

## BOOK REVIEWS

Leonard L. Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), Pp. 265, xii.

Thompson's book on Revelation is outstanding in every way. It is well-written, rigorously researched and clearly argued. Although it is not a chapter-by-chapter, verse-by-verse commentary, this book accomplishes well the tasks of such commentaries: it illumines the reasons why John saw his vision and how he composed it in writing. With regard to method, Thompson employs both literary criticism and social history. He argues that the two methods are mutually complementary and in his hands that is ably demonstrated.

The book is divided into four parts. The first part discusses (1) the socio-historical setting and (2) generic dimensions of apocalypses. This section contains outstanding discussions of the social milieu and the relationship between social forces and how apocalypses reflect social settings.

The second part examines the language and unity of Revelation itself. In this part, Thompson employs a literary-critical methodology. His major contribution in this chapter is his contribution of boundaries in Revelation. Boundaries are "where differences touch one another" (p. 86; see also pp. 75-76). Thompson discusses several types of boundaries, but two are most impressive. "Blurred boundaries" invite comparison and imitation (e.g., Rev. 3:4-5) and also contrast and rejection (e.g., 17:12). "Soft boundaries" may lead to complementary relationships (e.g., 2:13), to conflict (e.g., 2:13), or to movement through spatial planes (e.g., 1:10-11; see pp. 74-90 of the book).

In the third part Thompson discusses life in the Roman

province of Asia under the emperor Domitian. He argues persuasively that Domitian was an enlightened and able administrator, appealing directly to writers of that era, and that neither Christians nor Jews led lives very different from other persons and groups in first century Roman Asia. In particular, he finds no evidence of a widespread Roman persecution of Christians under Domitian.

Thompson examines the role and function of Revelation within its imperial setting in the fourth part of the book. He concludes that the crisis presented in Revelation was not an actual crisis, but resulted from the inward tension Asian Christians experienced between their religious expectations and social reality (see pp. 191-197). The Book of Revelation is the literary result of that tension. The fourth part ends with summaries of social histories on Revelation by Colin Hemer, Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, John Court, John Gager, and Adela Yarbro Collins. These critical summaries are quite helpful overviews of recent socio-historical studies of Revelation and assist the reader in placing Thompson's work in the history of socio-historical studies of Revelation.

This brief review cannot list the many contributions of this book, but a few deserve special notice. Along with the strengths noted above, Thompson effectively demonstrates the usefulness of literary criticism and socio-historical research, individually and jointly, in studying Revelation. By using both methods the student of Revelation may obtain a greater sense of the milieu from which the book comes and understand the book as a pragmatic tool in the life of an ongoing Christian community. Also, his discussions of boundaries clarify how seemingly conflicting symbols, metaphors, and images relate to one another in ways that are both meaningful and relevant. Finally, his research in the imperial administration of Domitian demonstrates that the impression we have had of Domitian comes from biased contemporaries and later writers who sought favor from his successors.

The book, however, is not flawless. Thompson's discussion

of the nature of the crisis, the tension between Christian expectations and Roman reality, is not as well argued. When he discusses the types of crises which gave rise to other types of apocalypses, he names particular apocalypses. When, however, he discusses Revelation in regard to his thesis concerning its crisis and origin, he does not give examples of other apocalypses which originated in this manner but, rather, provides social theories to substantiate his position. Theories serve good purposes, but they do not always reflect life as it is lived. In spite of this shortcoming, Thompson has written a very good book and it deserves a close reading by biblical scholars and interested laypersons.

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Cain Hope Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class, and Family* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990)

Professor Felder's purpose in bringing pen and ink to parchment in this project is a noble one and must be applauded vigorously. The subject is timely, the characters notorious and often misjudged, the villains identified, the need urgent, and the occasion portentous. No doubt, for many African Americans and Afro-Others as well, the Bible (of the Jewish and Christian traditions) has come to be an extremely important anthology of writings. Professor Felder's *raison d'etre* is to combat racism and its faithful ally, religious bigotry. Both are spawned from ignorance, fear, misinformation, socio-political boundary marking, and produce insiders and outsiders. With its tripartite division of race, class, and family, this work seeks to locate Black people within the biblical story. Felder claims that a quiet European/Euro-American consen-

sus has undermined the self-understanding and place in history of other racial and ethnic groups. He argues that racialism and racism have contributed to omitting, shunning, and marginalizing Blacks in relationship to the Christian Church.

