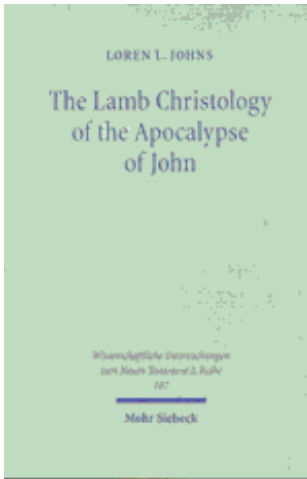


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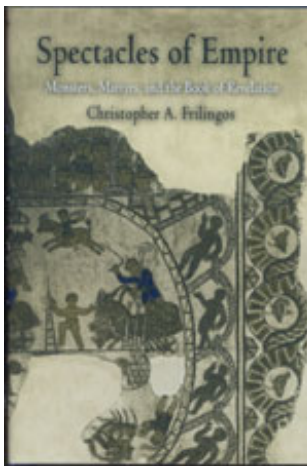


Johns, Loren

The Lamb Christology of the Apocalypse of John: An Investigation into Its Origins and Rhetorical Force

Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
2.167

Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004. Pp. xi + 276. Paper. €49.00.
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Frilingos, Christopher A.

Spectacles of Empire: Monsters, Martyrs, and the Book of Revelation

Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. Pp.
184. Hardcover. \$35.00. ISBN 0812238222.

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These two books, both revisions of dissertations, tell the tale of the two sides of biblical scholarship in the contemporary North American academy. On the one side (Johns, *Lamb Christology*) is traditional historical criticism: historically grounded, biblically oriented, philologically sound, theologically driven, in the service of scholars and ministers within an ecclesiastical context. On the other (Frilingos, *Spectacles of Empire*) is postmodern scholarship: historically grounded, critically oriented, methodologically sophisticated, ideologically driven, in the service of students and scholars within a literary context. The lines between the two approaches are, of course, fuzzy: Johns draws on literary theory, while Frilingos pays careful attention to historical context. Johns reads like

the dissertation it was, while Frilingos has crafted a highly polished set of essays. In the end, one book, *Lamb Christology*, seems too narrowly situated within a biblical hermeneutic that *must* find appropriate theology in the Apocalypse, while the other, *Spectacles of Empire*, wanders at times away from its announced focus on the Apocalypse. Both books will reward any scholar of Revelation; Frilingos's *Spectacles of Empire* in particular is an exemplary model for cultural studies approaches to biblical scholarship.

I begin with Johns, the theme of the Lamb, and a rhetorical take on traditional historical criticism. After a broad and somewhat superfluous introduction to interpretive problems related to the Apocalypse, Johns poses in the first chapter the two central issues of the book. The first is an exegetical problem that involves ethical ramifications: How does the Lamb Christology of the Apocalypse fit with the eschatological ethics of overcoming evil in John's Apocalypse? But we see that this is not a question so much as a thesis, a thesis that depends on the other central issue, which forms a postulate to his thesis: Johns's reading of the Apocalypse is to be located within a community of faith, "a community of faith that defines itself in some sense by the Apocalypse" (17). He calls this type of reading "ethical faithfulness," a "trans-subjective heuristic device" that keeps faith with the contemporary religious community *and* the original social and historical context of the text. Johns writes within the Mennonite tradition of nonviolent resistance. While resistance of domination and empire is a theme of the Apocalypse, he is swimming against the tide in arguing that the theology of the book is nonviolent; the imagery of destruction in the book *from heaven alone* is overwhelming. And here, in chapter 1, as well as in the concluding chapter 6, "The Rhetorical Force of the Lamb Christology in the Apocalypse," when he returns to this interpretation, Johns does not convince this reviewer that his Procrustean reading of Revelation is faithful to the text.

Within this interpretive rhetorical framework that begins and ends the study, there are four solid, extensively researched chapters on lambs and lamb symbolism. Chapter 2 provides an exhaustive philological examination of τὸ ἀρνίον and other words for lamb and sheep in the New Testament, the Hebrew Bible and Septuagint, and Joseph and Philo (appendix 1 includes a chart that correlates the various Greek and Hebrew words for lamb in the MT and LXX). Johns concludes that the victorious slain lamb in Rev 5 is anomalous and that τὸ ἀρνίον in Revelation does not fit with other uses that emphasize sacrificial aspects. Chapter 3 surveys lamb imagery in the ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman context. Johns casts the net wide, both temporally and geographically, so that many points, while of general interest to scholars of ancient religion, seem far removed from a first-century Christian community in Asia Minor. Within the more immediate Greco-Roman context, Johns finds that lambs are associated with divination, oracles, and vulnerability. The data are more pertinent and the exegetical point is finer in chapter 4, "Lambs in Early Judaism," in which Johns seeks to find whether the image of

