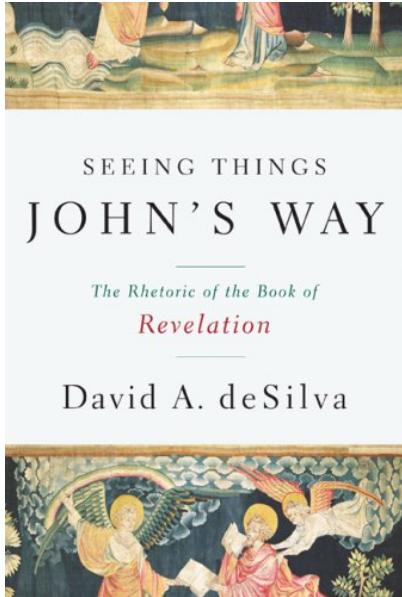


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deSilva, David A.

Seeing Things John's Way: The Rhetoric of the Book of Revelation

Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009. Pp. xiv + 393. Paper. \$49.95. ISBN 0664224490.

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David deSilva's book is a welcome addition to the ever-growing literature on the rhetorical interpretation of the book of Revelation. Since I have introduced this methodological approach in the late 1970s and beginning 1980s, rhetorical criticism has taken off in Apocalypse studies. deSilva's study documents the fruitfulness and appropriateness of rhetorical criticism for the interpretation of Revelation. He seeks to situate his rhetorical readings within classical rhetorical criticism, although he concedes that key features of classical rhetorical theory are not applicable to Revelation. His guiding questions for students are innovative and appropriate to elicit the argument of each chapter. They seek to teach a rhetorical approach to the interpretation of Revelation by articulating rhetorical queries that structure the chapters and guide the understandings of the whole book.

The first introductory chapter asks how people have read and how people still read this difficult book. In response to this question, deSilva elaborates five major interpretive keys that have been used in the history of interpretation: preterist, historicist, futurist, idealist, and contemporary historical interpretive approaches. One wonders why deSilva elaborates the traditional reading approaches but reduces the contemporary field of interpretation to one approach. It would have been interesting to see how deSilva would elaborate his

rhetorical questions for and readings of Revelation in dialogue with other contemporary paradigms of interpretation.

Moreover, it is disappointing to see that he labels “readings deeply aware of, and engaged with their own social location of reading” as “ideological interpretations” (7–8). He thereby repeats the malestream academic prejudicial labeling of liberationist and feminist readings as “ideological,” without clearly stating that malestream readings like his own are equally “ideological” readings. One would have expected that a rhetorical analysis would recognize that *all* readings are *ideological* and that the “rhetorical situation” of the text and that of the reader determines all interpretation and engenders multiple readings.

deSilva then goes on in the first chapter to argue that Revelation combines three genres—the letter, prophecy, and apocalypse—then introduces rhetorical analysis with an excursus on classical rhetorical criticism. The second chapter discusses the rhetorical situatedness of Revelation in the context of the seven congregations in the Roman province of Asia, while the third chapter seeks to elucidate the rhetorical focus and goals of the author in light of the recipients’ situation but asks, “What does John really want?” Chapter 4 explores apocalypse as a principal genre of Revelation and seeks to elucidate the rhetorical universe of Revelation.

Since in deSilva’s view it is John’s interest and goal to displace Roman imperial ideology, the next chapters name and discuss the rhetorical strategies John uses to achieve this goal. Chapter 5 and 6 explore John’s construction of his authority (*ethos*) by establishing the credibility of his message over and against those Christian prophets who articulate different visions and self-understandings. Chapters 7 and 8, in turn, ask what kind of emotions the author seeks to elicit (*pathos*), whereas chapters 9, 10, and 11 explore John’s rational argumentations (*logos*) and ask what presuppositions the reader would have to share in order to find the book’s arguments persuasive.

The last chapter is one of application that asks: “What might the Spirit continue to say to the Churches” today. Regretfully, the author adopts here the outdated hermeneutical method of scientific historical exegesis that elaborates what the text meant and contemporary pastoral application that explains what it means today, an interpretive dichotomous method New Testament rhetorical criticism sought to overcome. Instead of engaging in an ethics of interpretation that carefully assesses the power inscriptions engendered in the past and in the present in and through the rhetoric of a text, especially a sacred canonical text such as Revelation, deSilva engages in this last chapter in an apologetic assertion of John’s rhetoric in order to insist on the applicability of John’s arguments to our contemporary situation.

deSilva thereby identifies John's meaning with his own interpretation of Revelation without critically problematizing his own social-religious location and ideological interests. If he had taken seriously his own rhetorical analytic approach, he would have recognized the sociohistorical political locatedness of all texts and all interpreters that conditions all interpretations and does not allow them to be reduced to a single correct one. If he had problematized the dualistic hermeneutical method of "interpretation and application" as contrary to a critical rhetorical analytic, his careful rhetorical analysis of Revelation would have turned out to be more convincing and less apologetic. Nevertheless, much can be learned from this work if students adopt the author's rhetorical method of formulating questions rather than repeating his answers. In this way, deSilva's work can contribute much to the interpretation of the book of Revelation.