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Apocalypse and Allegiance: Worship, Politics and Devotion in the Book of Revelation (Book Review)

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God. Many of you know our life history and how it seems that if it can happen, it will happen to the Bosmas.... God isn't the one who creates pain and suffering. But He is the one who comforts.... All

I can say is "Thank you, God. Thank you for your abiding love."
And thank you, God, for Cella "holy and dearly loved."

Kraybill, J. Nelson. *Apocalypse and Allegiance: Worship, Politics and Devotion in the Book of Revelation*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010. 224 pages. ISBN: Reviewed by Dr. Syd Hielema, Chaplain and Associate Professor of Religion at Redeemer University College, Ancaster, ON.

Opinion polls have long confirmed that the final book of the Bible, Revelation, is one of the most popular works in the entire canon. After the establishment of the state of Israel after the Second World War and the subsequent rise of tensions in the Middle East, end-times fever and the accompanying interest in St. John's Revelation have increased dramatically. Attempts to correlate specific events of our time with the visions that John received, most notably in the wildly successful *Left Behind* series, written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, spread with each new outbreak of violence or natural disaster. But such schools of interpretation have a long history, so that more than a century ago G. K. Chesterton could write in *Orthodoxy*, "though St. John the Evangelist saw many wild monsters in his vision, he saw no creature so wild as one of his own commentators" (qtd. in Peterson, *Reversed Thunder, The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination*, xiii).

It's a pleasure to welcome J. Nelson Kraybill's *Apocalypse and Allegiance: Worship, Politics and Devotion in the Book of Revelation* into the speculative cacophony of commentaries and end-times analyses. Dr. Kraybill, president emeritus of Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary and author of *Imperial Cult and Commerce in John's Apocalypse* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), quickly distances himself from these schools of interpretation at the outset:

The last book of the Bible is not a catalog of predictions about events that would take place two thousand years later. Rather, it is a projector that casts archetypal images of good and evil onto a cosmic screen. These images speak first of all to realities of the author's era. But Revelation also serves as a primer on how good and evil interact in every generation. (15)

Kraybill's mission is to describe the "realities of the author's era" by means of the semiotic theory of Charles Sanders Peirce, which distinguishes among the communicative properties of icon, index and symbol (34). Complicated? Not really. After a very brief summary of Peirce's work, Kraybill focuses on the task at hand, which is to correlate the symbolism in Revelation with cultural symbols of the late first century. He does so because "symbols are signs that communicate simply because users in a given group or culture have agreed to give them an arbitrary meaning" (34). In his view, Revelation is filled with hundreds of

symbols, which, in order to be understood, must be seen as polemic reclaimings of idolatrous symbols from the Roman Empire.

Apocalypse and Allegiance functions like an encyclopedia of symbol correlation: according to Kraybill, the risen Christ in Rev. 1 responds to a Roman coin that features the infant son of emperor Domitian (37). The worship of the earth-beast in Rev. 13 correlates with various kinds of emperor worship (Ch. 3). The kingdom and priesthood established by the risen Lamb counters the "*augustales*, the priests of emperor worship" (100). The uncountable worshipers of Rev. 7 reduce the celebrating crowds at the Circus Maximus to a pitiful parody (114). I could continue, but you get the picture: Kraybill understands the dynamics of late-first-century Roman culture very well, and though the number of correlations with John's writing in Revelation are almost uncountable, their conclusion is consistent: Revelation unmasks the idolatries of Rome incisively and reveals the risen Lamb on the throne as the true and only Lord of all.

Kraybill's method becomes both a strength and a weakness. It is a strength because his vast historical knowledge illumines many confusing images and phrases in Revelation by situating them within the contrast between worship of the true King and idolatry in the first century. Anyone who completes this volume will find it very difficult to argue that John's primary audience was intended to be a church in the far-distant future anticipating the traumas of the end times. Instead, Kraybill's goal of describing first-century spiritual warfare so that it clarifies the warfare we are still engaged in today succeeds remarkably well. He follows the implications of his findings to difficult places and tackles these head-on, including dealing with the book's anger, violence, and desire for vengeance (133-137) and its economic implications (141-154).

