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Gospel and History (Book Review)

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K. J. Popma, *Gospel and History*. Translated and edited by Harry Van Dyke. Aalten, The Netherlands: Wordbridge Publishing, 2021. ISBN: 978-90-76660-65-3 (hardcover); 978-90-76660-62-2 (paperback). vii+237 pp. Reviewed by Keith C. Sewell, Professor Emeritus of History, Dordt University.

This is a continuation and amplification of K. J. Popma's *Scriptural Reflections on History*, previously reviewed in *Pro Rege* (June, 2021, 37-38). That work was first published in Dutch in 1945. This further volume, *Gospel and History*, dates from 1972. Klaas J. Popma (1903-86) was a classicist who was among those influenced by the philosophers Dirk H. Th. Vollenhoven (1892-1978) and Herman Dooyeweerd (1894-1977). As Harry Van Dyke, the translator and editor, indicates, this book is written in the same "stream of consciousness" style as the earlier work. At the same time, as Van Dyke suggests, Popma's post-1960s thinking reflects a scene that has become somewhat darker, with Christianity less present in public life, and Christians themselves more uncertain and confused.

In *Gospel and History*, familiar themes are repeated with greater force and depth. At the same time, it should be acknowledged that some readers might find Popma's elliptical style challenging. His style calls for a moderate reading speed, and if the reader responds accordingly, then the depth of the teaching may be more readily absorbed. Moreover, he drives us to think for ourselves, not as autonomous individuals, but in what we might call a "Word-disciplined" manner.

Across a wide range of sub-topics, a number of dominant themes emerge. One is what Popma calls the "Mother Promise." By this expression he means the *protoevangelium* promise of Gen. 3:15: "I will put enmity between you [the ancient serpent] and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (1). That promise cuts across and ultimately undermines the full reign of sin, even as the calling of humankind to fulfil the cultural mandate continues, though this be a world wrecked by human disobedience and its consequences. All history is full of suffering and confusion, hovering constantly on the brink of chaos, because of the impact of sin across the entire historical process—and

at the root of all this lies the active power of the demonic (3-16). The manifestations are various. Among them, Popma repeatedly draws attention to dictatorial, totalitarian rulers (9, 14, 94, 141, 162, 176) and to the phenomenon of "imperialism" in its various guises (17-18, 127-130, 140-141, 151-152).

The "Mother Promise" receives its fulfilment in Jesus Christ, in whom all things come together. He stands at the heart of all human history—the whole story turns on him (99, 178-179, 207). Although the people of God live amidst the trials and tribulations of the present age, their struggle is spiritual (165-167); it is Jesus Christ himself who has achieved victory and, thereby, totally counteracts and triumphs over the chaos and disintegration brought about by the evil one (101-6, 145-147). Furthermore, the preaching of the gospel itself "simply assumed the idea of world history" (69)—it is addressed to all the peoples of the earth, it brings them back together, and it provides hope and healing. So, Psalm 72: 8, 11 looks beyond the Davidic kingdom to the universal and all-encompassing rule of Jesus Christ (69). Here I would add that there is a *world historical* meaning to "the Sun of Righteousness [shall] arise with healing in his wings" (Mal. 4:2). As Popma puts it, "history as a healing process is the battle between life and death, which could only be won when the Life, Christ himself, appeared as the great Warrior" (108).

Another important theme is that as humankind, we cannot evade our own historically conditioned place in the historical process. Popma states that "man is his history." However, man is not totally determined by history (187); he is also "more than his history," so that "according to his created nature man transcends his history" (2). Man as "*ens historicum*, a historical being, is called to evaluate the history in which he is a participant," and this is ineluctable. All sufficiently self-aware persons have some sort of view of history, however inadequate or ill informed (153-154).

So what about a Christian view of history? As

decades passed after the ascension, it became clear that Christians were going to live on earth for many generations, and the quest to formulate a Christian understanding of human history became necessary. This quest proved to be very difficult (34-48, 70-78). The problem was that the Christians concerned were immersed in the same cultural development that they were struggling to understand (25). According to Popma, even Augustine (354-430), no intellectual lightweight, “never solved the problem of cultural critique—namely, how to judge a culture whose spirit the judge does not share yet of which he clearly is himself a member” (78).

Christians still struggle with this issue. It has to do with our history as Christians and the history of the wider culture of which we are a part. Moreover, this problem brings forward the question of the idea and status of “theology.” The term “theology” has a number of discernibly distinct meanings. Its roots in pagan Greek thought are undisputable. Yet theology has often been regarded as the centrepiece of Christian thought. Is it not so that theology tells us how to interpret the Bible correctly? At this point, Popma is exceedingly wary. He says, “Let us not speak too quickly about a ‘theology of history.’ That only confuses the issue.” He is not at all sure what a “theological interpretation of history” would amount to (140). He insists that the reading and interpretation of Scripture is not the exclusive task of theological specialists (117). He is definitely suspicious of what he terms the “theological indus-

try” (122). At the same time he acknowledges that defining theology is “an inordinately complicated and thorny question” (191). Certainly, the idea of a theological-intellectual elite, standing between the people of God and the Scriptures, strikes at the heart of the Reformation principle. My former colleague John Vander Stelt (1934-2020) explored these issues from a philosophical standpoint in his book *Faith Life and Theology: A Reorientation* (2020). Arguably, “theology” is at its most problematic for a Christian view of history when it requires that we submit to a rationally ordered “systematic theology” in which the key features of a biblically directed view of history are reduced to the status of static *loci* within its logically constructed architecture. When it comes to developing a Christian view of history, Popma calls for a “gospel-based view of history [that] is rooted in the faith of the church, shares its inspiration, and builds on it” (140).

These are questions that call for continued reflection, not least because of the part that the notions of “sacred theology” and “theology as the queen of the sciences” have played in the *history* of Christianity. The task of forming a Christian view of history falls to the people of God as they obediently hear the Word of God.

Christians are again feeling the pressure to reflect on how the Bible addresses human history. As they do so, they will find in this book a valuable resource, conveying deep insight and much encouragement.