



Delorme, Jean, and Isabelle Donegani

L'Apocalypse de Jean: Révélation pour le temps de la violence et du désir

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Most would agree that the book of Revelation stands out from the rest of the New Testament due to its dense yet often bizarre imagery. There may be slightly less agreement with regard to the consequences to be drawn from this observation. A majority of commentators would try to “decipher,” as it were, the imagery of Revelation, to find out what John “really meant” or what historical events, persons, and circumstances he might have alluded to. This is what a mind that is at home in historical-critical thinking would usually do with such a text. The two-volume commentary under review, however, takes a somewhat different approach.

The volume is the result of a collaboration (since 1998) of the late Jean Delorme (1920–2005), professor at the Catholic University of Lyons, and Isabelle Donegani, who finally revised the manuscript for publication. It comes with a “préface” (1:23–26) and a “postface” (2:225–234) by Jean Calloud (Catholic University of Lyons, Centre pour l’analyse du discours religieux), with some additional reflections on a semiotic approach to texts in general and to the book of Revelation in particular.

The semiotic approach taken by Delorme–Donegani takes its starting point from the methodological option for a consistently synchronic reading. Thus there is not, as there

would be in rather “conventional” historical-critical commentaries, an introductory chapter with discussions of the literary unity, authorship, date, place of composition, and so on. It becomes clear, however, that Delorme–Donegani understand Revelation as a text that is open to and wants to address readers at all times in all places. If this were just a methodological option, one could call it arbitrary, but the point is being made with reference to the framing parts of the book: the preface (Rev 1:1–3) comes without a particular address—different from the subsequent letter opening (1:4), to be sure—and the final greeting, “The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all” (22:21), equally opens the communication to include readers far beyond the seven communities addressed in 1:4.

Similarly, Delorme–Donegani are by no means inclined to interpret the series of plagues in chapters 6–9; 16 in terms of historical reference, as if these visions could find a satisfactory explanation as peculiar reports about climatic and seismic conditions in the first century. What is more, such a “historicizing” reading of these visions reveals, according to Delorme–Donegani, “une lecture obsessionnelle et insensible à la qualité poétique du texte” (1:214). The same is true for the colorful representations of the beasts from the sea and from the land (Rev 13): what John presents to his readers goes far beyond any historical identification (2:35). This is supported by the recapitulative structure of the series of visions and by the change of imagery used to spell out the same thing, that is, Babylon’s demise in Rev 17 and in Rev 18 (2:86). The question of historical reference in the book of Revelation is an issue that does deserve thorough reflection: it is true that Revelation is to be interpreted as a book written at a certain point in history and dealing with certain historical circumstances, but in many commentaries and studies on this book, one can get the impression that its visions are read as fairly direct representations of the circumstances in which John and his communities lived—somewhat in the footsteps of W. M. Ramsay. What not a few historical-critical commentators seem to neglect at times is indeed the literary, poetic quality of Revelation that allows for some overstatement if not caricaturing: Producing an *apo-kalypsis*, John does not intend just to describe the world and its mechanisms but to unveil it for what it really is. If this is the case, one should not expect too much direct historical reference in this book. Thus, Delorme–Donegani present a reading of Revelation that mainly interprets the book of Revelation by itself or in relation to the Old Testament, that is, an intrabiblical reading. However, even thus they cannot avoid the occasional reference to the world outside the text, as in the explanation of “gospel” in Rev 14:6 (2:44).

Apart from the question of historical referentiality, Delorme–Donegani repeatedly point out that, in Revelation, the possibilities of language are stretched to the breaking point. Revelation is the attempt to communicate what is properly unspeakable. This becomes evident already in the throne-room vision (Rev 4–5), but also in the description of the

New Jerusalem (21:10–27), where John uses different sets of imagery (“langage”) in order to approximate the point he wishes to make.

On the whole, it is the openness of Revelation that makes this text so appealing to the reader. In the subtitle, the commentary is designated as a book “pour le temps de la violence et du désir,” and several chapters introduce the motif of desire. However, this seems to be somewhat arbitrary until one has reached the interpretation of Rev 22. According to Delorme–Donegani, the rather reticent description—one could even say nondescription—of the wedding feast of the Lamb as well as the openness of the book’s ending serve to strengthen the reader’s desire: the things to be hoped for are not just presented as something given but rather pointed to sufficiently to convey the sense that there is something desirable in store, as it were. Revelation thus does not want to be “consumed” or just appreciated; it seeks to make a real impact on the reader(s).

The approach taken in this commentary becomes evident even in the table of contents: Semiotically interesting chapters, such as Rev 1 (1:27–75) and Rev 21–22 (2:155–225) are commented on at considerable length, while Rev 13, which otherwise attracts enormous attention, is dealt with rather *en passant* (2:27–36). Thus, even on the level of counting pages it is clear that this commentary offers a very pointed reading of Revelation, so that it would not be advisable to use it as the only or first work of reference when working with Revelation. It is certainly not written with the intention to explain each and every detail in the text. But when used together with a more “conventional” commentary, it will prove very enriching and stimulating for a discussion about the hermeneutics of Revelation, a discussion that is by all means worthwhile and necessary.