But his approach also has weaknesses. At points the almost overwhelming correlation of passages in Revelation with first-century cultural artifacts begins to feel reductionist. St. John's writing is so multi-dimensionally rich, operating on several levels simultaneously, that Kraybill's heavy emphasis on this one dimension diminishes and even ignores other significant dimensions. St. John's literary artistry is such that intra-textual allusions abound playfully

and profoundly, carrying the narrative forward from the Lamb to the community of the Lamb to the new creation. Kraybill acknowledges that John never once quotes the Old Testament while alluding to it several hundred times, but he does not explore this multitude of allusions. One could justly argue that other commentators focus on these literary dimensions, allowing him to concentrate on the particular contribution he is most able to provide. But the absence of these other dimensions creates the impression at times that Revelation is primarily a *reactive* work attempting to reclaim the throne from the Roman Empire rather than a *proactive* declaration set in the context of a spiritual warfare whose outcome has already been determined. At times it as if the Roman Empire were afforded too much power to provide the lenses for reading Revelation.

Kraybill's handling of the worship theme in Revelation provides a clear illustration of the strengths and weaknesses of his approach. My Reformed heart is strangely warmed when he introduces his study by asserting, "We will not give equal attention to all parts of the vision. Rather, we will focus on the theme of worship – worship of the emperor, worship of the Lamb, and worship in our world today" (22f.). This account of worship as the ultimate heart orientation of persons and cultures and thus the locus of spiritual warfare provides a powerful foundation for his biblical study, one that creates strong bridges between the first-century world and our world today. But worship has two dimensions: in addition to fundamental heart orientation, it is also a specifically focused human act, carried out when God's people gather together, and this second dimension also receives a great deal of attention in the book of Revelation. Statements such as "In this time between the times, worship becomes the central means by which God orients individuals and congregations towards God's future" (179) are theologically wise concerning this second dimension but leave one with the sense that for him worship is utilitarian; e.g., "worship is a staging area for spiritual resistance" (179). Yes it is, but it is much more: Revelation makes clear that worship involves bowing in adoration before the Lion/Lamb, whose mystery is far greater than we can ever articulate. It is not at its center an equipping act but one of surrender and submission.

Apocalypse and Allegiance has several unique features. First, rather than proceeding sequentially through the text of Revelation, Kraybill focuses on less than half of its twenty-two chapters, sequencing his study thematically rather than textually (e.g., beginning with chapter one, moving to chapter thirteen, and so on). At first I found this approach confusing, but I did come to accept it, recognizing how this strategy served his purposes well.

Second, Kraybill is a true teacher, and the book contains close to a hundred illustrations, discussion questions at the end of each chapter, a contemporary story that illustrates a

theme from each chapter, a timeline, a glossary, a map, and an extensive bibliography and index. The cumulative effect of these "extras" is very helpful, reinforcing his main theses and engaging the reader.

Finally, Kraybill's Anabaptist perspective is thought-provoking. After noting John Dominic Crossan's lament concerning the bloodthirsty character of Revelation (133), he responds with a carefully developed but brief argument that Revelation actually preaches non-violent resistance to a violent empire (133-137). This five-page section is packed with solid biblical study and wise insight. I would have liked to see a more thorough development of his argument, but I understand that his work is a thematic commentary and not a treatise on pacifism. Consider these two suggestions that he offers: "what the Christian church in the West today needs is more anger, not less. We may need Revelation to jolt us out of our slumber, to open our eyes to see the idolatry and injustice that pervade globalization and empire today" (137) and "Sometimes injustice or suffering may make it appropriate for us to use the rage passages of Revelation in prayer. . . . Then the rage we bring to God and leave at the throne of grace will find its proper place" (136). I find these to contain wise, prophetic advice; nonetheless, I remain more drawn to Bonhoeffer's conclusion—that violence may be necessary as a last resort in extreme situations—than to Kraybill's pacifism.

Kraybill's Anabaptist worldview also leads him to interpret Revelation to declare that all and any participation in the economic structures of the Roman Empire is sinful. After overviewing various New Testament references to commerce, he concludes, "John of Patmos, in the middle of a dirge about politicians and merchants who have 'fornicated' with Babylon/Rome, hears a voice cry, 'Come out of her, my people, so that you do not take part in her sins'" (Rev 18.4) and, later, "Roman ideology and the structures of empire are so corrupt that followers of Jesus must abandon all relationship with them" (159, 162). While Kraybill's discussion questions (154, 166) helpfully challenge readers to wrestle with the implications of this interpretation for our economic lives today, I wish he had developed these claims more thoughtfully, either by nuancing them or explaining why they cannot be nuanced. Surely such issues are among the most complex that Christians must face today, and providing more reflective guidance would have been pastorally sensitive.

With qualifications, I would recommend *Apocalypse and Allegiance* for personal and group study. If I were to use it with a group, I would pair it with Eugene Peterson's *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination* (which would require reading the chapters of Kraybill's volume out of order). Because these two works focus on complementary dimensions of Revelation, they would work very well together.