τὸ ἀρνίον in Rev 5:5 fits with the image of military might suggested by the adjacent christological titles “the lion from the tribe of Judah” and “the root [or shoot] of David.” While scholars had assumed that τὸ ἀρνίον, translated as “ram,” combines various messianic traditions from Second Temple Judaism, Johns shows that the lamb image in Rev 5:5 connotes vulnerability rather than the power of an apocalyptic redeemer figure. Texts examined include the *Testament of Joseph*, the *Testament of Benjamin*, *1 Enoch* 89–90, *Psalms of Solomon* 8, and rabbinic literature. Johns does not, to my mind, treat the “morphing” of animals in the Animal Apocalypse in *1 Enoch* subtly enough (96–97), applying rather a mechanistic reading of the symbolism there and in Revelation in order to dismiss it as a parallel.

Chapter 5, “Lamb Symbolism in the Old Testament and the Apocalypse,” shows the marks of an unrevised dissertation as Johns go through somewhat painstaking literature reviews only to arrive at the standard position on key issues. He begins with an extended discussion of metaphor, simile, and figurative and referential language. Johns wants to maintain a tension between “decoding” all of the images in Revelation as referring to something in the social-historical context of the audience (he wants to keep it theologically meaningful for today) *and* examining the images in light of the literary background and social-historical context (he wants to read it critically too). He concludes that Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s rhetorical approach to Revelation is warranted and that the important question to ask relates to the construction of a symbolic universe and the Lamb Christology’s function within that universe. This conclusion, a widely held approach to the Apocalypse, is too weak to warrant inclusion of such a long survey of literary theory (a survey that includes no poststructuralist approaches). The section on the social-historical setting of the Apocalypse concludes with the common consensus that John writes in a prophetic tradition against the imperial cult and other aspects of Greco-Roman culture. And here Johns repeats his tendentious thesis that John of Patmos was, essentially, a Mennonite Christian who developed “an ethic of *faithful, nonviolent resistance*” (127, emphasis original). This faithful resistance will lead to Christians being slaughtered like the Lamb, so Johns returns to the Old Testament to understand further the model for the Lamb Christology. The array of texts discussed here is fairly large (sacrificed lambs in the OT; the paschal lamb in Exodus; the Suffering Servant in Second Isaiah; Dan 8; Gen 22; Mic 5:6; the lambs of eschatological peace; and, finally, the occurrences of τὸ ἀρνίον in the LXX). Johns pays careful attention to detail in each section as he builds the case for the lamb as a symbol of vulnerability.

All of this brings us back to the concluding chapter 6, “The Rhetorical Force of the Lamb Christology in the Apocalypse.” Johns’s rhetorical exegesis of the Lamb Christology strongly supports his theological interests: “the lamb *has triumphed* in his death and resurrection, not that the lamb *will triumph* in the future, subsequent to his death and

resurrection” (161, emphasis original). Faithful resistance led the Lamb to death—and so to triumph. And so it will for the Christians of Asia if they resist (not fight) Rome and its cults. But in a section that is by rights an entire seventh chapter, “Christology and Ethics in the Apocalypse” (171–202), Johns considers how this Lamb theology fits (or better, does not fit) with the incredible violence in the Apocalypse and, more significantly, with its interpretation over the past two thousand years. He must admit that, if the vision of the Apocalypse is ultimately ethical and nonviolent, it has not been very successful (186). Given the imagery and tradition of interpretation, perhaps rather it is Johns who has the vision wrong.

Frilingos’s methodology is diametrically opposed to that of Johns, and the style and scope of the book are a refreshing contrast. While the focus of the book is on understanding Revelation as a literary “spectacle” comparable with those staged in the theater and circus, the even more significant contribution is Frilingos’s methodological focus on Revelation as a *product* of the culture of the Roman Empire rather than objectifying the text (and the social world of its audience) as distinct and stable entities opposed to Rome. This is an important development that moves well beyond the trend in recent “Revelation against Rome” postcolonial studies, such as Steven J. Friesen’s *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), a text that Frilingos effectively criticizes. And while he claims that this book is not about theory but one that uses theory to sharpen historical and literary interests, he deftly handles a range of critical theory in the book. Chapter 1 sets out his questions and approaches in model fashion.

