Ressegueie, James L.

*Revelation Unsealed: A Narrative Critical Approach to John's Apocalypse*

Biblical Interpretation 32


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Ressegueie's goal is to provide a literary critical analysis of Revelation "that rigorously applies the methods of narrative criticism to John's vision" (p. 1). To accomplish this task, he discusses: (1) the point of view and rhetoric of the Apocalypse (pp. 32-69); (2) the settings of Revelation (pp. 70-102), described as "spiritual settings that must be plotted on a spiritual map" (p. 70, emphasis his); (3) character, both divine and demonic (pp. 103-159); and, (4) the plot and structure of the book (pp. 160-192). A short chapter on the theological significance of Revelation (pp. 193-209) follows the literary investigation.

"Point of view" refers to "the way a story gets told" (p. 32) and consists of phraseological, spatial, psychological, and temporal aspects. Phraseological elements include the juxtaposing of events seen with those heard. When the seer describes an event heard, the result "brings out the inner reality, the spirit and reality of what he sees" (p. 33). John also employs the divine passive to demonstrate God's sovereignty over events (pp. 37-38). The viewpoint of the Seer is expressed in spatial language, which directs the reader/hearer toward the most important features of his vision. One example is found in chapter 4. Here the focus moves from the throne of God outward to the four living creatures to the twenty-four elders (pp. 38-39). Such movement gives the reader/auditor a sense of the full glory of the scene. A second example is how John uses descriptions of a character's outer garments, such as those of the whore of Revelation 17 or the rider of 19, to reveal personality (pp. 41-42). Spatial perspectives also consist of counterpoising.
heavenly perspectives with earthly ones (p. 43), providing the reader/hearer with new insight into the true meaning underlying the events described in the unfolding vision.

In addition to point of view, John employs rhetorical devices (pp. 48-69). Resseguie confines his discussion of John's rhetorical tools to an analysis of the use of numbers, including seven, three, four, twelve and one hundred and forty-four thousand. Unfortunately, one finds little development of how John employs other rhetorical tools, or how an understanding of ancient rhetorical theory may enhance our appreciation of the Apocalypse.

Regarding the setting of Revelation, elements representing chaos and death, such as the abyss, the sea, Babylon, etc., are counterpoised with features describing the divine realm, such as the throne of God and the new Jerusalem. Settings, however, are not merely topographical. They also may be architectural (pp. 91-95), as in the case of the temple and altar of 14:17-18. Props, such as the scroll of Revelation 5 and the little scroll of chapter 10, may also serve as settings. John's language, furthermore, may be ambiguous, as demonstrated by the fact that the theme of desert may refer either to a place of refuge, as in 12:6, or to the demonic realm of foul birds and beasts, as in 18:2.

The most significant feature of character development is the contrast between the demonic and apocalyptic or idealized characters. For example, the description of the beast of the sea (13:1-16) opposes the image of Christ, the slain and risen lamb (Rev. 5:6-13; 12:10; 19:12-16). Likewise, the portrayal of the beast from the land (13:11-15) is antithetical to the description of the two witnesses (11:6-11). Furthermore, since John avoids anthropomorphism, the character of God is communicated either through divine speech or actions, as well as through what the narrator and others say regarding God's character (pp. 105-111).

In the analysis of plot, recapitulation theory is rejected (pp. 164-165) in favor of a "U" shaped structure, where initial stability is threatened by instability. The final goal of the narrative is a return to the original state of order. Resseguie maintains that throughout the Apocalypse the reader finds dramatic oscillation between heavenly and earthly scenes. Rev. 1 portrays stability on earth, while in chapters 2-3 the church on earth is threatened with instability. Chapters 4-5 reflect heavenly stability, while Revelation 6-19 describes instability on earth from a heavenly viewpoint. Finally, with the new creation in 20-21, equilibrium is restored to the earth (pp. 166-167).

The concluding section (pp. 193-209) provides a short description of John's theological contribution. Although no revolutionary insights are proposed, the power of John's vision is affirmed. Of particular interest are the comments on salvation (pp. 205-206), as well as the description of John's understanding of evil as a hybrid that is part human and part demonic (pp. 197-199).
Resseguie's book is a helpful summary of some of the major literary themes of the Apocalypse. His most intriguing contribution is the analysis of plot and structure, and it is unfortunate that more attention was not given to this aspect of the work. Nevertheless, the study is rescued from becoming an incoherent mass of detail through a very helpful introduction, to which the reader should refer continually. There are, however, some very unfortunate misprints, such as on p. 81, where an evident computer error led to the failure of exporting Greek characters into the text, resulting in gibberish. In short, Resseguie's book is a useful, although not revolutionary, contribution to our understanding of John's Apocalypse. It can be used with profit, especially by neophytes, in the study of Revelation.