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Preaching in the new creation: the promise of New Testament apocalyptic texts

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Ralph E. and Norma E. Peck Professor of Preaching and Communications at Iliff School of Theology, Denver, Colorado. But the interested lay person can also gain new insights into the challenges facing the church and the hope that calls to us through the “God-shaped hole”.

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Preaching in the New Creation: The Promise of New Testament Apocalyptic Texts

David Schnasa Jacobsen

Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999

144 pages, \$31.50 softcover

This is a fine book on a difficult and timely subject for the beginning of a new millennium, the recovery of New Testament apocalyptic texts for the pulpit. So much apocalyptic discourse today seems manipulative and destructive. David Schnasa Jacobsen, Assistant Professor of Homiletics at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary, presents in a lively way an intriguing road map for readers to negotiate apocalyptic biblical terrain. If they follow his route, they will better appreciate this difficult genre and be better equipped to preach the new age that God is creating and has begun in Christ.

The clear organization of Jacobsen's book contrasts the chaotic possibilities of apocalypse. Apocalyptic texts often resist close historical-critical scrutiny, partly because their language is symbolic; instead of expecting exegesis to open the world behind the text, preachers should focus on the world the text opens in the foreground. He offers three exegetical steps: first, do a rhetorical analysis of the text to assess what the text is trying to accomplish. Mark 13:24-37 is trying to move its hearers from one kind of “watching out” to “watching for” the new thing God is doing. Second, learn to analyze apocalyptic form. Whereas Hebrew apocalypses commonly move in a fearsome manner from divine action to cosmic convulsion and sometimes also to eschatological judgement, the apocalypse in Mark 13 moves to eschatological salvation. Third, consider what social reality the symbols employed by a text disclose in front of it, as opposed to trying to determine what they refer to, or what feelings they generate. They may function either to construct, maintain, or delegitimize the world. The symbols in Mark 13:24b-25 (“The sun will be darkened...”) are from Isaiah where they delegitimize Babylon and thus stand as a promise for Israel that again is not to be feared. Preachers ought to avoid the swamp of discussing what the symbols in the text

literally mean (if that could be determined) and instead use the symbols as a lens to reinterpret the present world.

Jacobsen devotes a chapter each to how apocalyptic symbols construct and maintain social worlds, but he only mentions the third possibility, how they delegitimize worlds, claiming that these are “the rarest of the three stances toward world for the preacher” (64). Perhaps another chapter is needed to explain this, or to explore if the opposite is not the case – apocalyptic texts by their imagery of nature in convulsion seem to call into question all powers and principalities. Even in Mark 13, where Jacobsen convinces me that what seems fearsome is in fact hopeful, the symbols seem to function initially to delegitimize the powers of this world – which is exactly how he uses them in the first half of his sermon on this text. One of the functions of apocalypse is to pronounce a sentence upon the current age.

I was pleased that Jacobsen includes three of his own sermons. Apart from their inherent interest as strong sermons, they afford an opportunity to see this theory in practice. He really does mean that preachers should not discuss the literal meaning of symbols in apocalyptic texts; in fact one strains to hear any direct discussion of his texts. He does what he advocates, he uses the symbols as a lens to view our world. He also does something he does not discuss: each sermon has five parts and moves in similar ways. Readers may be left wondering, (a) if something other than apocalyptic texts is governing his homiletic, and (b) whether the demanding nature of his exegetical proposals will not leave the preacher too far short of a completed sermon. Still, what is offered here is an excellent roadmap for a journey not to be missed.

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The Church Musician

Paul Westermeyer

Minneapolis: Augsburg-Fortress Press, 1997

159 pp., \$22.95 Softcover

Alas, the “worship wars” in our churches continue to claim individual and congregational victims! Often pastors and church musicians do not know where to turn for clarity and support. This is a book for all who worship, sing, and appreciate good music in the church, but especially for pastors, church musicians, and members of parish worship or music committees.