Chapter 2, “Merely Players,” looks at the Roman world as a spectator society, in which one was acutely aware of the importance and difficulty of always seeing and being seen. Here and throughout the book Frilingos effectively combines exposition of visual artifacts, be they in stone or in performance, with literary evidence. He displays skillful readings of texts such as Apuleius’s *The Golden Ass*, Ovid’s *Arts of Love*, and the *Martyrdom of Pionius*, as well as social practices such as the imperial cult and circus spectacles, including gladiators and animal hunts. When discussing the ideology of images such as the Ara Pacis Augustae, Frilingos is careful to read the web of power relations chiseled in the friezes rather than just the expression of imperial power in the monument. Chapter 3, “A Vast Spectacle,” turns to the viewing practices inscribed in Revelation and its series of spectators who try to “see and be seen” as the world comes to an end. Frilingos begins with literary *ekphrasis* in the Second Sophistic, chiefly Phlegon’s *Book of Marvels* and Achilles Tatius’s *Leukippe and Kleitophon* (Frilingos has a strong interest in the Greek novel). These texts suggest a model for imperial viewing of the “foreign and fantastic,” a model that he applies to the “strange sights” in Revelation and John’s exploitation of “thaumistic” (Greek θαυμαστόν, “amazing”) viewing. The particular

sights include the two witnesses of Rev 11; the two beasts of Rev 13; Babylon in Rev 17–18; and the rejoicing heavenly multitude of spectators in Rev 19. The audience of the Apocalypse is treated to the performance of a lifetime—but also a spectacle that tests their limits of self-control against amazement at the marvels of the beasts.

Chapter 4, “As If Slain,” looks at Revelation’s Lamb within the context of the performance of masculinity in the Roman world. In contrast to Johns, for whom the Lamb expressed a Christian ethic of vulnerability yet resistance in the face of evil and domination, Frilingos sees the Lamb as a destabilizing image for ancient constructs of masculinity. Working from Michel Foucault’s study of the technology of the self in the Roman world, as criticized by Kate Cooper, Frilingos turns once again to the Greek novel, *Daphnis and Chloe* by Longus, to consider the spectacle of sexuality. Sexual viewing for Frilingos draws the viewer and viewed into a complicated web of both spectacle (as developed in chs. 3–4) and the ambiguities of penetration. So too the Lamb problematizes images of masculinity. Both slain and slayer, pierced and punisher, penetrated and penetrator, the Lamb in Revelation plays on the trope of masculinity. Sexual viewing and spectatorship are intertwined as the gaze of the audience follows the gaze of the Lamb in the rape and destruction of Babylon in Rev 19–20.

Chapter 5, “Wherever the Lamb Goes,” continues working the themes of masculinity and penetration in the context of the “monstrous” in Revelation and other texts. Frilingos now combines the “imperial” viewing of his chapters 2–3 and the “sexual” gaze of chapter 4, allowing the categories of spectacle to overlap. His own gaze encompasses an even wider array of texts: *Daphnis and Chloe*; 4 Maccabees; the *Martyrs of Lyons*; and briefer looks at Plato’s *Symposium* and fourth-century martyrdom accounts ascribed to Ambrose and Prudentius. Within Revelation’s spectacle he looks at the “monsters of Revelation,” such as Satan in Rev 12 but also the women who appear as monsters in the text: Jezebel, the Woman clothed with the Sun, and Babylon. Frilingos also includes here the 144,000 (Rev 7:1–11; 14:1–5), the “Synagogue of Satan” (Rev 2:9; 3:9), and the two beasts in Rev 13. In all of this the Apocalypse “renders the concept of the ‘masculine gaze’ problematic” (114). Dominating (penetrator) yet slain (penetrated), the Lamb haunts Revelation and its audience, a spectacle that challenges the viewers’ self-control as they try to follow it. A short epilogue revisits the thesis of locating the power of the Apocalypse in the power of ancient spectacle with a brief comparison of the technology of the viewing self in Revelation and early Christian martyrdom accounts.

Frilingos’s contribution to early Christian studies goes beyond his well-argued thesis. By carefully arguing that Revelation is an “expression of Roman culture” (12) and opening his reader’s eyes to “the pulsing rhythms of Roman culture at play in the book of Revelation” (13), he breaks down the wall between “Word” and “World” that characterizes

so much New Testament scholarship. Revelation does not so much *oppose* Rome as put Roman culture on display; Frilingos has shown how the tropes of vision and spectacle play out in the Apocalypse as they do in the circus, the novel, and martyrdoms. If there is a flaw here, it is that Frilingos's own gaze is at times too busy; he looks at so much more than Revelation it is at times difficult to keep one's eye on the main thread and how the various readings of the many texts fit within the overall argument. But this slight problem is mitigated by a graceful writing style. *Spectacles of Empire* is thus a significant work within the postmodern, cultural studies approach to early Christian literature. Christopher Frilingos points the way forward to reading early Christian texts within the social and literary cultures of ancient Rome. Loren Johns represents, by contrast, classic historical criticism of the past century, with its emphasis on the sources and "background" of the text and the "intention" of the author. And like John himself in Rev 5, both fix their gaze on the Lamb, "standing as though slain." How should we understand this strange, complex, contradictory image? Where Johns looks to the biblical tradition, Frilingos looks to the Roman world. And where Johns is ultimately unsuccessful at jibing the theology of the Apocalypse with his own church tradition, Frilingos is quite successful at his own *ekphrasis* of Roman culture on display in Revelation.