

Newport, Kenneth G. C. *Apocalypse and Millennium: Studies in Biblical Eisegesis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. x + 252 pp.

Kenneth G. C. Newport is Reader in Christian Thought at Liverpool Hope University College and serves on the board of the Charles Wesley Society. His primary aim in producing this book appears to be a concern about the dangers inherent in certain approaches to the apocalyptic prophecies of the book of Revelation that he characterizes as the use of eisegesis to interpret the text as particularly addressing the situation that exists in the reader's own time as opposed to the historical situation that called forth the text.

Newport's point of departure is the fiery cataclysm that ended the siege of the Mount Carmel headquarters of the Branch Davidian cult led by David Koresh on 19 April 1993. He believes that the deaths of the approximately eighty cult members might have been avoided had there been some attempt made to understand the basis for the cult's apocalyptic theology (151). The book purports to be an attempt to understand this by reviewing the history of apocalyptic interpretation on the part of Koresh's theological forebears.

The review of apocalyptic interpretation begins with British Protestants in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, moves to the Catholic reaction to the Protestant paradigm, then to the Methodist tradition, and finally to nineteenth-century American Millerite interpretation and its lasting influence upon the Seventh-day Adventist Church and its offshoot, the Davidian Seventh-day Adventists, which in turn spawned the Branch Davidian cult headed eventually by David Koresh. His point is that the historicism that was characteristic of Post-Reformation England was the same historicism that guided William Miller's Adventist interpretations and was adopted by Seventh-day Adventist interpreters all the way to David Koresh. He wants to make clear that there is a "direct line of descent from Miller to Koresh" (205). The blame for Koresh's faulty interpretations can thus be placed at the feet not only of Miller but of all historicist Protestant interpreters since the Post-Reformation period.

In reality, the book is a polemic against historicist interpretation of biblical apocalyptic, especially of Daniel and the Revelation. The book of Revelation is "an almost infinitely malleable text" (55). The flexible nature of the complex symbolism used in apocalyptic prophecy makes it wide open to abuse, permitting the reader to use it for either good or bad purposes to address contemporary situations (4, 18-19, 62). This, according to Newport, constitutes 'eisegesis', "the art of reading into a text more or less whatever one wishes to find" (4). The reader controls the process of interpretation so that the text yields to the prejudices and concerns of the reader and his community (19). In fact, "in the process of determined interpretation to suit the reader's ends (and here negative ones are particularly in view), ingenuity knows almost no bounds" (20).

Discussing alternatives to historicism, which he admits "has a long and prestigious pedigree" (11), Newport describes the origins of futurism and preterism

in the seventeenth century as Catholic reactions against anti-Catholic Protestant historicism, showing that they are not entirely objective methods of study, either, since they have an apologetic purpose: "As would be expected, each served its principal exponents well as they sought to use the biblical text to make sense of the world in which they lived" (15; cf. 22, 87-88). He also briefly discusses idealism, but writes it off as "not a major force" (15). The method he apparently prefers is mentioned only in passing when he states that preterism "should not be confused with the modern critical contemporary-historical method of interpretation, though clearly it is a forerunner of it" (16). He explains that, while early "preterists argued that John was given an accurate vision of the course of events over the next several centuries," "according to contemporary-historical analysis, all of Revelation relates to John's own time (he is of course allowed to make some guesses as to the future)" (ibid.).

The historicist approach is criticized not primarily because of a lack of textual evidence for its validity—though Newport states that evidence for its use lacks significant argumentation in the literature (20)—but because of its openness to abuse, of which anti-Catholicism, the Millerite disappointment, and the Waco disaster are primary examples. In fact, it is these negative results of the use of the historicist method, in Newport's view, which are the real issue in a new field of studies that he is pursuing, known as *Wirkungsgeschichte*, concerned with "the history of popular exegesis and the interaction between the biblical text and the non-critical interpreter of it" (3, emphasis his). He holds that texts have their most significant impact in a non-critical context (ibid.). It is this context that he attempts to explore in the book.

In his favor, Newport presents a fair summary of the teachings of the different interpreters and groups which he studies. Aside from his main thesis that eisegesis can be deleterious if not dangerous, this is perhaps his greatest strength, and I learned a lot from his history of interpretation. (Though he denies that he is attempting a history of interpretation [3], he actually gets quite detailed in his reporting of the interpretations of certain historicist interpreters that he wants to use as examples of eisegesis and its causes and effects.)

At the same time, I have a few criticisms:

1. Given the fact that Newport is attempting to explore the impact of the text in a non-critical context, he is very narrow in his research, limiting himself almost exclusively to British and American Protestant historicist interpreters that form a line of continuity from the Reformation to Waco. While he does note the Catholic reaction to Protestant historicism, his primary trajectory (to use his own term) is directed via Millerism and Seventh-day Adventism to David Koresh's Branch Davidian extremism (168, 178-79, 198, 205, 210). Also, he is extremely critical of the "non-critical" methodology of historicist interpreters, which he consistently labels negatively as eisegesis, no matter how carefully some have worked from the text to develop their interpretations. One gets the distinct impression that he is less interested in the socio-religious impact of the text than in using the poor results of

the work of some historicist interpreters—which cannot be denied—to launch an all-out attack on historicism as a legitimate method of interpretation.

