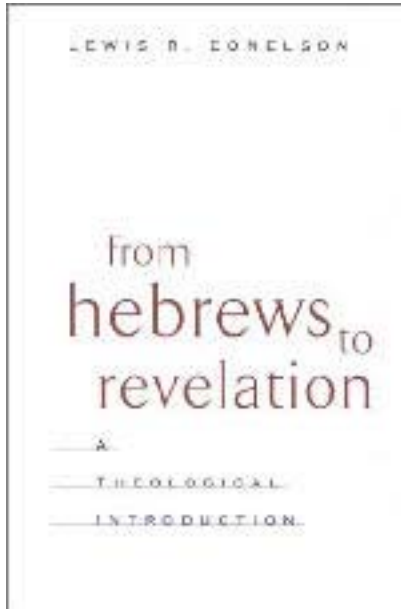


RBL 04/2003



**Donelson, Lewis R.**

***From Hebrews to Revelation: A Theological Introduction***

Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000. Pp. v + 161. Paper. \$19.95. ISBN 0664222366.

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This slim, well-written volume is just what it claims to be: an introduction to the books at the end of the New Testament, emphasizing mainstream Protestant theological readings of the texts. While Westminster John Knox's marketing department calls this the "latter half" of the New Testament on the cover, Donelson is much more honest in calling these the "last nine books" of the New Testament, since clearly the Gospels, Acts, and Paul count for far more than 50 percent of scholarly interest and theological weight. The book seems to be written for a very general audience and will be most useful for interested lay people, perhaps in church settings, or possibly classroom use.

Donelson sketches out his methodology in a brief introduction (only six pages). He does a very nice job of raising complicated methodological issues such as the importance of social-historical settings, the value of rhetorical analysis, the validity or accessibility of the author's intention, intertextuality, and potential indeterminacies in the texts. For a beginning theology student or lay person this could be very helpful. None of these methods are discussed in any detail, of course, although Donelson continues to remind the reader throughout the book of the importance of conscious methodological reflection. His own methodology relies more on narrative, New Critical approaches than he admits and is clearly controlled by the canon (again, no surprises, given the title and press of this

book). The readings follow mainstream liberal Christian orthodoxy. Intertextuality, for instance, seems to mean biblical allusion, and there is no attention to feminist readings, postcolonial approaches, or other ideological or genealogical methods.

Chapters 1–6 cover Hebrews, James, 1 Peter, Jude and 2 Peter, the Letters of John, and Revelation respectively. For those of us who teach introductory New Testament courses, this list evokes a feel of the last few weeks of the semester as one tries to cover “everything else.” But many of us might not cover all of these texts or choose to read *Didache* or the *Acts of Thecla* instead. The book thus limits itself to “Bible Studies” rather than early Christian history and theology. A balanced canonical approach guides this book but also skews its coverage. Each chapter is about the same length, averaging twenty-three pages. The result is a problematic leveling of the “last nine books.” Revelation, the longest text of the nine, receives the same number of pages here as James, which is less than a third its length and much less prominent in the history of interpretation. Hebrews, one of the most complex and least understood texts in the New Testament, receives the same treatment as 1 Peter, which is much more accessible. Furthermore, one must question a short treatment of the Johannine Epistles separate from a fuller discussion of the Fourth Gospel; Donelson notes the “complex of Johannine documents” but is unable to explore this fully. Ancient canon lists and publishing conventions that separate 1 John from John (or Acts from Luke, for that matter) should not tie the hands of scholars and students who want to study the texts historically. Donelson might have spent a short time explaining how and why these nine books came together as they did.

Nonetheless, once within each chapter, the beginning student will find much to learn from. The scholar will find many sound insights and, invariably, something to quibble about. Donelson is a fine, knowledgeable reader of the New Testament. In each chapter, he makes a thematic argument. While there is an outline of each New Testament book, he moves freely around the texts according to the themes. This keeps his book from reading like a commentary and gives the sense of listening to a series of good introductory lectures, with both depth and breadth. He introduces important interpretational topics, such as the background of the addressees in Hebrews, the status of the communities in 1 Peter as actual resident aliens, or the literary relationship and authorship of the Johannine Epistles and the Fourth Gospels. In the preface, Donelson notes the debt he owes to other scholars. While there are no footnotes, there is a list of suggested further readings at the end of the book.

Donelson takes a theological position on each text and supports this by narrative exegesis, often noting historical reconstructions of the original communities as well as discussing contemporary meanings. Hebrews reads Hebrew Bible texts on priests and

sacrifice christologically, tying this reading to the ethics of the community. James presents an ethical view of faith that suggests virtue theory, while 1 Peter explores the nature of suffering and limits of a Christian community's accommodation to culture. Jude reads present and past in terms of an apocalyptic future, while 2 Peter's reading of Jude explores questions of theodicy, apostolicity, and the emerging Christian canon. The letters of John explore practical as well as symbolic meanings in the metaphorical theology, "God is love." Finally, Revelation is a full account of the conflict of good and evil in the world, with the perspective that God will prevail despite all appearances. These broad themes are well-supported and augmented by other theological observations about each text.

As stated above, these are mainstream Protestant theological positions suitable for an introduction. Much, of course, is left out for reasons of space and simplification, which is understandable. However, controversial or problematic points are also avoided, mediated, or explained away: Christian supersessionism in Hebrews; the commands in 1 Peter for women and slaves to be submissive; the labeling of opponents as demonic in Jude, 2 Peter, the Johannine Epistles, and Revelation; or the violence against Jews, opposing Christians (e.g., "Jezebel"), and culture in Revelation, with the rejoicing of heaven at destruction on earth and the vehement exclusion in the New Jerusalem. To this extent, Donelson follows mainstream Christian interpretation as well, which has yet to integrate ideological and genealogical critique into mainstream theological discourse, but these are problems that should be confronted rather than explained away in an introduction. Donelson does a very good job of introducing theological readings of the New Testament and a range of methodologies. He might have broadened this approach and introduced more critical readings of the canon as well.