Felder's work mirrors the suspicions, frustrations, and feelings of betrayal on the part of Blacks who identify with the symbols and language of the Western, Christian Church. It raises the question of whether this affiliation remains a viable approach for African Americans on the brink of the imminent advent of the 21st Century. Apparently, Felder's work fails to place his findings in a larger framework of multicultural studies which demonstrate that pervasive, native African religious practices and beliefs are still a very vibrant and current part of daily African American life. The author's efforts, however, to encourage fairness for African American Christians do suggest that he does not lack awareness or concern for other persons of African descent in the Diaspora.

Part One of Felder's work deals with the issue of race. In this section he embarks on the admirable task of attempting to weave an interpretive framework for a range of racial attitudes in the Bible on the loom of racism and ethnocentrism as manifested by the contemporary Church throughout the world. *Troubling Biblical Waters* attacks modern racist arguments that claim support from biblical texts by revisiting such texts historically and critically. Mining the biblical tradition for the presence of Negroid Blacks, *Troubling Biblical Waters* deserves praise for its profound and sensitive treatment of what it finds. Previous attempts to uncover such presence in the ancient world and/or the world of late classical antiquity, have often produced works of uneven and uncritical quality.

Chronicling the presence of Negroid Blacks throughout the biblical world, as well as the attitudes of indigenous ancient Middle Easterners toward them, Felder's research intelligently supports his

thesis that although these ancient peoples were not oblivious to the differences of skin color and "racial" features among the many actors in the history of this region, their assumptions about human worth and dignity were never based on skin color. The book outlines this point with such precision that one is forced to ask why so much space is devoted to the Queen of Sheba, since she is still a nebulous monarch surrounded with much controversy concerning her exact identification. Also, one section of the book appears to work on the assumption that the ancient Near Eastern borders were as stationary as we moderns have come to understand them in our time. They were far more fluid. Overall, however, Part One argues passionately and articulately for the continuing usefulness of the Bible, considered critically, in laying out on its own terms and at various times, how the designations for people of color functioned in the ancient world.

In Part Two, *Troubling Biblical Waters* plumbs the literary depths of ancient Greek writings, the Bible, and allied literature in order to consider the issue of class—how various ancient societies employed or acknowledged the concept, and how modern societies have placed interpretive overlays on those ancient observations to the disadvantage of modern Blacks. The major organizing principles for treating class considerations are views of society, the individual, and various social contracts or legal systems that have evolved. Critically, Felder demonstrates that the ancient Greeks were not the founders of the idea of social justice. Even within the ancient Near Eastern family (as prevalent as the idea of law is in the Eshnunna, Urnammu, Lipitishar, and Hammurabi Codes) no guarantee emerged in those societies that secured individual rights. I agree with Felder's claim that early Jewish interpretations of Mosaic-plus Law are the most appropriate starting points for formulating a reliable picture of what it meant to have social rights in ancient Israel. Earlier Israelite formulations were exclusive and

inclusive simultaneously. That is, one could kill, slaughter, maim, burn, pillage, and utterly destroy an "outsider," but not an "insider." The books of Joshua and 1 Samuel attest to this. As with all things biblical, the idea of social justice, tied to the justice of Deity, is developmental. Its quintessential articulation is especially readable in the works of the pre-exilic prophets for whom certain biblical books have been named.

In treating the idea of justice in ancient Israelite literature, Felder constantly makes a distinction between priests and prophets (e.g., p. 61). His careful analysis would be greatly improved were he to present these two offices as two sides of the same professional coin. It has been demonstrated that the major writing "prophets" were also priests. Separating "priest" from "prophet" may be done effectively when the reader is made to understand that the difference merely heightens an "in house" disagreement.

Felder provides a thorough examination of justice and social class in the New Testament as well. Focusing on the Ethiopian ambassador in Acts and on the justice theme in the Letter to the Galatians and the Epistle of James, *Troubling Biblical Waters* concludes that "Blacks in the American slave church, and subsequently in the Black Church, have identified with biblical justice that has long affirmed the full humanity of Blacks" (p. 78). It is this African American Church understanding of biblical justice and society which gave rise to eminent preachers such as Nat Turner, Gardner Taylor, Howard Thurman, and Martin Luther King, Jr. For them, this book argues, Jesus was God's justice. A justice which became flesh and walked among humans to instruct society in what were understood to have been the latter days of that society, before a new *Urzeit* social contract was to be inaugurated.

