

BOOK REVIEW

Finamore, Stephen, *God, Order and Chaos: René Girard and the Apocalypse* (Paternoster Biblical Monographs; Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2009). Pbk. xxvii + 290 pp. £29.99.

Stephen Finamore's study is plagued by bibliographic confusion: the acknowledgments date from 2008 and Paternoster states a 'first published' date of 2009 on the copyright page, but other editions available claim dates as far back as 2003 with varying page counts and at least two different ISBNs. Additionally, the series advertisement in the back of the present edition lists this title as a 2005 release. This makes it difficult to assess the gaps in this edition's bibliography, as a few recent publications have either undercut Finamore's argument or lent it support. For example, John Sanders's dialogical volume, *Atonement and Violence: A Theological Conversation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), advances the discussion of René Girard's work with regard to soteriology in ways that would have nuanced Finamore's exegesis, while George Heyman's *The Power of Sacrifice: Roman and Christian Discourses in Conflict* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2007) could have dramatically clarified his thinking on the links between sacrificial soteriology, martyrology and Girard's insistence on a non-sacrificial model of the atonement. That said, Finamore has succeeded in crafting a finely focused application of Girardian mimetic theory to selected portions of Revelation.

Following a brief introduction, Finamore begins with a survey of views on Revelation, highlighting various interpretations of the Apocalypse's plague sequences. He divides the literature into chronological periods before and after 1850. The author is clearly confident with the material, noting the shifts in the early church's relationship with the Roman Empire and corollary changes in exegetical trends: for example, 'rapprochement' with Roman authorities made Revelation's anti-imperial stance embarrassing, prompting interpreters such as Tyconius and Augustine to 'rehabilitate' Revelation by spiritualizing its content

(pp. 14-15), although the book's historicity was still accepted due to its use of allegory and prophecy. Victorinus's pioneering 'recapitulation' view is vital to Finamore, as it addresses the unfolding of the plague sequences in the form of later judgments. Joachim of Fiore's seminal contribution is his periodization of Revelation, re-centralizing its history and eschatology. Finamore notes that Luther would later find Revelation (via Joachim's periodized model) polemically useful, though he remained wary of it because of the redeployment of its apocalyptic themes by the revolutionary Müntzer (who receives too brief a treatment here). But Finamore excels at parsing the streams of interpretation, acknowledging the rivalries and common roots shared by conservative futurist and scholarly preterist readings, and reflecting upon the breakdown of traditional divisions of exegetical approach. He distinguishes popular from scholarly presentations, but refuses to dialogue further with popular sources. This is an understandable decision, but an unfortunate one, since the book would have benefited from an excursus on the uses and abuses of Revelation in contemporary, popular eschatological literature, as well as tighter definitions of 'eschatological' and 'apocalyptic' and a thicker description of Revelation's theology.

Finamore devotes two chapters to the thought and reception of Girard. Again, the author's confidence is clearly exhibited, as he guides readers through a highly abstract and interdisciplinary theology and the critiques to which it has been subjected. The first of these chapters, 'Mimesis, Culture and Apocalypse', unpacks Girard's approach to cultures and their texts, clarifying the connection Finamore sees between this and Revelation. Put briefly, Girard argues that interpersonal relationships are characterized by *mimetic rivalries* that 'created and now sustain human societies and cultures' (p. 59): rivalries spawn conflict, which would escalate and destroy a society if not for the *scapegoat mechanism*, which defuses conflict by channelling it into the death/exile of a chosen figure, an outcast who is often divinized in the aftermath and immortalized in the society's mythos. Girard thinks the Christian gospel—which he usually explores in the context of the canonical Gospels, rather than Revelation—unique in that God's resurrection of Jesus reveals and invalidates the scapegoat mechanism, vindicating the slain victim. I have some reservations about Finamore's take on Girard: for one, more attention to the application of Girardian theory at the socio-rhetorical level of cultural discourses (rather than just those of individual texts) would inform his discussions of

metanarrative and Revelation's confrontation with imperial ideology. He masters Girardian *differentiation*, which sustains his own thematic focus on Revelation's chaos imagery as a breakdown of differentiation (this could be stronger still, had he emphasized that process as a crisis of *entropy*). He remains on firm ground when reviewing Girard's surprisingly non-sacrificial understanding of the death of Jesus, as well as the image of entrance into God's kingdom as an act of secession from the dominant 'mimetic consensus' (p. 90, repeated 171, 221).

The second chapter on Girard is an apologetic exercise. Positing Girardian theory as a metanarrative of great interdisciplinary consequence, Finamore thinks that some critics underestimate the polyvalence with which Girard employs *mimesis* while others underappreciate the degree to which they share Girard's values, such as the critiques of culture voiced by Girard and feminist voices. He offers spirited responses to charges of patriarchalism and Gnosticism and to an assessment by Walter Wink. He also finally reveals two approaches that he himself derives from Girard, and both deserve more thorough explanation than he gives. First, mimetic theory serves as a heuristic device, useful insofar as themes of rivalry, conflict and movement between order and chaos can be found in a text and between its characters (perhaps also extending beyond the text, to incorporate relationships between the text, other texts and real-world counterparts?). Secondly, it offers a hermeneutical proposal, a hermeneutic of the victim—though Finamore's explanatory statement that the confession of Jesus as Lord affirms 'that the excluded victim is the exposé of falsehood, the judge of ideologies and the destroyer of cultures founded on violence' (p. 130) might itself need to be qualified by replacing 'destroyer' (perhaps with a term such as 'critic', 'discreditor' or 'dismantler'), lest the hermeneutic of the victim reinscribe the very violence it seeks to address.

