

REVIEW

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About the dissertation work of **Nako Petkov Nakov**:

LITURGICAL ASPECTS IN THE BOOK OF REVELATION OF ST. JOHN THE THEOLOGIAN (CHAPTER 4 AND 5)

For awarding the educational and scientific degree PhD in professional direction 2.4 Religion and Theology (New Testament Studies)

Scientific supervisor: Prof. Emil Traychev, DSc,

Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski.

1. Information about the doctoral program

According to the current procedure, no violations were committed. The doctoral student has successfully completed his individual study plan. All the requirements of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the requirements of the Regulations for the Acquisition of Scientific Degrees at Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski. No plagiarism was found in the proposed dissertation.

The review presented by me was prepared on the basis of an order of the Rector of Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski RD-38-350 of 07/02/2024 and decision of the first meeting of the Scientific Jury held on 07/16/2024.

2. Data for the dissertation and the abstract

The topic of the dissertation is significant as a scientific problem, undeveloped in Bulgarian biblical studies. The structure is clear and completely adequate in terms of the development of the dissertation's thesis, the secondary problems it raises and the analyzes made.

2.1 The text of the dissertation

The dissertation "Liturgical Aspects in the Book of Revelation of St. John the Theologian" (chapters 4 and 5) is structured in an Introduction, three chapters, a Conclusion, References (150 titles) and a Declaration of Authorship - a total of 200 pages.

In *the Introduction*, the dissertation student clarifies the object, subject, goal and tasks, methods traditional for the "dissertation" genre; he has also conducted a systematic review of the historiography of studies of his problem, grouping the studies around several central theses - I welcome this approach. A brief history of the interpretation of the book in Christian antiquity is also given, and complete commentaries on the book from more recent times are also

presented. He proposed his hypothesis, according to which the common elements between the heavenly worship in the book of Revelation and the worship in the ancient Church should be sought in "the Jewish worship known from the Jerusalem temple and the synagogue." The dissertation's assertion that "Revelation can be understood as an interpretation of a liturgical practice existing at the time of the seer in the ancient Church, as this interpretation, in addition to giving a theological explanation to the existing practices, greatly influenced the gradual formation and development of the first liturgical successions", is a contribution to the research of the Revelation and creates an expectation of argumentation based on facts and analysis to support it.

Chapter One *"Isagogical Data for the Book of Revelation"* examines the issues characteristic of isagogy. These details outline the contexts (historical and literary), boundaries and perspectives of the theological and hermeneutical discourse on the book. The dissertation has made a successful, in my opinion, summary of the book and has outlined the main isagogical problems without redundancy.

The authorship debate is old, and since the time of Frederick Farrar in the 19th century, to whom the dissertation chiefly refers, all the arguments pro et contra have been given. Already at the beginning of the book we have the following identification of its author: "I, John, your brother" (Rev. 1:9). Revelation begins and ends by identifying the writer as "John" (1:1, 4, 9; 22:8). From the second century onwards, many interpreters believed that he was the apostle John, son of Zebedee (Justin. Dial. 81.4) and the author of the fourth canonical gospel (Irenaeus. Against Heresies 3.11.1; 3.16.5; 5.30.3). But the author of Revelation never claimed to be an apostle who accompanied Jesus during his ministry. John simply calls himself "brother" (Rev. 1:9), and the distinctive style and content of the book of Revelation make it highly unlikely that he wrote the gospel and the three epistles that are part of the New Testament canon. It is possible that "John" is a pseudonym, as is common practice for apocalyptic writings. If so, however, John should have identified himself as an apostle to emphasize his high position, but we see no such thing. John presents himself as an early Christian prophet who calls his book "prophecy" and mentions his God-given commission to "prophecy" (1:3; 10:11; 22:7, 10, 18, 19). He has visions while "in the Spirit" (1:10) and sometimes uses the first person singular when speaking of God (1:8; 21:5), the resurrected Jesus, and the Spirit (2:1-3:22; 14:13; 22:17). In his visions we find many similarities with Dan. 10 (Rev. 1:9-20), Is. 6 (Rev. 4:1-11) and Ezek. 1-2 (Rev. 10:1-11).

The dissertation advocates the thesis that the author is the holy apostle and evangelist John, and the book was written ca. 96 AD. However, the doctoral student's argument about

authorship is developed schematically and too generally, which creates some uncertainty in the conclusions at the end.

Chapter Two "*The Book of Revelation of St. John the Theologian and Christian Worship*", explores the book's relationship to early Christian worship. Passing through the historical process of the formation of Christian worship from the Old Testament Jewish service of God to the time of the holy apostles, the dissertation points out that he is not looking for any "historical regularity, intentionality or planning in the stages of this development, but we strive to capture the presence of the Holy Spirit and His activity in the formation of worship practices in the Christian community" (p. 70). The possible connections of the descriptions in the book with the Jewish liturgy, the possible influences of the liturgical descriptions in the book on the Christian liturgy, as well as the question of the liturgical use of the book of Revelation are investigated.