2. He reflects a certain bias in his use of sources which is especially evident when he begins to discuss Seventh-day Adventism. For example, he quotes more from Ronald Numbers and Jonathan Butler, disgruntled former Adventists who have written a number of works critical of Adventism, than he does from mainstream Adventist sources. While he does quote from L. E. Froom, a noted Adventist writer, he notes “Froom’s evident bias” (180) but fails to note the bias of those who may be critical of Adventism. He also cites various websites as evidence of Adventist teaching (188-89) which are not sponsored by any official organ of the church but by various individuals who are promoting their own views. These may or may not reflect church teaching, but one wonders why Newport has gone to these sites when there is plenty of evidence for church teaching on official church websites. At the same time, he cites the teachings of the former Eternal Gospel Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church of West Palm Beach, Florida, which is not affiliated with the SDA Church organization, and was ordered by a court to change its name to avoid misrepresenting the SDA Church, as representative of SDA teachings, though he notes that there was “some dispute” between the two (189-91). All of this is poor scholarly practice.

3. He manifests a certain carelessness in his research when he erroneously refers to the Conflict of the Ages Series as “The Great Controversy Series” and lists the works all out of sequence in his footnote (187-88). In addition he refers to the seven-volume *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* as an eight-volume set (188). (The Commentary Reference Series is composed of eleven volumes—formerly ten.) He also misspells the name of John Nevins Andrews (181), one of the important Adventist scholars he reviews. These errors do not build confidence in the quality of the research undertaken. The fact that Newport was formerly an SDA college professor, and should know better, makes these errors especially egregious.

4. He insists on identifying the teachings of David Koresh and the Branch Davidians on the book of Revelation with SDA teachings, saying that any difference “is more one of degree than of kind” (213; cf. 205-6), though he admits that the Davidians and Branch Davidians rejected mainstream Adventism and taught that it was one of the seven branches of apostate Christianity (208) and that Koresh “did diverge from the standard Seventh-day Adventist line on numerous points” (216-17). To consider the Branch Davidians in continuity with the SDA Church is like considering the Protestant churches in continuity with Roman Catholicism. While there may be some carryover of certain doctrinal points because of Scripture or strong church tradition (as in Sunday sacredness), there is a fundamental discontinuity which needs to be noted. To fail to note the discontinuity is to mislead otherwise uninformed readers into believing a falsehood, that David Koresh was just a Seventh-day Adventist with some sexual aberrations, a Christ-complex, and an anti-federalist agenda. To suggest, as

Newport does (199), that it was the SDA interpretation of the second beast of Rev 13 as the United States that was the catalyst for the events at Waco is to subtly imply that all SDAs would fundamentally fall into the same camp and may be similarly a risk to society. This is irresponsible, no matter how respectable the motive. It takes no cognizance of the fact that SDAs have no anti-US sentiments, are taught to be loyal to the established authorities, are pacifists opposed to the use of arms, are taught not to do anything to provoke a time of trouble before the time, and are taught that even when a state passes laws that violate the conscience believers should not fight against the state but should seek out remote places of refuge where they can worship God freely according to the dictates of conscience. There is no theology akin to that of Koresh and the Branch Davidians. With his SDA background, Newport should know this, but perhaps he exaggerates in an effort to make his point.

Newport's book has an interesting line of thought, but it needs to be read critically, not with a gullible mind. He has not himself, in the book, critically evaluated the historicist method of interpreting Daniel and the Revelation. He has evaluated it in the light of some non-critical issues which he perceives to be negative results of historicist interpretation, particularly anti-Catholicism, disappointed Millerite eschatological expectation, and a disaster at Waco, and he has found it wanting. But these things in themselves cannot be used as a critical basis for rejecting the method. The method should be justified or invalidated from within the text, and this requires careful critical study of the text. This book belongs properly to socio-religious studies, not to biblical studies, as Newport himself would no doubt readily agree.

Edwin Reynolds

Wallace, Ronald S. *On the Interpretation and Use of the Bible*. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1999; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999. 137 pp.

Roland S. Wallace is retired from teaching at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia. He is the author of numerous books, including *Readings in 1 & 2 Kings*, *The Message of Daniel*, and *Calvin, Geneva, and the Reformation*. He confesses at several points that his experiences with the Bible helped him form the ways in which he understands it. He deals with presuppositions in regard to inspiration, revelation, and salvation history. He stresses the unity of the OT and NT in the light that the OT was a preparation for the NT. His emphasis on the unchanging value of the OT text is apropos when the use of the NT is prominent in the church.

Wallace sees with insight the importance of Gen 1-11 as a theological prelude to the Bible. My difficulty lies in that he sees them as mere "stories" (36). It is disconcerting to observe that, while he does not believe in miracles, he believes in