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Apocalyptic

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Foreword

The past decade has seen a veritable mushrooming of scholarly studies of Apocalypticism in general and the Book of Revelation in particular. Whatever other causes for this development one may identify, in large part the proliferation of scholarly contributions is due to the work of the Society of Biblical Literature's "Reading the Apocalypse: The Intersection of Literary and Social Methods Seminar". As the "new millennium" drew closer, the topic of Apocalypticism began to receive increased attention in the majority of Society of Biblical Literature sessions.

In the church the Book of Revelation has had a checkered history. Whereas in some groups preaching on apocalyptic texts has held pride of place, in others the Book of Revelation has suffered from benign neglect. Those who felt that they had cracked the code of biblical Apocalypticism drew a large following of devotees and book buyers. The others tended to give up in dismay, even though good insight into the workings of Apocalypticism had already become available.

Biblical apocalyptic deserves better. Käseman was no doubt on the right track when he insisted that apocalyptic was the mother earth from which Christianity grew. Can we recover our roots and remain faithful to the tradition without getting entangled in those roots? The present collection of essays is an attempt to help the church more fully claim its apocalyptic heritage and bring it to bear on the tasks that lie ahead.

John saw a "portent" which appeared "in heaven" (or: "in the sky"). What show was playing there? To put the question differently: What would a first century audience have seen behind the images and scenarios portrayed in the Book of Revelation? Tim Hegedus explores these questions in light of antiquity's fascination with the night sky, which stretched above as a sort of "overhead projection". The cloudless nights in the Mediterranean regions provided free admission to a cosmic drama for every shepherd boy, every peasant, every night watchman who cared to observe it.

Hegedus does not engage in idle speculation. He presents tangible evidence of what various writers and traditions of antiquity did see taking

place on the cosmic “screen”. Whereas Bruce Malina (1995) interpreted Revelation entirely as a “sky vision”, Tim Hegedus intends to focus on one particular vision (Rev. 12:1-17) and he wants to elucidate only those astral features which are “clearly and unmistakably present” there.

Tim takes the reader on a fascinating journey through ancient astrological iconography and its Christian appropriation. In so doing, he provides a key for understanding some of the mysteries of Revelation in particular and ancient Christian art in general. Seen from this vantage point, many of the formerly obscure images (such as the woman in Rev. 12) and numbers (such as the number twelve) appear in a new light. Stimulating reading!

If we had not previously suspected so, Harry Maier demonstrates that in our own day, secular culture as reflected in popular TV shows and movies is replete with apocalyptic themes and scenarios. But Harry does much more. He examines not only the significant difference between Christian apocalypse on the one hand and its secular step-child on the other, he also delineates different trajectories along which Christians have interpreted the message of Apocalypticism.

In the course of this comparison Maier finds it helpful to distinguish between a hermeneutic of suspicion and a hermeneutic of confession. Also, he differentiates between a theology of glory which finds expression in a “utopian millenarianism” which hopes to “create a just and equitable commonwealth” (see also H. Richard Niebuhr’s “Christ the Transformer of Culture”) and a theology of the cross (exemplified, for instance, by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada’s *Evangelical Declaration*).

While Maier affirms (with Boesak and others) that Revelation is a “powerful source of comfort to those struggling with injustice”, he emphasizes John’s heavy note of censure of a phlegmatic church. Harry calls the church to take seriously its vocation of “trouble-maker and stumbling block”.

In Harry’s view the Book of Revelation “may well be the most important New Testament text to help shape Christian identity at the beginning of the new millennium.” There is much food for thought here.

Volker Greifenhagen sheds further light on the subject of Apocalypticism by bringing into consideration the eschatology of Islam, the “neglected partner in the triad of Abrahamic traditions”.

Christians are often surprised to discover in what high esteem Jesus is held in Muslim belief. Even more enlightening, Greifenhagen points out, is the unexpected degree of commonality between the two faith traditions when it comes to questions of eschatology. Without minimizing the unique elements and the diversity of eschatological expectations within each tradition, Greifenhagen points out that, as in Christianity, so also in Islam, eschatological hermeneutic follows three separate and often conflicting paradigms. In either tradition one can find a literal (fundamentalistic) approach, a psychological (individualized) interpretation, and a social reform agenda.

As an added bonus, this exploration of a non-Christian but closely related stream of apocalyptic thinking gives Volker the opportunity to reflect on the benefits and dangers of apocalyptic.

This is fascinating reading from which Christians can learn much.

As part of the assignments in my Seminary course on the Book of Revelation, students are asked to write their own apocalypse. The purpose of the assignment is to help us explore how the apocalyptic worldview is relevant to our own day, and to acknowledge and express the apocalyptic dimension in our lives and in the life of our community. Students are asked to think and speak and write like an apocalyptic prophet and to express their faith in apocalyptic terms. The object is not just to emulate the Book of Revelation or to replicate the gist of the numerous intertestamental apocalypses, but to explore some possibilities of apocalyptic thinking for preaching, counselling and for ethical decision making.

The “personal apocalypse” by Boyd Drake is one of the products of such a class. For various reasons I decided to print Boyd’s apocalypse virtually unaltered. For one thing, Boyd assured me that what he has written is not fiction. It represents what Boyd actually experienced. Whether various portions of the text relate “in the body” or “out of the body” experiences, we will not try to determine. These things, as Paul well knew, are sometimes impossible to distinguish.

Boyd’s apocalypse does not claim to be my apocalypse or yours, although we can all identify with his story. Were I to write my own apocalypse, I would no doubt incorporate into it allusions to the great number of biblical passages that guide me through life’s often painful journey, passages that give me hope, courage, and direction. You, the reader,

might incorporate other features which are distinctive of your own faith journey. Be that as it may, Boyd allows us to enter into his world in which tragedy and despair are an everyday reality with which he has tried to cope as a social worker and as a Christian. You will find his account deeply moving. Maybe it will even stimulate you to do your own writing and reflecting.

Four perspectives on Apocalyptic. Each author, in his own way, opens up possibilities for you and me to pursue.

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