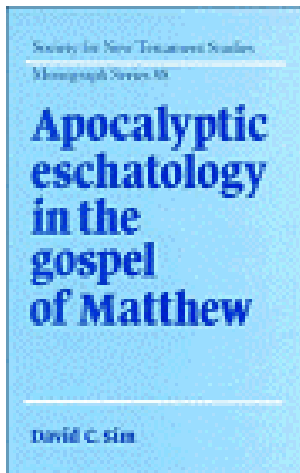


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**Sim, David C.**

*Apocalyptic Eschatology in the Gospel of Matthew*

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Mark Allen Powell  
Trinity Lutheran Seminary  
Columbus, OH 43209

Call it millennial fever if you like, but the hitherto neglected topic of Matthean eschatology is suddenly receiving a lot of attention. "Eschatology" was the theme for the 1996 meeting of the SBL Matthew Group, and recent works by Blaine Charette, A. D. A. Moses, and David E. Orton have brought the subject to the fore. Now a flurry of dissertations is arriving by students of major figures in Matthean studies. The current volume was produced as a 1992 thesis under Graham Stanton at King's College London. It may be compared to two as yet unpublished works: "'Let the Reader Understand' The Eschatological Discourse of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel," by Jeffrey A. Gibbs (Ph.D. diss., Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, 1995) and "The Events of the End of the Age in Matthew," by Kathleen Weber (Ph.D. diss., Catholic University of America, 1994). The former is a student of Jack Dean Kingsbury, the latter of John Meier.

Sim sets out to describe the nature and extent of apocalyptic eschatology in Matthew, to explain the evangelist's adoption of this perspective with reference to probable social-historical circumstances, and to identify the practical purposes that embracing such a perspective would serve. He employs a method of redaction criticism broadly understood, that is, one that recognizes alteration, supplementation, omission, and retention of source material as redactionally significant. He makes limited use of social-scientific analysis to interpret data, but not as a means of historical reconstruction.

Sim distinguishes between the religious perspective of "apocalyptic eschatology" and the socio-religious phenomenon of "apocalypticism." The former is characterized by dualism and determinism. Typical features include eschatological woes, the arrival of a savior figure, a final judgment, descriptions of the fate of the wicked and the righteous, and an emphasis on the imminence of all these events. Such a perspective arises within a social setting that favors apocalypticism, namely, one in which a minority religious group experiences alienation in response to a situation of crisis. In such a setting, apocalyptic eschatology serves to identify and legitimate the community, to offer hope, to satisfy the desire for vengeance on the wider oppressive society, and to maintain group solidarity by imposing threats of judgment.

In the main part of his book, Sim investigates all of the characteristics of apocalyptic eschatology listed above with reference to Matthew's Gospel. He attempts to identify which elements Matthew accepted from his sources and which he adopted from Jewish tradition. For instance, whereas Mark and Q describe Jesus as an advocate at the judgment, Matthew ascribes the role of judge to Jesus himself. Parallels are noted with Revelation, the Qumran War scroll, and the Parables of Enoch.

Sim disagrees with earlier assessments by Strecker and Marguerat that Matthew has no consistent view of the end events. He finds the consistency in a specific focus on the aftermath of judgment: the righteous will become angels and the wicked will burn for eternity. The most controversial claim of his study, however, may be that "Matthew actively promotes an imminent eschatological expectation" (p. 174). He argues that Matthew's recognition that the parousia has been delayed does not imply an expectation that the delay will continue. He attempts to show that the schedule of eschatological events presented in 24:4-14 places Matthew's own time near the end of the table. Even the unfulfilled prediction that the gospel must be preached throughout the world is to be regarded as near completion.

In the final portion of the book, Sim relates the function of Matthew's apocalyptic perspective to the probable social setting of the Gospel. It is a bleak picture. Caught up in the pogroms of the Jewish War, Matthew's church has become fearful of the Gentile world, while separation from the synagogue has also produced hostility and bitterness toward the Jewish parent community. Thus we can understand the lure of apocalypticism and the adoption of a perspective that promises vindication and vengeance.

As is often the case in treatments of neglected themes, Sim exaggerates the significance of the motif in a way that now ignores other elements of Matthew's thought. Many scholars (David Balch, Amy-Jill Levine, Andrew Overman, Anthony J. Saldarini) would question the extent to which Matthew is willing to sever ties to other Jewish groups. I would challenge the level of antipathy toward the Gentile world that Sim ascribes to Matthew. He relies heavily on an interpretation of 18:15-17 that ignores its literary

context: to treat someone "as a gentile" is not to shun the person but to regard the person as a lost sheep who must be recovered. Matthew does not envision the church as a beleaguered minority awaiting rescue, but as the "salt of the earth" (5:13) and the "light of the world" (5:14), expressions that convey a positive sense of mission in and for that world. The apocalyptic perspective is undeniable and needs to be integrated into any appraisal of Matthew's theological scheme, but surely it is an overstatement to say that this Gospel "advocates a policy of avoiding the gentile world" (p. 219). What was that Great Commission again?