According to the PhD student, "the evidence for the earliest period of Christian history must be used with extreme caution" because one cannot claim that the presence of a certain passage reflects a worship service just because it sounds liturgical. One should not "take phrases that sound liturgical out of the context of the New Testament and then use them to reconstruct early Christian liturgical practices, especially in the presence of the possibility that precisely these passages influenced the formation of later Christian worship (p. 81).

The PhD student emphasizes that "the visions are presented in the context of acts of worship, and by the end of the book it is difficult to distinguish these acts from visions of the future." The dissertation agrees with those scholars who argue that "this close connection between worship and vision of the end times shows that the liturgical elements in the book are not merely a literary device, but are an essential part of the process of revelation and reflect the response of the initiates to the gradual revealing God's salvific plan and its fulfillment".

The doctoral student's thesis that "the angelic ministry reflected in the book of Revelation and the ministry in the early Christian church (as far as it is reflected in the scarce sources) have common aspects" is also important, and he seeks an explanation of this fact, which is obvious to him.

On pp. 85-86 he offers possible hypotheses to explain the interrelationship between the heavenly worship described in the visions of St. John and the worship in the ancient Church: a hypothesis for elements of worship practices known to the author of vol. Revelation from the worship in the ancient Church in his time; hypothesis of a common root in the Jewish worship, known from the Jerusalem temple and the synagogue; "Heavenly worship is God's revelation

given to the seer, which he describes in the book, which in turn enriches and influences the further development of worship in the ancient Church."

On page 91 he returns to these assumptions, "but now more concretely formulated" as his thesis: "1) Revelation can be seen as the source of Christian liturgical successions; 2) Both early liturgical successions and Revelation can be seen as independent offshoots from the root of Jewish worship; 3) The revelation can be understood as an interpretation of a divine service existing at the time of the seer in the early Church, and this interpretation greatly influenced the gradual development of the first liturgical successions.

Significant is the observation made on page 94 that in "our modern Bible the first great scene of heavenly worship in the book of Revelation is divided into two chapters (4 and 5), naturally leading the reader to overlook the close parallelism between the worship of the Seat of the throne, on the one hand, and the worship before the Lamb, on the other. Everywhere the heavenly worship in the book of Revelation is emphasized by the duality of throne and altar."

One of the conclusions that Mr. Nakov makes deserves special attention: "St. John's concept of the unity of heavenly and earthly worship helped the early Church in a practical way to overcome the Jewish split between Temple and synagogue, and to create a unified type of worship, in which the assembly takes an active part, regardless of the authoritative role of the priest. The centuries-long estrangement from the cosmic experience of worship, as well as estrangement from the worship of God in human everyday life, distance us from the visions presented in the book of Revelation" (p. 100).

Chapter Three, "*Interpreting the Book of Revelation (Chs. 4-5)*" gives us a synthesis of interpretations that should support the dissertation's central thesis. Here he has done a pretty good job of solving this task.

He showed that throughout the book one can find " numerous direct and indirect references to the eucharistic part of the anaphora" (2:7, 17; 3:20; 11:11; 19:9; 21:6; 22:21) . According to him, "the climax is in the heavenly worship scene in chapter 4 and specifically verses 8 and 10" . The heavenly throne is the unifying unit of the scenes presented in ch. 4 and 5. The throne is the central object, and everything else is positioned around it and in direct relation to it.

I will highlight the following, in my opinion, important points in this chapter:

1. Important is the emphasis on the description of the heavenly worship "through the color shades, glints and reflections of the minerals jasper and sardis, and the rainbow, which itself is a manifestation of color, is described through the radiance of an emerald - ὁμοιος ὀράσει σμαραγδίνῳ".