In Part Three, the author treats the issue of family, which he approaches from sociological, allied health sciences, political, and scientific perspectives on one hand, and from an extended view

of family as the Household of God on the other. He suggests that the Bible does not always depict the family as we have traditionally understood or desired this relationship. The family as a patriarchal household in the Old Testament (or for that matter throughout the ancient Middle East until the time of Muhammad I) does not fit well with modern interests in maintaining nuclear families or renewing them. Note, for example, Abraham denouncing the spousal status of Sarah by claiming her as his sister, or the permissiveness tolerated in the household of David. The pronouncement placed in the mouth of the Jesus of the canonical Gospels are equally unedifying at points. Additionally, an overall comparison of the ideas of family or household reflected in the Old Testament against those in the New Testament will yield precious little. Although the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God appears to have required a new household transcending kinship and language, the idea of family or household (spelled with either a lower or upper case "h") invariably sets up a boundary marker separating the "insiders" from the "outsiders."

At best what Felder is able to describe is a change in the rules and conditions that produce differences. Coming full circle, then, it is the Black Church that feels and/or knows itself victimized by a similar process. Household and family have a good ring to them—if one is an "insider." All things considered, therefore, the book's *Vox victimarum vox Dei* provides little balm in the Household of the Black Church!

Yet the book closes on an optimistic note. Felder holds that since Blacks are primarily identified by *race* rather than by nationality, their Church (extending beyond the boundaries of civil religion) may tap into a potential it has as "a paradigm for sharing, caring, and global hope" (p. 172). The focus on apocalypticism, with which the book ends, is not to suggest some cataclysm as a way of solving the family problem, but as a ray of hope for humanity

in a troubled world. A world brought to the brink of despair by its own connivance and selfish ignorance.

Felder's work is on the cutting edge of fresh, new scholarship in ethnic studies. In a real sense, the work embodies Foucault's description of "subjugated knowledges." This book pours forth from the cornucopia of African American frustrations. Its themes are many, but each has been presented carefully, in a well-researched manner, and with an attending urgency. *Troubling Biblical Waters* will serve both the academic community and the interested reading public for many years to come.

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Karl Evanzz, *The Judas Factor: The Plot To Kill Malcolm X* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1992), 323 pp., Notes, Bibliography, Index \$22.95.

*The Judas Factor*, by Karl Evanzz, is an imaginative examination of the assassination of Malcolm X. Evanzz, a reporter for the *Washington Post*, argues that Malcolm X was spied on and persecuted by a conspiracy that included the FBI, other national security agencies, and the Nation of Islam. According to Evanzz, this conspiracy was responsible for Malcolm X's assassination and that someone close to Malcolm betrayed him to this conspiracy.

Evanzz elaborates on this conspiracy theory by detailing FBI surveillance on Black organizations and leaders over the years. J. Edgar Hoover's racism prompted this surveillance which began with Marcus Garvey, continued with Paul Robeson, and W.E.B. DuBois, and culminated in the wiretapping of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X. In the late 1960's the FBI, through its COINTELPRO program, used infiltrators, *agents provocateurs*, and sabotage to dis-



rupt Black groups such as the Black Panthers. Not even mainstream organizations and leaders like the NAACP and Roy Wilkins escaped the FBI's dragnet.

Regarding Malcolm, Evanzz speculates that the FBI, fearing that his prominence in the Nation of Islam would make him and that organization too powerful in the Black community, tried to separate him from the Nation. The tactics of the FBI employed their undercover agents within the Nation of Islam to take advantage of jealousies and tensions within the organization to split Malcolm from it. The FBI assumed that as a consequence Malcolm would lose his organizational base and sink into obscurity.

This plan backfired as Malcolm became even more influential, now freed from the Nation of Islam's restrictive worldview and practices. He planned to establish a religious organization, the Moslem Mosque Inc., as an orthodox Islamic organization that would compete with the Nation of Islam, and a secular organization, the Organization of Afro-American Unity, to promote Black liberation. Evanzz states that Malcolm also planned to cooperate with other civil rights organizations, particularly those connected with King, and to bring the plight of African Americans before the United Nations.

According to Evanzz, these plans were anathema to the FBI and other national security organizations. A linkup between Malcolm and King would create an unstoppable momentum for Black liberation and an insurmountable threat to White supremacy. Taking Black America's case before the United Nations, as Malcolm proposed, would have brought America unbearable international embarrassment and loss of prestige, especially in the Third World, where the U.S. was competing with the Soviet Union for dominating power.

