Marshall, John W.

_Parables of War: Reading John’s Jewish Apocalypse_

Studies in Christianity and Judaism 10


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I find that Marshall’s basic premise is that the Apocalypse of John was a Jewish rather than a Christian document. _Parables of War_ is a work that attempts to reexamine the cultural and historical context of the Apocalypse from a Jewish background. This book also reexamines the acceptance of the term _Christian_ as a description of the early followers of Christ or as a _topos noetos_ given by modern scholars. Marshall questions whether the presence of Christ is sufficient for positing “Christianity” as a term or whether “Christianity” has been retrojected onto the elements of prehistory (5).

Marshall divides his book into two sections. The first (chs. 2–7) he considers a hermeneutic reflection on four texts (Synagogue of Satan = Rev 2:9; 3:9; Keeping the Commandments = 12:17; 14:12; the 144,000 and Zion = 7:4–8; 14:1–5; and the Holy and Great City = 11:1–19). Marshall suggests that the traditional view is problematic in that it does not explain these four texts because it denies the Jewish foundation of John’s writing. Since the Apocalypse is seen as a Christian document, the Jews cannot be Jews and Israel cannot be Israel. Marshall suggests
that the Christian document assumption of the Apocalypse is the reason these four texts become *aporias*.

In chapters 3–5 Marshall discusses word meanings, terms, and taxonomy. He traces the uses of “Christian” and “Christianity” by scholars and questions whether the early church ever saw Christianity as a separate term or subgroup of Judaism. Marshall attacks the traditional scholarship and interpretation of the Apocalypse from this “Christian” perspective and suggests that the Jewish backdrop is much more plausible. In chapter 6 Marshall discusses how John’s document became Christian and how scholarship has influenced the acceptance of that view. Chapter 7 is an examination of “Christianity,” “Christ,” “Judaism,” “synagogue,” and “church.” Marshall calls the reader to reexamine or redefine these terms before entering the Apocalypse in order better to understand the Jewishness of the document.

The problem with contemporary interpretation is not that it employs anachronistic terms and categories—that is unavoidable, just as a theological dimension of communication might be unavoidable—but that the particular terms and categories are homogeneous and un(der)examined. To understand the author and audience of the Apocalypse as “Christian,” its communal structures as a “church,” and its competitors as a (or even the) “Jewish synagogue,” and to construe these as thoroughly natural or immanent to the text unjustifiably closes off important avenues of interpretation. (86)

The next section (chapters 8–12) is a defense of Marshall’s thesis as he examines the historical background, context, and texts in Revelation. Marshall first suggests, in chapter 8, that dating Revelation to the time of Vespasian is a better method than dating it to the time of Domitian. While Christian sources suggest that Domitian is the main focus of the date and text, Marshall indicates that the reign of Vespasian brought more of a threat to Jews in the Diaspora and at Jerusalem. He also indicates that the three short-term Caesars, Galba, Otho, and Vitellius, are usually neglected in determining the seven heads/kings in Rev 17. Using these three again supports his belief that Vespasian is the head of the beast.

Chapter 9 is a good discussion of Jewish history and persecution in the Jewish Diaspora. Marshall explains how widespread the attack on the Jews, scattered in the various provinces, was during and after the Judean War with Rome. By using Josephus Marshall suggests that this widespread threat and persecution of the
Jews was taken by John, in the Apocalypse, and explained in a parable apocalyptically—the Apocalypse.

Chapters 10–11 are a reinterpretation of the four texts discussed earlier as supportive of the Jewish background for John’s writing. First, Marshall believes that the “Synagogue of Satan” can be reinterpreted as a “gathering of those from Satan” who were against the Jewish nation (2:9; 3:9) and who were standing with the Greco-Roman culture. These people were not Jews who attacked Christians but pagans who attacked the Jews. Second, “keeping the commandments” and the “testimony of Jesus” means those who follow the commands of God and model the Jewish life of Jesus (12:17; 14:12). Marshall suggests that these are Jews who live the Jewish law of God as did Jesus. Third, the army of 144,000 and Zion (7:4–8; 14:1–5) are a symbolic Jewish nation who are faithful to the laws and Jewish nation. Finally, the Holy City (11:1–19) is Jerusalem and the attack on it by Rome. Marshall suggests that this interpretation of the texts is supported by the Jewish nature of John and the early Christians in the first century and Diaspora. “Though John does envision the lamb and the crucified Lord as central forces in the resolution of the conflicts he addresses, he speaks in these parables as a Jew moving within Judaism and fully loyal to Judaism” (173).

In chapter 12 Marshall puts this theory together and applies it to a wider context of the Christian faith and writings of the apostle Paul. He uses this context to suggest that the early Christians were not seen as a separate movement but one within Judaism.

While I think that Parables of War is an excellent and thought-provoking work in the background and context of the Apocalypse of John, I feel that Marshall needs to do more work on supporting and redefining his thesis. His research and historical critique of the traditional view of this book is well done. The first few chapters on traditional hermeneutics and taxonomy are rather slow and at times difficult for me to follow, but I do believe that they are an integral part of his thesis. I would like to see more attention given to the exegesis of his four texts as well as other texts in the Apocalypse. I feel that his thesis can be problematic with other texts in the Apocalypse and would like to see him address other texts that I think support a Christian background rather than a strictly Jewish background. While I am not ready to support his thesis, I do look forward to other discussion of this thesis and further writings from Marshall on the Apocalypse. Marshall has given me something to think about when I teach my Revelation classes and will be another “theory of interpretation” that can be suggested to students and taken into consideration in lecture and further readings.