

THE FUTURE OF THE WORLD, AN EXEGETICAL STUDY OF REVELATION 19.11-22.15, by Mathias Rissi. *Studies in Biblical Theology, Second Series. SCM Press, 1972. 120 pp. £1.50.*

Is the Apocalypse of John really an apocalypse? Certainly it would seem to diverge in some respects from a typical instance of the form. Thus Revelation is to be read aloud in church (1, 3) whereas apocalypses were normally read privately. Again, pseudonymity is the rule generally, but the common opinion is that Revelation is the work of the John—whichever John that may be—whose name it bears ('there is not a shred of evidence', wrote R. H. Charles, 'not even the shadow of a probability, for the hypothesis that the Apocalypse is pseudonymous', and most scholars agree). We miss in Revelation the device of 'prophesy after the event' (except perhaps in one passage which Rissi thinks is an interpolation, 17, 9b-17), and the presence of precise predictions. If Rissi is correct, Revelation also shows an uncharacteristic interest in the nations for their own sake, and transmogrifies the concept of the eschatological battle. Charles and Boismard, among others, regard Revelation as very much a composite work, but most commentators, Rissi among them, find in it a substantial literary unity which few would predicate of the run of apocalypses. Untypical as it clearly is in some ways at least, the book unhappily retains the apocalyptic obscurity which makes the genre so maddening to the modern reader, who, unless he be a bold man, finds it nigh impossible to be sure that he has the key to crack the code in which each section is written.

Professor Rissi is prepared to tread the path of boldness. Revelation, he believes, was written *c.* A.D. 75-79, towards the end of Vespasian's reign (17, 9b-17, with its reference to Domitian, 81-96, he believes, as we have said, to be an interpolation). The message is that Christians should take heart in their troubles from the belief that Jesus has overcome the world. In a short while the enemies of Jesus will draw themselves up in battle array, but no blow will be struck, no blood spilt, for the eschatological battle has already been fought and won, in the ministry of the historical Jesus, so it remains only that Jesus should proclaim his victory for all opposition to crumble. Jesus will then reign on the earth for a thousand years (though this number, Rissi enigmatically tells us, 'transcends chronology'), after which the heavenly Jerusalem will descend and the Church be gathered into it. The Church's enemies will be thrown into the

lake of fire, which signifies suffering of inconceivably long duration, but judgment will not be God's last word and ultimately Israel will be converted and will enter the city through the twelve gates which bear the names of the tribes; more, the Gentiles will also be included in this universal salvation. It is clear that Rissi believes that for John salvation will be actually, not just potentially universal: on p. 81 he interprets 22, 3 ('every accursed thing shall disappear') as implying that 'the lake of fire, or the second death, is now done away with' and 5, 13 as a proleptic statement of the praise that at the end every single created being without exception will offer to God; he thus has to interpret 22, 15 ('outside are dogs . . .') not of the last scene of salvation history, but of the penultimate stage when the just are already in the city and the wicked are in the lake of fire being punished before being admitted to salvation.

Professor Rissi is more sure that he has identified the views of the author of this bewildering book than it is perhaps safe for any of us to be. To consider the varied, contradictory assessments of the book down the ages (Jerome thought it 'beyond all praise', Caius the Presbyter in the third century thought it 'incoherent and unintelligible', the work forsooth of the arch-heretic Cerinthus; Moffatt, more recently, pronounced it a work of 'creative genius', while Dodd wrote with unwonted asperity of its 'muddled fantasy-thinking' and said its God 'can hardly be recognized as the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ') is to be led to suspect that an author who has spread confusion to this extent in the ranks of his readers may well not have been over-clear himself as to what he wanted to say. I suspect he himself did not know whether he intended the millenium to be taken as a sober reality or not; whether by the lake of fire he meant annihilation or penal torments, finite or eternal; whether he believed that all men would be saved, or only that all men could be saved. Rissi's reading of the book is attractive (if obscurely expressed at times), but most of the details of his interpretation are very much open to question. Revelation, with its flamboyant imagery, is a fine antidote to an over-intellectualized Christianity, but it is doubtful whether it contains any coherent doctrine about 'the future of the world'.

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