challenges that emerge as the commentator reads the biblical text from the present and also reads the present from the biblical text. Especially when analogy from the ancient text and context takes shape or even breaks down, ‘something unexpected’ should occur anew in every aspect of life, including both ‘personal’ and social-cultural dimensions.

Such a comparative and transformative approach reveals that several interpretations might be equally legitimate and plausible. Because it does not hide the self and its worlds, each reading becomes more critical, as indeed it should be. This model touches upon the coalition of cross-cultural and trans-historical experiences, which does not pretend to attempt any interpretation for all situations, alongside the dominant ideologies such as imperialism and colonialism. As such, the volume foregrounds the ideology of the text that ‘does not serve the interests of the Empire or those inside and outside the churches who cooperate with the Empire’ (21). The cultural/social location of the Seer and his audience should serve as a construct to enhance the dialogical imagination between the present and the future.

In Chapter One, ‘The Witness of Active Resistance: The Ethics of *Revelation* in African American Perspective’, Brian Blount undertakes an inter(con)textual reading of *Revelation* with African American slave narratives and spirituals. By focusing on the apocalyptic language of resistance in *Revelation* as understood by the slaves in their time, Blount proposes an ethics for African Americans today that promotes resistance over and against the oppressive culture in America and envisions the authentic engagement necessary to transform the present world. Chapter Two features Justo González’s reading of *Revelation* in a Hispanic/Cuban American Perspective. In ‘*Revelation*: Clarity and Ambiguity’, González recognizes himself as in a dual situation of the dominant culture and of a worldwide Christianity that challenges the existing geopolitical and economic order. For him, the issues of ambivalence emerge not from the text itself, but from the readers’ ambivalence about Revelation and its challenge of life and discipleship.

In Chapter Three, ‘Coming Out of Babylon: A First-World Reading of *Revelation* Among Immigrants’, Harry Maier illuminates the experience of his hybrid German and Canadian identity. Reading *Revelation* among immigrants, especially as they are adapting themselves to the capitalism of society, might fall into the embrace of what increasingly appears to be Western capitalist comfort. However, the experience of the double identity of an immigrant should foster hearing ‘what the Spirit says to the churches.’ Chapter Four, ‘Polishing the Unclouded Mirror: A Womanist Reading of *Revelation* 18:13’, by Clarice J. Martin, details the stories of African American women in the mirror of John’s critique of the commodification of humans by the Roman Empire. Those parallels might be confirmed when reading with the oppressed and marginalized, insofar as the interpreter discerns the Seer’s writing as a minority protest against the harsh realities under the Empire.

Chapter Five, ‘Power and Worship: *Revelation* in African Perspective’, describes the worship of God so richly displayed in *Revelation*. In an appreciation of worship as the heart of an African reading of *Revelation*, James Chukwuma Okoye underlines the question that takes place behind the activity of worship: ‘Who indeed is in charge of this world?’ Worship can be a life-giving or life-threatening event, and true worship of God is always a threat to imperialists and rulers. Chapter Six, ‘The Heroine and the Whore: The *Apocalypse of John* in Feminist Perspective’,

draws on insights from studies of fantasy literature. Utopian political fantasy, presented as if liberating, cathartic, and revolutionary, condones oppression and marginalization inasmuch as the texts leave the women as stereotypes of good and evil and not real flesh-and-blood women. Tina Pippin shows how John's visions of an alternative world failed to purvey the destruction of the oppressive forces against women and thus perpetuated the degraded female figures, whether good or evil, heroine or whore.

Chapter Seven, 'Reading the *Apocalypse*: Resistance, Hope, and Liberation in Central America', draws upon ten hermeneutic keys for the interpretation of *Revelation*, which reveals its political theology. Pablo Richard encourages believer-readers to discover their own practice and conscience inside the present empire as well as the ethical and spiritual power transmitted by the Letter to build a new heaven and a new earth. Chapter Eight, 'For the Healing of the World: Reading *Revelation* Ecologically', proposes the perspective of earth-healing as a means to address our present global environmental justice crisis. Barbara Rossing declines the escapist and violent rhetoric of Left Behind and reclaims *Revelation's* vision as a source of liberation. For Rossing, a visionary ethics of Revelation includes a New Jerusalem with its river of life and a tree of life that is a healing for the nations.

Chapter Nine, '*Revelation* 13: Between the Colonial and the Postcolonial: A Reading from Brazil', details Vitor Westhelle's experience of Bible study with displaced and landless peasants in Brazil. During the late 1980s while serving as a pastoral worker, Westhelle observes a transition from colonialism to postcolonialism such that the oppressed should use the tactics of dissimulation to carve out space for resistance. For Westhelle, Revelation engages in such dissimulation as a tactic in the in-between state of apocalyptic. Chapter Ten, 'Hope for the Persecuted, Cooperation with the State, and Meaning for the Dissatisfied', draws upon the changing social and political situations in China since the era of Mao Tse-tung. In three consecutive readings, Khiok-Khng Yeo shows how different interpretations of *Revelation* are equally plausible and legitimate. For those who resisted in the face of state persecution, the letter serves as a source of comfort and empowerment. For those who sought cooperation with the Chinese state and a fragment of Christian vision therein, *Revelation* becomes a site of mystery proving a message of hope and ambiguity. For those who seek meaning in the midst of capitalist seduction and democratic utopia, the letter offers a vision of renewal and a promise of the future claiming the people of God.

The present volume is significant on various counts. First, from the standpoint of biblical criticism, the volume makes clear that the interpretive stance it proposes does not retain the hierarchical bias of scientific criticism and its objective discipline, which privileges the reading of specialized or knowledgeable readers, but rather it assumes the multiplicity of interpretations that search for ethical accountability and contextual responsiveness. Thus, one's socio-cultural location cannot be essentialized or generalized over that of other colonial subjects in another global time and space.

Second, the biblical text, as the readers' foremost dialogue partner, becomes a place of mystery such that each time a reader reads the text from her place, a new perspective emerges. The believer-readers are empowered to sharply revision their own scripture and their cultural, social, political, and theological traditions. Third, the volume provides compelling evidence for the ethical and religious power of a contextual hermeneutic. While each reader's socio-cultural location is variegated and intricate in terms of benefits and loss of privilege and becomes complicated by

the fluidity and complexity of identities, intercultural Bible study brings to the fore the need for re-evaluating in *each* situation the interpretations of the Bible.