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Till Jesus comes: origins of Christian apocalyptic expectation

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Till Jesus Comes: Origins of Christian Apocalyptic Expectation

Charles L. Holman

Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996

222 pages

The New Testament, when it speaks about the future hope, is replete with seemingly contradictory statements such as the following: "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place" (Mark 13:30), "And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations" (Mark 13:10). How is one to deal with such conflicting affirmations?

Scholars may posit the use of various sources, or ascribe the unevenness to the hand of redactors. Holman has examined Old Testament, intertestamental, and New Testament literature and has found that this sort of tension between "near-end expectation" on the one hand, and "delayed fulfillment" on the other, can be traced all the way back to the bedrock of biblical tradition. It is rooted in the covenant promises and their partial fulfillment in the history of the people of God. The author shows that "the end expectation of fulfillment and reckoning with a delay of that fulfillment are two sides of a coin" (82). In fact, it may be appropriate to regard affirmations of imminence as a way of coping with the experience of a delay.

It is remarkable that, in spite of the fact that the covenant promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were only partially fulfilled in the course of history, Israel did not abandon their trust in God, but continued undaunted in hope. Along the way the people of God experienced incomplete fulfillment of those promises: the return from the exile, the success of the Maccabees, the coming of Jesus and his resurrection. These events served to strengthen that hope, and enabled the community to cope with still further delays of that eschatological future.

As time went on, future expectation began to be expressed in apocalyptic categories. The old traditions (most impressively codified in Daniel) were handed on not unchanged, but adapted to meet the varying needs of each succeeding age. Sometimes (especially when the delay was felt most poignantly) imminence was stressed more than at other times. Sometimes the cause for the delay was ascribed to human sinfulness and the need for repentance, but most often an explanation for the delay simply could not be given at all. At those times believers were simply encouraged to cling to the confidence that in the mind of the sovereign God there is a clear picture of what will happen and when. Some apocalyptists (such as 1 Enoch and 2 Baruch) present a clearly structured outline of world history, whereas the martyrs under the altar who cry "how long?" (Revelations 6:10) are given white robes, signs of God's justice and care, and encouraged to

"wait a little longer". The effect in each case is the same.

This is a fascinating book. It deals with what is central to biblical theology and the faith of the people of God. Read it! It will be an important resource for preaching, teaching, and personal edification. Never has a (revised) doctoral dissertation been more readable and practical. The author will take you on a journey from the Blessing of Jacob (Genesis 49) to the end of the age (Revelations 22). He will explore with you the faith of the pre-exilic and the post-exilic prophets, the hope of the early and the later Jewish apocalypses, the exhortation of Paul and the Synoptic Gospels, and the eager longing of John of Patmos.

But the author will do more. He will reflect with you on how essential it is for the Christian church to witness to that hope which is in us, and to persevere in that confidence precisely when we cry "Lord, how long?"

Erwin Buck
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To Set the Captives Free: Liberation Theology in Canada

Oscar Cole Arnal

Toronto: Between the Lines Press, 1998

230 pages, \$21.95 Softcover

Oscar Cole Arnal, professor of the history of Christianity at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary, provides a tantalizing glimpse into the history of background and liberative theologies in Canada. This work includes an excellent historical and social analysis of the Canadian context. It is a book directed to seminary students, social justice advocates, clergy, and all those who wrestle with Christianity and justice in the Canadian context.

The first chapter sets the stage for his book, followed by a foundational chapter on the liberation-oppression struggle in the Christian tradition. He begins with the Hebrew and Greek scriptures, and continues with a brief survey of liberation in the history of the church. Following Douglas John Hall, Cole Arnal points a finger at the "Constantinian betrayal" of the church. He traces protest voices (echoing Hall's "thin tradition") from the early church to the present. Revealed is a church with a poor record of caring for the oppressed.

The third and fourth chapters provide a social analysis of Canadian society. In chapter three, Cole Arnal names the economic elite as the oppressors in Canada, since they control the media, culture, and education