Consequently, according to Evanzz, the FBI conspired with persons in the Nation who for reasons of their own wanted Malcolm dead. Malcolm's expulsion from the Nation was a bitter

one, and that organization, fearing that he would drain it of members and prestige, vilified him in print and persecuted him with death threats and surveillance of their own. Therefore, according to Evanzz, the FBI and the Nation of Islam may have worked together to put Malcolm out of circulation.

Evanzz also speculates that the FBI included an assassination of King as part of its conspiracy. Killing both of these Black leaders simultaneously would deal a death blow to the civil rights movement. In any event, Evanzz speculates, Malcolm had to be eliminated before March 1965, which is when he was to go before the United Nations. To that end the conspiracy to kill him began in mid to late 1964. Evanzz states that people close to him may have been part of the conspiracy.

Malcolm X's assassination has been surrounded by myth, speculation, and denial. The official investigation, which led to the arrest, indictment, trial, and conviction of three men connected with the Nation of Islam, was so mishandled that two of the three may have been innocent. Rather than uncovering the truth behind the assassination, the investigation obscured it further. Since then there have been numerous theories, speculations, and legends concerning Malcolm's death.

*The Judas Factor*, while imaginative in its assertions, unfortunately does little to dispel the confusion surrounding the death of Malcolm X. It makes sweeping charges about the malfeasance of the FBI and CIA, the corruption of the Nation of Islam, which Evanzz says received funding from racist right-wing oil millionaires, and the disloyalty of those close to Malcolm. While these charges ring true for many observers, one wishes that the author had presented more convincing evidence. Far too often he makes his points through innuendo. This tends to cast doubt on his credibility. Also he does not focus sufficiently on Malcolm's assassination. He spends too much time detailing the FBI's persecution and sabotage of other Black organizations, detracting from the focus of

his book.

Evanzz simply does not provide sufficient, concrete proof for his assertions. While many people suspect the evil intentions of the FBI towards Malcolm, Martin, and the Black community in general, the Bureau's actual role in the destruction of the two men needs further investigation. Evanzz, despite his copious quoting from FBI files, really does not do this. He fails to realize that making an assertion or charge is not the same as proving it. If there is a "smoking gun" that verifies FBI/Nation of Islam involvement in Malcolm's death, the author, for all of his imaginative speculations, does not produce it.

Still, *The Judas Factor* does provide one with fruitful topics for further investigation and research. For example, Evanzz insinuates that Malcolm and Martin were planning joint projects as early as January 1965 and that this is one reason why both were targets of plots against their lives. This claim requires further investigation.

Another assertion that bears examination is the Nation of Islam's involvement with right wing racists such as H. L. Hunt and the Klu Klux Klan. Malcolm himself also made these charges, but they were lost in the wake of his murder. Also, the role of the Nation of Islam's leadership in the process leading to Malcolm's death needs final clarification. Evanzz, by placing Louis Farrakhan in Newark, the site of the conspiracy, on the day of the assassination, insinuates that Farrakhan was involved in the actual plot. If this is true, then he needs to provide more conclusive evidence. Mere speculation is insufficient. While the hatred of Malcolm by the Nation and Farrakhan in 1964/1965 is well known, their alleged involvement in the actual assassination is still shrouded in confusion and mystery. Of course, Evanzz's assertions and insinuations about the FBI should be fully investigated and, if proved true, used to indict the agency for murder. Only if Evanzz's charges are carefully investigated and verified can these alleged instigators of Malcolm's assassination be brought to justice.

Unfortunately, such an investigation may never transpire. Both Blacks and Whites are more comfortable with myth, speculation, and denial concerning the assassination of Malcolm X and the other assassinations of the 1960s. Neither White nor Black Americans want to look too closely at Malcolm's (or Martin's) murders. The Nation of Islam's possible involvement in Malcolm's murder is too much for many Black nationalists and Afrocentric types to bear. Better for them is to lay the blame solely upon the White power structure. Analogously, many White Americans cannot imagine the FBI actually conspiring to murder radical social and political leaders. The truth for both races in matters such as this is too destabilizing.

Despite its interesting and imaginative speculations, *The Judas Factor*, unfortunately, does little to clear up the confusion surrounding Malcolm X's death. Instead it adds to the already numerous conspiracy theories, myths, and speculations. If, however, the book generates further investigation of the assassination it will have served a useful purpose.

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