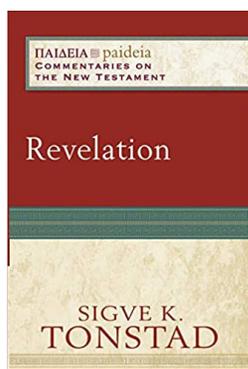


BOOK NOTES

Sigve K. Tonstad,

Revelation: Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament

(Grand Rapids, MI: Baker
Academic, 2019), 398 pp.
\$35.00



Sigve K. Tonstad, a prolific Adventist scholar of Norwegian origin, has published a number of books and scholarly articles in different areas. His published dissertation¹ has positioned him well to write a commentary on the book of Revelation. Tonstad's major interest lies in theological interpretation of biblical texts, which features prominently in all of his books. The present work reflects this same interest.

Since the commentary was published by a non-Adventist publishing house in the Paideia series, this is not a typical Adventist commentary. Some important issues are muted (e.g., the 1260 days and the sanctuary), not discussed at all, or interpreted in ways that will not be familiar to most Adventists. The author concentrates on some major themes (e.g., the cosmic conflict and the question of theodicy), while leaving out other major theological issues or dealing with them only in passing. This approach must be kept in mind when reading the commentary. The work is not a verse-by-verse treatment of Revelation, but rather a commentary on larger rhetorical units, discussed in the order of the narrative. Introductory matters are treated to some extent, but the focus is on tracing the thought of Revelation's narrative and exploring theological issues raised by the text that are of interest to contemporary Christian readers in hopes of enabling them to see the "big picture," as opposed to the atomistic treatment of typical commentaries.

Tonstad's central argument is that the book of Revelation meets a critical existential need: it unveils misrepresentation, mudslinging, and falsehood, since it is not only God who is at work in the universe. He convincingly argues that Revelation is to be understood as exposé. The adversary has a clear name: the "ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world" (Rev 12:9). Tonstad takes this description seriously. Not only are the true character and the strategies of the deceiver revealed, but also God's way of dealing with evil—the character of the One whose ways are defined by the "slaughtered Lamb." In contrast to Satan, "the slanderer," Jesus offers access and transparency (open heaven, open scroll, open book)—the essential building blocks of trust in a healthy society.

A major strength of the commentary is that it takes seriously the problem of evil and its subtle character. This is extremely important because, in a post-Holocaust, terror-scarred world, any discussion of the love and benevolence of God requires careful articulation.

A major challenge for Christianity is to speak intelligently and credibly about God in view of the recent past that cannot be erased. This necessitates taking up the task of theodicy. This commentary is a creative attempt to understand how love works in a context of freedom and how it can bring healing and restoration amid lies about the divine government by the fallen star, the deceiver.

The commentary provides a strong argument against the retribution-oriented reading of Revelation, a view that wrongly envisions God as acting arbitrarily against the forces of evil, setting up an eschatological holocaust at the end of history. Tonstad's commentary demonstrates that God is not a tormentor, but His economy is rooted in love, freedom, and responsibility: He takes His created beings seriously, but He also allows that the evil be defeated by its own schemes. This argument has value in the current non-Adventist discussions on Revelation in which the question of violence is one of the most heated and most complex issues.² The commentary clearly and strongly demonstrates that the hallmark of God in His dealing with evil is neither power nor violence, providing a forceful defense of God's fairness.

Of no less importance for the argument of the commentary is the cosmic conflict theme, which provides the fundamental conceptual framework for the theological inquiry. Giving close attention to the cosmic scope of Revelation's story reveals that the concept of "war" is central to the drama that unfolds in the book. The commentary demonstrates how the clash between an economy of life and an economy of desolation is woven into the book from the very beginning until the very end. This war is fought primarily in the realm of opinions and it is characterized by intention of evil forces to deceive. Therefore, words are more important than weapons in this war. For Seventh-day Adventists who place the cosmic conflict between Christ and Satan at the core of their philosophy of history, Tonstad's commentary provides some significant insights regarding the theological details of the cosmic scope of Revelation.

Concerning the temporal horizon of Revelation's reading, Tonstad does not align himself with any main school of interpretation. He makes a strong case against the preterist approach, pointing out consistently throughout the commentary the fact that the Roman imperial reality's foot is too small for the shoe of John's imagery. Revelation's cosmic scope calls for a larger character who is the antagonist of God and His purposes. The

case is the strongest in the discussion of Revelation 13 and 17, in which the Nero Redivivus myth is exposed as a mismatch. It is also noted that futurist interpreters show little concern for textual and historical control; their interpretations are rather set by the time of the current reader. Therefore, futuristic works are mostly ignored by respectable commentaries. According to Tonstad, the greatest problem with the historicist “school” is the constantly changing map of events, with continual revision as time passes. This problem is also widely recognized among Adventist interpreters of Revelation. However, in my opinion, the variety of interpretations is not a compelling argument for discounting the validity of historicism as a proper approach, which is indicated by an exegetical argument from the very beginning of the book of Revelation: an allusion to Daniel 2:28, 45 in Revelation 1:1, suggesting that Revelation is to be interpreted in line with the historicist principles laid down in Daniel 2.

