

Review of the book Hope against hope

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Preprint

Hope against Hope: Christian Eschatology in Contemporary Context, Richard Bauckham & Trevor Hart (eds.), Darton, Longman and Todd 1999 (ISBN 0-232-52284-7), pp. xiv + 233, pb £11.95

This monograph is a product of interdisciplinary co-operation between a newtestamentarian (Richard Bauckham) and a systematic theologian (Trevor Hart). The title refers to Romans 4:18, where it is stated that Abraham 'in hope believed against hope ... that he might become a father of many nations.' Humanly speaking, we are in a situation as hopeless as that of Abraham, who had in vain hoped for a son. But since Abraham became father of a son in the end, why should we not 'hope in the transcendent possibilities of God the Creator' (xi)? In chapter 1, the authors discuss the hopelessness of our plight by discussing the decline of the modern 'myth of progress.' They distinguish 'Jewish and Christian views of history' that 'have looked to the transcendent God's activity within history' from the Enlightenment view that, while building on the Christian eschatology it repudiated (9) typically asserts wholly immanent meaning (11-12; cf. 37-38). In the face of 'the two World Wars, the Holocaust, Stalin's reign of terror, Vietnam, and the killing-fields of Cambodia, Bosnia and Rwanda' (15), the theodicy implicit in the myth of progress (evil as the price paid for progress - 12) becomes 'a sick joke' (15). And though the myth of progress 'was universalistic in its goal' ('what the West already has will inevitably in time also benefit the "developing" world' - 11, 19), it is by now clear that equality world-wide has continually decreased, and that ecological limits make it in practice impossible for most of the world to share 'the American standard of living' (18-19). Finally, they discuss the anti-metanarratives of Nietzsche, Benjamin and Lyotard, who offer a future of bleak meaninglessness instead of genuine hope. In chapter 2, B & H succinctly introduce what they see as the genuinely Christian eschatology. Contrary to the myth of progress, it acknowledges human limits and does not offer a speculative theodicy. 'It tells a story of God's dealings with evil which offers hope without minimizing or justifying evil. ... It finds in the cross God's loving solidarity with all who suffer and proffers hope for the end of history, when God will wipe away the tears from every eye and take his creation beyond the reach of evil' (41). In chapter 3, B & H argue that Christian eschatology involves a 'wager' on meaningfulness, on transcendence, on the God of the resurrection. 'We shall ... have at last to be rescued ... from the shipwreck of history by one who stands outside its horizons' (68). In chapter 4, they argue that Christian eschatology is neither straightforwardly descriptive of future states of affairs (73), nor noncognitivist (because it really is about the future - 82). It is about a future, however, that is very much different from the present, because it will be a re-creation by God, and therefore everything we could possibly say now falls short of what will then happen - though by our imagination we can have an 'ambiguous vision' of the eschaton. In chapter 5, the authors analyze ten images that have played central roles in Christian eschatology: antichrist, parousia, resurrection, new creation, millennium, the last judgment, the garden of God and the city of God, sabbath rest and marriage feast, the kingdom of God, the vision of God. In the final chapter, B & H argue that Christian hope should not lead to quietism, but should motivate us to refuse to accept the world as it is. They distinguish sharply between the myth of progress that assumes that progress is inevitable, and truly Christian hope, which asserts that progress is possible (182).

This is a fine example of common sense theology: clear, accessible, and nevertheless spiritually engaging. The book is full of quotations, and of passages that deserve to be quoted in turn. The position the authors defend is attractive: eschatology will have to steer a middle way between quasi-scientific prediction of the future on the one hand, and unwarranted spiritualizing (misrepresenting eschatology as being about only a qualitatively different present) on the other. I would like to raise two questions, not as criticisms, but as an invitation to the authors to develop the vision presented in this sympathetic and though-provoking book even further. Firstly, in spite of all their references to the shipwreck of modernism and the hopelessness of our postmodern plight, the authors seem to underestimate the extent to which the idea that God is a transcendent person acting in the world is no longer 'culturally available.' They write about the re-creating activity of the transcendent God as if people nowadays commonly understand what is meant by that. To me, this seems much too optimistic, and therefore I think that a

further spelling out of their views on the doctrine of God and on divine agency might prove very useful. My second question has to do with eschatology as motivating concern for *this* world. The authors make it very clear that it is not their intention to foster quietism, but it seems to me doubtful that their views will really encourage an 'eschatological activism' (202). Early in the book they have to such an extent emphasized the *discontinuity* between this world and the world to come (e.g., 77-80), that at the end of the book they have great difficulty to show the value of 'thisworldly' action. For them, our actions here and now can be 'signs and anticipations of the eschatological kingdom of God' (200); but is that sufficient to motivate us here and now? José Míguez Bonino once argued (*Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation*, Fortress Press 1975, 132-153) that we should not see our actions in this world as mere signs of the kingdom, but as the building-bricks that God will transform when establishing the kingdom. Is there no biblical warrant for the assertion of an intrinsic, yes even a causal, connection between present body and resurrection, between present just actions and the coming kingdom? If that is the case, our present labour will have significance also *sub specie eternitatis*.

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