

BOOK REVIEWS

Brandon D. Smith *The Trinity in the Book of Revelation*. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2022. 248pp. Paperback. \$35.

How should the letter of Revelation be interpreted and rightly understood by the Christian church? This question is one that has baffled theologians throughout history and into our present day. Certainly, it is possible that there are more opinions on Revelation than any other canonical writing. For this reason, scholars are often hesitant when it comes to breaking new ground in the Apocalypse, fearful that their understanding might isolate them from one of the traditional historical camps that have dominated the interpretation of the letter for the last century.

Brandon Smith's *The Trinity in the Book of Revelation* courageously offers us a fresh glimpse into this mysterious letter, exploring Trinitarian theology in both a contemplative yet attentively faithful way to the long history of Christian thought. Smith helps to erase the dichotomy between exegesis and philosophy, striving to show that they can remain in cooperative dialogue with one another to bring profitable comprehension of Christian theology, especially trinitarian theology.

He strives to exegete key passages of Revelation with a view towards their placement within both modern and pro-Nicene trinitarian readings. In this manner, Smith challenges the belief that one can be both exegete and theologian within Revelation, that as we read the text we are faced with a clear and simple depiction of God's revelation of Himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—the undivided Trinity who works cooperatively together to bring history to its promised endpoint.

Smith's work, as part of the SCDS (Studies in Christian Doctrine and Scripture) series, fulfills the aim of providing a fresh contribution to systematic theology through faithful engagement with Scripture, Christian doctrine, and catholic (creedal) heritage. The book proceeds in a simple and well-organized manner. First, a short introduction is given on doing theology with the Trinity. It is here that Smith helpfully reminds us that "doing theology is a holy act that should not be undertaken by the proud or belligerent," two preeminent warnings that many who research and opine on Revelation fail to heed. As a first-order principle, this introduction seeks to reveal that Revelation is not simply a first-century polemic against the Roman empire, nor is it a murky, eschatological prophecy that requires the proper code to be understood. Instead, Revelation is in Smith's own words, "about the words and deeds of the triune God who is bringing all of history to its culmination."

Chapter one propels the reader toward a trinitarian reading of Revelation, establishing the author's guiding presuppositions and methodology for the remaining chapters. Smith surveys in the chapter several of the tools employed in trinitarian theology and biblical interpretation to guide the reader in building a trinitarian framework for the letter. He begins by raising the recent debates among NT scholars regarding how early Christians understood Jesus, either in a high or low manner, focusing on dispelling the notion of a Father-Son binary distinction that relegates the Spirit to a lesser role. This complicated debate receives a passing glance and at first impression, the reader is left wanting for more details. However, Smith does pick up the discussion later in the work, forcing the reader to remain patient in the resolution of a key issue in the interpretation of the letter.

Smith initially reveals his methodology as guided by what others have recently attempted in trinitarian studies, namely, the merging of canonical interpretation, biblical theology, historical interpretation, and theological exegesis (or TIS). His distinction, and what ultimately sets this work apart from others in his field, is what he refers to as his "pro-Nicene toolkit." This balance between theological readings and robust exegesis is worked out through what Smith calls trinitarian conceptual categories: eternal relations of origin and inseparable operations. One of the most helpful terms he introduces to the reader here is that of redoublement, a Patristic idea that we can speak about the unifying work of the Trinity in specific texts even though their processions or missions differ. The chapter closes with the author's commitment to a close-reading of the text as well as a reminder that Revelation deserves a theological-canonical approach. This latter distinction of the letter as a two-Testament book is encouraging, given the neglect of how the Old Testament and its theology influences John's views on the Trinity.

Chapters two through four comprise the heart of Smith's work with each chapter devoted to one of the distinct persons of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each chapter is developed with the same outline and goal. First, he presents the Patristic readings on each person of the Trinity. Next, he proceeds to the interpretation of key passages. Finally, the conclusion of each chapter draws these two together with interpretative movements backwards and forwards that show how Patristic theologians inform exegesis and vice-versa. He strives, where possible, to show how the two mirror and complement one another, again showing a major contribution of his work, that Patristic theology and exegesis do not have to be at odds with one another. His chapters on the Father and Son are quite compelling and offer for the reader a deep appreciation of their relationship in

unity of substance but difference in economy of missions. Especially compelling is Smith's treatment of Revelation 11:15–19 where the Father hands over the kingdom to the Son—revealing their unity of purpose in creation, salvation, and worship—yet their distinction in bringing these to their fitting culmination.

The chapter on the Holy Spirit is much shorter than that of the Father and Son, however, to be fair, fewer texts exist in Revelation comparatively with that of the first two persons and the ones that do exist are somewhat elusive regarding substance and mission of the Spirit. Smith handles this challenge well, focusing on depictions of the Spirit in the first three chapters of the letter. He admirably wades into the “seven spirits” debate, one that may not be solvable given the paucity of canonical references to this phrase. The most helpful aspect of this chapter is his focus on the speaking by the Spirit to the seven churches, reflected in the oft-repeated phrase “the Spirit says.” He rightly points out that the Spirit's speaking to the churches reinforces the words of Jesus as divine oracles. It is this chapter where the reader might find himself wanting a little more, especially given the depth of the previous two chapters. Understandably, given the lack of sufficient supporting texts that mention the Spirit directly, Smith has done well although one might raise their hand in the back of the mental classroom and ask “Dr. Smith, what do you make of Revelation 22:17?”

The concluding chapter discusses the ways that trinitarian reading of Revelation contributes to theology, exegesis, and practice. It is Smith's view that John's doctrine of God is at its core, trinitarian, and so readers of this letter must move beyond the high/low Christology debate as well as binary tendencies that overlook the work of the Holy Spirit. He concludes that Revelation pushes forward our appreciation of the letter as prophetic witness which closely reflects the visions located in the OT prophets. As well, Smith reminds us of the centrality of the Lamb as a fundamental metaphor that describes Jesus' identity. Truly He is the one who has overcome and so conquered sin and death and is making all things new. Finally, the work closes with the significance of a trinitarian reading of Revelation for the church. This concluding element enables Smith's research to be accessible to not only the modern theologian but to the local church pastor who seeks to remain faithful in his preaching of Revelation.

The Trinity in the Book of Revelation is a welcome and valuable contribution to the field of theological and biblical studies. Smith persuasively demonstrates the importance of trinitarian readings of Revelation anchored in faithful exegesis of the text as well as an approach that honors the long history of its interpretation. His hermeneutical model is one that deserves to be explored and followed by future scholars. One would hope that we may see further work by Smith in

this area, applied to other canonical books for a profitable understanding of the undivided Trinity. It is the hope of this reader that his efforts would find a widespread audience, both in the classroom and the local church pew.

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