2. While the praises addressed by τέσσαρα ζῶα to the Triholy God and taken up antiphonally by the elders in ch. 4 praise God sitting on the throne, the doxology in ch. 5 also encompass God's redemption, which is historically rooted in the suffering and sacrifice of the Lamb. Here the doctoral student also sees a polemical reference to Jewish and Gnostic apocalyptic texts.
3. The "Book" which the Seater of the Throne holds in His hand, represents "the Old Testament, or at least that part of it which relates to the future, and is associated in the mind of the seer with the reading of the Old Testament in the Sunday service of the ancient Church." "In the vision described in Rev. Ch. 5, the prophecies of the Old Testament are not simply seen as predictions of future events. They are represented rather as containing the secret providence of God, it is God who holds the book in Himself, to Him belongs the right and power to commit it to whomsoever He deems worthy to open its seals, and therefore to proclaim their true interpretation.' According to the doctoral student, this vision "suggests the view that the prophecies of the Old Testament are incomprehensible except to the one whom God himself chooses as his confidant. The ancient Church, or at least the community to which St. John belongs, perceived the Old Testament as a sealed book, for which only the Lord Jesus Christ has the key. The secret has not been revealed to anyone before, and the only way it can be learned is through the Savior." The doctoral student emphasizes that "the book sealed with seven seals in ch. 5 contrasts with the open little book (10:8-11) which St. John is commanded to take and eat, then to prophesy again. This little book can hardly be anything other than the gospel. The conclusion to be drawn from this contrast is that in John's day the reading of the Gospel, no less than the reading of the Old Testament, was already a part of the Sunday service. The way in which the two books are contrasted in Revelation shows that St. John saw the New Testament as accessible truth, while the Old Testament required an additional gift of interpretation and understanding .
4. According to Mr. Nakov, "The setting in which the scene of the Divine Liturgy unfolds in the vision of St. John is typologically reminiscent of elements from Solomon's Temple. In the vision we find images whose prototype already exists in Candle. Scripture of the Old Testament'. A thesis that he argued successfully with references to Old Testament texts (Ex. 25:18-20, 37:7-9; 2 Chron. 4:2; Jer. 52:17).The doctoral student shares the reconstruction of Feodor Alekseevich Smirnov (1842-1921) of the early Christian liturgy, made on the basis of the visions

in the book of Revelation (p. 176) and draws the following conclusion: "the vision of St. John probably paints for us a God-revealed image of the liturgical practice in its original usual form, as it had at the time of the apostles and the first Christians, showing at the same time the historical connection of the ancient Christian worship with the Jewish liturgical forms and practices, and the most important thing is that it carries a majestic idea of the subsequent formation and development of Holy Eucharist". However, here, in my opinion, the boundaries between a possible existing practice at the time when the book of Revelation was written and a subsequent influence of the description in the book on the formation of early Christian worship are clearly blurred.

The following essential conclusions should be noted in the Dissertation *Conclusion section*:

1. "In the diversity of liturgical successions in the early stages of the formation of the divine service, a number of elements become visible, some of which determine the history of the development of the divine service to the present day. Among these aspects are: the Eucharistic Παρουσία, the participation of the Church in the angelic worship, the emphasis on the importance of the interpreter of the Scriptures (the Lamb who alone is worthy to take the book and unseal it - Rev. 5:9), the connection between confession of sins and the Holy Eucharist, the separation of believers and unbelievers before the heavenly table, the celebration of the Holy Eucharist as an act of the Church in its universal integrity and association of the Holy Eucharist with the Judgment of the world, the perception of the Holy Liturgy as a spiritual battle" (p. 181).

Two of these elements, according to him, directly concern chapters 4 and 5 of the book of Revelation: the participation of the Church in angelic worship and the emphasis on the importance of the interpreter of Scripture. Revelation reflects the liturgical theory and practice of its age.

2. On p. 182, the doctoral student makes the following note: "Regarding the question related to the author's sources for the description of the heavenly worship in ch. 4-5, I believe that the very vision given to the author is a source for a description of worship in heaven. It probably reflects to some extent an already existing form of worship in the ancient Christian Church, but at the same time the vision gives a sublime theological explanation and visualization of what Christian worship on earth should be according to God's will. In this sense, the pictures of the heavenly service greatly influenced the further development of the earthly Holy Liturgy". The presence of elements of the Jewish synagogue worship practice in the

paintings of the book of Revelation probably speaks of their existence in the worship of the ancient Church even at the time of the seer.

3. "The description of a heavenly service given in the book of Revelation was modeled after the actual Liturgy of the early Christian Church. Therefore, on the basis of the vision, we can make a reconstruction of the Christian liturgical practice from the time of the first Christians. In this sense, the Liturgy from the time of St. John would have the following form and sequence: the sacrament is led by a superior - an apostle or a bishop, who occupies a throne standing in front of the altar; on both sides of him stand old men - presbyters; in front of the bishop's throne is a sacrificial throne; the white-robed presbyters fall before the throne and offer praise and thanksgiving to God; The Gospel lies, as it were, held at the right hand of Him who sits invisibly on the throne, and is read to the faithful from the face (of the name) of the Lamb; in the midst of the throne and the elders, in the image of the bread and the cup, lie the body and blood of the slain Lamb; under the throne are the graves of the martyrs, over which the first Christians performed the Eucharist. St. John, in his vision, probably painted a divinely revealed image of the liturgical practice in its original customary form, as it had at the time of the apostles and the first Christians, while at the same time showing the historical connection of the ancient Christian liturgy with the Jewish liturgical forms and practices" (p. 183).