In the next chapter, Finamore reconciles the soteriological effects of Jesus' life, death and resurrection as understood in Revelation with Girardian thought, understandings that he will claim are 'not incompatible' (p. 134). He is wise to begin by considering (too briefly) the effects of the atonement according to other major soteriological models, which tend toward shortcomings—hypostasizing sin, underemphasizing the importance of Jesus' life or of his resurrection as a victory of truth, to name a few—that mimetic theories do not typically share. Next, he addresses Revelation's martyrology via studies of

μάρτυς, νικάω, and related terms. In Finamore's view, martyrs' deaths actually strengthen a victim-oriented hermeneutic. He writes:

[they amount to] mimesis of the death of Jesus and would therefore be expected to have a similar effect; the deaths of innocent victims expose the truth about the nature of the prevailing culture and therefore bring about its demise (p. 138).

Similarly, 'to conquer is to die faithful to Jesus, an act which saves from the beast and its allies' (p. 142). Some references that Finamore considers incidental suggest rich rewards for further study: the allusion in Mt. 13.35 to Ps. 78.2 presents Jesus as one who speaks of things hidden since the foundation of the world (LXX 77.2: ἀπ' ἀρχῆς, p. 151 n. 97), leading us to wonder about the Christology that springs from this and related imagery such as the ἀπαρχή in 1 Cor. 15.20. Finamore concludes by tying Revelation and his Girardian soteriology closely to the Christus Victor motif, drawing on other biblical resources for added emphasis on victory as a *truthful witness against, secession from and refusal to emulate* earthly power structures.

The final major chapter applies the Girardian hermeneutic and heuristic device to Revelation's plague sequences, with exegesis supplemented by Finamore's favourite interpreters from Chapter 1. He opens with rather generic comments, noting that the genre-bending form of Revelation 'conveys the idea that something new has taken place' (p. 165). Girard informs his view of the book's outline, as an initial situation of order is interrupted by events that lead to disorder and a resolution; the *denouement* triggers a transfer of sovereignty and the formation of a new culture, forcing readers to grapple anew with the 'eschatological dimension' of the deaths of martyrs as witnesses following their lord (p. 169). With respect to the book's characters, the dragon 'and his agents are the mimetic rivals of God and his agents. As such they are the present rulers of human social life', but their 'purported order' is revealed as a lie by the Lamb, who 'accomplishes God's promised action by being a victim' (pp. 175, 192). Finamore follows Victorinus's intertextual suggestions, arguing that the 'book' of Rev. 5.1-14 is the Old Testament, that Revelation 4-5 'are a representation of the events which have wrought this transformation' of the ages (p. 195), and that 6.2 recalls Mt. 24.14, with the gospel understood *as a testimony* (μαρτύριον) to the nations and imaged *as the first horseman*.

The irony of recapitulating an interpretation from Victorinus aside, it is with this first rider that Finamore truly distinguishes his Girardian hermeneutic. He argues that the horseman is to be read symbolically as the ‘first consequence’ of the turning of the age. He states:

[this is a moment] effected by the revelation of truth and the beginning of a process by which sovereignty over the earth is transferred...[He] represents the continuation of the work of Jesus by his followers; the representation of the life and death of Jesus in the proclamation and the activities of the churches (pp. 199-200).

The rider’s conquest images the subversive power of the revealed truth of Christ’s story, which in the lives and testimony of witnesses ‘as they are expelled from culture goes forth conquering’ (p. 202). Although a full outline of Revelation according to the Girardian hermeneutic might have been more effective, Finamore adds an excursus on the theodicy of Romans 1 instead: rendering *δικαιοσύνη* as an ‘integrity’ inherently opposed to the lie of idolatry, he shows that God’s ‘wrath’ is exhibited in the downward spiral of humanity’s increasingly eschatological crises of differentiation. Returning to Revelation, Finamore claims that the ‘plagues do not refer to specific historical events nor are they literal future events’; rather, they are symbolic of a steadily worsening crisis (p. 221). In a brief sixth chapter, he summarizes his findings and spends only a few paragraphs reflecting on how his hermeneutic might speak truth to abuses of power in the contemporary world order.

In relation to the interests of this journal, Finamore’s monograph amounts to an amalgam of insightful but often disparate parts, at once a sourcebook on the history of premodern and modern commentary on Revelation, a constructively critical introduction to an important voice in biblical and theological interpretation, and the promising beginnings of an application of heuristic and hermeneutical methods, derived from Girard, to portions of biblical texts that will continue to draw much scholarly and popular interest. Finamore shows admirable restraint in refusing to allow Girard’s work to become an exclusive hermeneutical framework; this is much more than simply a ‘Girardian reading’ of biblical texts. Certainly some of the challenges with which he struggles are inherent to the subject matter: one exemplary problem is that existing languages ‘cannot articulate a social world in which violence is renounced...language can only offer hints of what an alternative mimesis might be like’ (p. 93). But these linguistic and cultural constraints

require a more cohesive argument, especially when Finamore seeks to counter imperial discourses of violence with Girard's metanarrative hermeneutic. How, for instance, does the biblical tradition of witnessing to and against the empires of the Old Testament affect Revelation's apocalyptic soteriology, its redeployment of Roman imperial imagery, its characterization of God's people as witnesses, and the manner in which we might read the text with an eye to Girardian theory? Finamore's case is persuasive in specific instances, but his future work will cohere better if he can address the mutually influential relationships between ancient and contemporary cultures of violence, the biblical texts and postmodern readers.

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