Slater, Thomas B.

*Christ and Community: A Socio-Historical Study of the Christology of Revelation*

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This is a revised 1996 King's College London dissertation, written under Prof. G. N. Stanton. The author is on the faculty of Religion Department at the University of Georgia. Slater argues in this study that the three main christological images in Revelation—the "one like a son of man," the Lamb, and the Divine Warrior—have specific functions in the life of the first audience of the text. His thesis is that these various functions maintain the unity between the Christian communities in Asia and Christ, in particular by engendering a social identity within the community of "priest-kings" participating in a second Exodus en route to the New Jerusalem, and by ensuring the victory of the community through suffering. Slater employs social-historical methodologies, including some insights from the sociology of knowledge.

The Introduction stakes out a clear position in the debate over the historical setting of the Apocalypse (this is an expansion of Slater's "On the Social Setting of the Revelation to John," *NTS* 44 [1998] 232-56). While others (including myself) have argued the Revelation does not reflect a social situation of oppression so much as it attempts to create one, Slater defends the more traditional position that Revelation was written to Christian communities encountering actual, active oppression at the hands of the Roman governor of Asia, although he acknowledges that this oppression was not official imperial policy. Slater argues against both Adela Yarbro Collins' notion of "perceived crisis" as a sociological category through which to understand the setting of the Apocalypse (see Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984]) and, even more strongly, against Leonard Thompson (Leonard...
Thompson, The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire [Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990]). Slater does mount some challenges to Thompson's revisionist readings of the early Trajanic historians, but he does not in any way disprove Thompson's argument (despite his claim to have done so on p. 31). Indeed, Slater undercuts his own "objective" and unexpressed presuppositions about the perspicuity of texts when arguing against Thompson. While Slater chides Thompson for not reading Statius, Martial, and Quintilian "critically enough" (31), Slater himself does not read the NT texts critically at all. Any mention of suffering or tribulation in Revelation (or 1 Peter) is taken at face value rather than examined as possible rhetorical posturing. The argument, moreover, is circular: 1 Peter and Revelation are evidence of a social situation of oppression; and the social situation of oppression is then the background for Slater's reading of Revelation. Slater frequently lists NT texts that "prove" the oppression of the early Christian communities in Asia, such as John 15:21 and Acts 5:41, but does not take into account the rhetorical positions of these texts. While Pliny's well-known Ep. 10.96 to Trajan is an important text, it cannot bear the weight put on it here, and Slater fails to make his case.

Slater then moves from social setting to exegesis of the Apocalypse. Part I, consisting of three chapters, examines the tradition and image of "one like a son of man" Chapter 2 examines the Jewish background of the tradition in Dan 7:13; 1 Enoch 37-71 (the Similitudes of Enoch); and, more briefly, 4 Ezra, the Apocalypse of Abraham, the Martyrdom of Isaiah, the Testament of Abraham, and Philo On Abraham. This chapter is a more developed version of Slater's "One Like a Son of Man in First Century CE Judaism" (NTS 41 [1995] 183-98). Chapter 3 then argues that Rev 1:1-20 shares an exegetical tradition with the Similitudes of Enoch and 4 Ezra. The common use of Dan 7:13 forms the tradition; specific actions of the Messiah in the three texts (judging, gathering the elect, making war on the righteous, and possessing an element of mystery) strengthen the connection. Chapter 4 shows the connections between the portrayal of the "one like a son of Man" in the messages in Revelation 2-3 to both Rev 1:1-20 and the Jewish tradition discerned in chapter 2.

In Part II, Slater examines the christological motifs of the Lamb and the Divine Warrior in Revelation. Slater finds that the Lamb is the most comprehensive christological image in Revelation with numerous functions (chap. 5). Of these, the most important is the task of leading an eschatological Christian community to the New Jerusalem, which Slater associates with the Exodus tradition. In this christological task, in which the Lamb shares divine honors with God, the Lamb protects the community against the forces of the Satan and makes war on the enemies of God on earth. Slater identifies six functions within the community for this image: the bolstering of the community's faith by achieving victory through suffering; satisfying the community's thirst for vengeance upon their oppressors; giving hope of victory for defenseless Christians in the Lamb's association with military imagery; assuring the community of their ultimate salvation in the use of deterministic motifs; protecting the community and
thereby improving their quality of life; and finally raising the status of the community in
the next life by the bestowal of the title of priest-kings. In Chapter 6 Slater turns to the
image of the Divine Warrior in Rev 19:11-21. While combining aspects and functions of
the other christological images in Revelation—the unity of Revelation's christology being
one main point—the Divine Warrior above all challenges the worldly institutions that
oppress the Christian community. Christ as warrior in Revelation judges the nations and
makes war, righteously, on behalf of God.

The strengths of this work are clearly literary. Slater's exegesis is well-grounded in the
scholarly literature. His gives careful attention to interpretational issues in each passage,
although infrequent consideration of the original Greek. He has a strong grasp on the
tradition history of the christological images and the interpretational options as presented
in the scholarship. He makes an effective case for the literary unity of the christology of
Revelation.

For Slater, however, these literary images have a clear social-historical function, but
here the book falters. Three methodological areas stand out as problematic. The first is
the relationship of the exegesis of individual passages or units to the Apocalypse as a
whole. Slater does well to put Revelation 1-3, which is the most explicitly christocentric
section of the Apocalypse, at the front of his study. In this way his analysis matches the
rhetoric of Revelation, which has the audience hear the Apocalypse through the narrator
John and, by extension, through the character of Christ. But he loses a sense of the
rhetoric of the text as the audience might actually experience it once he moves from the
messages (erroneously called "letters" by Slater) in chapters 2-3 to the visions that begin
in Rev 4:2. The Lamb is the most important christological image in Revelation by all
accounts and receives the most attention in the book. But is the whole of this image the
sum of its parts, which is how Slater proceeds? That is, the Lamb is introduced before the
throne of God (Rev 5:6) and is an important character in the final vision of the New
Jerusalem (Revelation 21-22). The passages describing the Lamb do not function in
isolation of these images and subnarratives but are part of the apocalyptic rhetoric of the
entire work. Slater does not give adequate attention to this larger framework.

The second problematic area is Slater's assumptions about the social setting of the
audience. Slater takes the position that every literary tradition or element discerned in the
text presupposes a reader familiar with that tradition (p. 158), just as he assumes every
reference to tribulation or suffering proves that the community was suffering active,
actual oppression. The reader Slater finds is a projection of the author: the ideal reader,
the shaping of which is the rhetorical aim of the text as a prophetic letter. In this way, he
exhibits a limited notion of the heuristic concept of a symbolic universe and how a
narrative world might function within a community.
Finally, Slater employs a mechanical and limited view of the sociology of knowledge in his interpretation of the social function of literary images. Texts embody, or attempt to change, symbolic universes and exhibit strategies for maintaining or changing the audience. Slater's frequent designation of one passage as exhibiting such strategies (for instance a "therapeutic" maintenance strategy in Rev 2:14-15 and a "nihilation" maintenance strategy in 2:17, p. 127) atomizes the text and casts strong doubts on his conclusions. If the mythology of Revelation functions in any way to maintain, change, nihilate, or structure the social order, it does so at a much broader narrative-rhetorical layer than the individual verse or image.

As a literary study of the christological motifs in Revelation, their respective tradition histories, and their unity in the text, this is a solid work. But it falls short as an interpretation of these literary motifs in the social world of the first audience.