2.2 The abstract of dissertation work

The abstract is made according to the requirements and adequately and fully presents the dissertation.

3. Publications on the topic of the dissertation

The dissertation student has published three articles on the subject of the dissertation in peer-reviewed collective volumes (Proceedings of International Scientific Conferences). The articles present individual aspects of his research and fully cover the criteria and requirements of the current procedure.

5. Quality of work, critical comments and assessment of contributions

I have no significant remarks on the dissertation work of Mr. Nako Nakov. I would note the following perceived weaknesses of his study:

1. About the authorship of the book: On page 66, Mr. Nakov evasively states as a conclusion, in which he should be more categorical, especially since he has already stated his position: "The Book of Revelation **connects (emphasis - PS)** with the name of st. ap. and Evangelist John the Theologian". I attribute this uncertainty here to the lack of a more detailed argumentation in favor of the authorship of St. Ap. and John the Evangelist; the doctoral student somewhat underestimated the strength of

the arguments against his position on this matter (the arguments of Dionysius of Alexandria and the thesis of the two named John, cf. Eusebius. Ecclesiastical History 7.25).

2. When he uses the word God with prepositions "for", "on", etc. it is good to use a short article: "to a God", "for a God", etc.
3. It would be good to point out *parallels in the interpretation of the fourth and fifth chapters of the book of Revelation with the other New Testament books: thematic, conceptual, linguistic*. There are such, for example, with Heb. 12:22-23. One could look for parallels with liturgical elements in the Gospel according to John and the Pauline epistles (eg the "Eucharistic Παρουσία" that the PhD student talks about in the conclusion). Thus, the Apocalypse stands too isolated in the canon of the New Testament in terms of language and ideas. Furthermore, pointing out these parallels would give stronger support to the thesis that the book reflects an existing liturgical practice at the time it was written.
4. On page 100, the following is said: "Over the centuries, it seems that worship has lost its universal dimension, and in addition, it has also lost its earthly, human appearance. It remains somehow outside the everyday life of people and history. As a result, the Holy Liturgy seems to be performed in a world of its own, separate from people and separate from the Heavens . This finding does not correspond with Father Prof. Ivanov's note ¹under the line, which comments on the change of man's attitude towards *the sacred* , the loss of its meaning and value. The very statement here of the doctoral student is too controversial and inappropriate, especially in the addition: "If our Liturgy tends to float in some artificial world, which is not connected with either the heavens or the earth..." (p. 101).
5. On page 121: "St. Andrew of Caesarea interpreted the throne as a personification of God's rest in the saints, "because He rested on them as on a throne." What does this "rest" mean? A brief explanation is needed here, even if the reference is to the famous priestly exclamation "Яко свят еси, Боже, наш, и во святых почиваеши...", which is not quoted.

¹The professor says the following: "Over time, there has been a change in human understanding of sacred, sacramental, holy, which is a consequence of the secularization of this world... how to understand the Eucharist - is it a symbol or a reality, with faith or with reason, tradition or interpretation are leading in this process" (Ivanov, I., Eucharistic Holiness in Anaphora (Resolving conflicts and shaping models).

6. Some technical inaccuracies (few in number in the dissertation): p. 121 in 1 Enoch 46:1, 2 - "the Head of Days" or the Beginning of Days (translated as "The First Day" ...) - I assume that Eng. phrase is left over from the edition of 1 Enoch that the author uses, but I did not see which one it is; or perhaps in the work of Christ, which is quoted, it is not clear. Like p. 89: "His is the glory and rule forever. Amen" (Origen Discourses on the books of Genesis and Exodus) - in which edition is Origen cited? note 268, showing that the error was not accidental.

I accept the contributions formulated by the doctoral student with the following note: he too often relies on those formulated by other authors, whom he quotes quite correctly, but accepts them as facts and places them as starting points for his observations and generalizations, sometimes without critically analyzing them. For example, the reconstruction of Feodor Smirnov, which may not reflect the liturgical practice of the author's time (st. John), but be a construction (of Smirnov) derived from the text of the book of Revelation, which influenced a later formed liturgical rite. The same goes for some of Otto Piper's claims.

Mr. Nakov's work is contributory and significant with the summaries and theses that lead to the argumentation of his main hypothesis, the capacity for synthesis in interpretations and depth in theological analysis.

Conclusion

The dissertation work of Nako Petkov Nakov corresponds to the requirements of the Law on the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the Regulations on the Conditions and Procedures for Acquiring Scientific Degrees and Holding Academic positions at Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski. Bearing in mind the contributing nature of the research, I recommend the honorable scientific jury to award the scientific degree PhD (New Testament Studies) to Nako Petkov Nakov.

My vote is a positive.

2.09.2024

Assoc. Prof. Pavlin Sabev, PhD