Tonstad raises the question of whether “these -isms” do justice to John’s priorities. He acknowledges that the scope of Revelation runs from ancient times to the eschaton, which “might be used as more than token support for the historicism aspiration” (p. 28). However, he warns about the danger of reading Revelation as such a time-bound specific road map. He defines his own approach as a value-centered interpretation that prioritizes values over events, and is God-centered rather than time-centered. Despite this approach, at some points Tonstad draws a clear line from the symbols to historical realities. Some examples are interpreting the beast of chapter 13 as a “Christian empire . . . papal Rome” (p. 215), the prostitute of chapter 17 as an apostate “faith community,” the church in the post-Constantine period (p. 267), or claiming that some of the details of Revelation’s prophecy are still future, such as the “ten kings” of Revelation 17. Nevertheless, historic specificity is not a matter of interest for Tonstad—an approach foreign to the Adventist historicist interpretation of Revelation. This is evident in the commentary’s non-historicist interpretation of the seven seals and seven trumpets.

It is important to hear fresh insights rooted in the text and grow in our understanding of the book of Revelation. Tonstad’s commentary gives many of them, but at the same time many Adventist readers would argue with some details in Tonstad’s commentary—for example, the interpretation of the mourning in Revelation 1:7, the angels of the churches in chapters 2–3, the first horseman of chapter 6, the interpretation of the earth beast in chapter 13, the concept of judgment in chapter 14, or the seven kings of chapter 17. Moreover, they would object to Tonstad’s failure to align clearly with the historicist school of interpretation. However, the merit of Tonstad’s commentary lies in the area of the theology of Revelation, which is his primary research interest. So the strong and fresh voices of the cosmic conflict theme, the importance of the deception/revelation motifs, and reading Revelation as a theodicy are not to be muted despite the above objections. It is also to be acknowledged that the commentary affirms some

Seventh-day Adventist topics in a creative way, such as the question of Sabbath, the understanding of the millennium, and the state of the dead. It is hoped that these voices will be heard by non-Adventist readers of the Paideia commentary.

A major weakness of the commentary is the interpretation of Revelation’s judgment theology. Tonstad argues against the retribution-oriented reading of Revelation, but the impression at the end is that the baby is thrown out with the bathwater. His argument against the arbitrariness of God’s judgment is brilliant and his demonstration of how evil is defeated by its own scheme has some validity. However, it seems that a clear definition and exposition of God’s wrath in the context of His dealing with the problem of evil is sacrificed on the altar of defending His fairness. Also, the need for an investigative judgment is ignored by interpreting the arrival of “the hour of His judgment” (Rev 14:7) as a “critical moment” and relating it to a matter of revelation simply. Closely related to these weaknesses is Tonstad’s interpretation of the wrath of God, which is quite muted in the work.³

Three further issues deserve some discussion. First, history and theology are not strangers to each other; neither are they enemies. They are to be seen as allies in interpreting Revelation. Tonstad is right that in the theological outlook of Revelation “the Revealer is more important than his exposé,” but Revelation reveals not only the character of God and the schemes of the deceiver, but also “what must soon take place” (Rev 1:1). Second, giving close attention to the heavenly temple motif would have strengthened the argument of the commentary, since the motif brings out sharply the cosmic perspective on things happening on the earth and the role of judgment in God’s plan of salvation. Third, the Greco-Roman and Jewish background deserves at least some hearing, but it is almost completely banished from the interpretation because of the strong and convincing case against the preterist perspective, which builds almost entirely on the imperial background.

Research on the theological aspects of Revelation is a fruitful field for scholarly investigation and may yield significant insights for Adventist interpreters. Interestingly, Ellen G. White speaks of the need to understand the “lessons” emerging from Revelation, as well as the details of its fulfillment.⁴

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¹ Sigve K. Tonstad, *Saving God's Reputation: The Theological Function of Pistis Iesou in the Cosmic Narratives of Revelation*, The Library of New Testament Studies 337 (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2007).

² See, e.g., Paul Middleton, *The Violence of the Lamb: Martyrs as Agents of Divine Judgment in the Book of Revelation*, The Library of New Testament

Studies 586 (London: T&T Clark, 2018).

³ This is also noted in Frank M. Hasel, review of *God of Sense and Traditions of Non-Sense*, by Sigve K. Tonstad, *Reflections* 63 (2018): 11–12.

⁴ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1923), 113.