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Bible and the Future (Book Review)

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The Bible and the Future, by Anthony A. Hoekema. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1979. 343 pages, \$12.95. Reviewed by John C. Vander Stelt, Associate Professor of Philosophy and Theology.

Given the rampant speculation concerning the return of Christ, particularly the dispensational, premillennarian views of the eschatological pop-theologian, Hal Lindsey, and given the significant influence of Seventh-day Adventists' and Jehovah's Witnesses' ideas about the future, *The Bible and the Future* is an extremely significant publication.

Anthony A. Hoekema, Professor of Systematic Theology Emeritus at Calvin Theological Seminary, has made a major contribution with this study by relating Scripture's teaching concerning the future to a covenantal life style of believers and in rejecting erroneous and sectarian notions about the *eschaton*.

Hoekema has correctly placed the doctrine of the end-things in the context of (the tension between) the Kingdom of God that already is and that is still to come. The former he called "realized or inaugurated eschatology," which is discussed in Part I of the book in connection with such themes as the Old Testament, New Testament, meaning of history, Kingdom of God, and the Holy Spirit.

In Part II, concerning future eschatology, the author has dealt in a sensitive and Biblical manner with the topics of death, immortality, intermediate state, signs of the times, second coming, millennium, resurrection, judgment, punishment, and new earth. In each instance, Hoekema is first of all concerned to indicate what Scripture requires the believer to hold to, and only secondarily, to indicate what he must reject in the light of Scripture. In the main line of his exposition, the author has followed the approach and ideas of such men as Hendrikus Berkhof, G. C. Berkouwer, Geerhardus Vos, and N. H. Ridderbos. In a sense it can be said that Hoekema has brought together and popularized the salient features of the views on eschatology of these theologians.

I find of great value in *The Bible and the Future* Hoekema's constant desire to let Scripture speak for itself, to enter into careful dialogue with those who hold erroneous views, and to reject all those views that are unmistakably heretical. The 28-page appendix on recent trends in eschatology, the selected bibliography, and, finally, the indexes of subjects, proper names, and Scriptures enable the person interested in any facet of (traditional) eschatology to locate the relevant topic, person, and passage of Scripture within a few seconds.

Noteworthy is Hoekema's stress on the fact that eschatology is not just a part of a doctrine but

that it is characteristic of all proclamation and Christian living (cf. p. 3). The reason he can say this is inseparably related to his belief that

The greatest eschatological event in history is not in the future but in the past. Since Christ has won a decisive victory over Satan, sin, and death in the past, future eschatological events must be seen as the completion of a redemptive process which has already begun. (p. 77)

Hoekema has no use for the idea of "immortality of the soul" (cf. pp. 89-91) and has given an illuminating discussion of man's intermediate state between his death and the return of Christ.

Hoekema's clear stress on the cosmic nature of Christ's redemption and return is welcome. The kingdom of God

does not mean merely the salvation of certain individuals nor even the salvation of a chosen group of people. It means nothing less than the complete renewal of the entire cosmos, culminating in the new heaven and the new earth. (p. 53)

Hoekema's succinct and lucid discussion of the nature of the general and particular signs of the times (cf. pp. 129-163) is of great help. He refuses to equate prophecy with history. The notion of reportorial history leaves the doors wide open to speculation about a timetable for future events and a datable return of Christ.

Only in a few instances did I feel it necessary to place a question mark. I wonder whether it is correct to characterize all atheistic existentialism with the phrase "sheer individualism" (cf. p. 25)? Also, should one continue to speak of "physical death" (emphasis, mine), keep thinking in terms of a "something" or an "aspect" of man that remains after physical death and talk about a "temporary separation" of soul and body? (cf. pp. 95ff.) Finally, it would be helpful if Hoekema would explain the meaning of the phrase "going to heaven" and clarify the statement "For heaven and earth will then no longer be separated, as they are now, but will be one (see Rev. 21:1-3)" (p. 274).

With the appearance of *The Bible and the Future* I am able to discard many books in my library on eschatology. I have no doubt that this book will be used by many for years to come.