

**THE OPEN HEAVEN: A STUDY OF APOCALYPTIC IN JUDAISM AND EARLY CHRISTIANITY**, by Christopher Rowland. *SPCK*, 1982 pp xiii + 562 £22.50

In the last twenty years more and more studies in New Testament theology have given a central place to apocalyptic: in fact, in the famous phrase of Kasemann, apocalyptic is seen 'as the mother of all christian theology'. This interest came after a period of neglect when scholars seemed to be intent on saving Jesus from apocalyptic. The reason for this protection was a general consensus that apocalyptic was too odd, peripheral, other-worldly or just plain distasteful. The recent reinstatement of apocalyptic, however, has concentrated on its eschatological aspects and this emphasis has been taken up and used by theologians of hope and politics. The promised new world of apocalyptic has acted as a spur to relativise the present structures of the world which we suffer. Despite the new interest there still remains a good deal of confusion about how to define apocalyptic accurately. So often the definition reflects the interest of the theologian and ignores what is not required.

This is the view of the author of *The Open Heaven*. Christopher Rowland, who is Dean of Jesus College Cambridge has written the first major study of apocalyptic by a British scholar, since D. S. Russell wrote what has become the standard textbook *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* in 1964. This large book, which is subtitled 'a study of apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity' deals with apocalyptic texts from the third century BC to well after the Fall of Jerusalem, so that we may get the fullest view of what apocalyptic is and see how early Christianity fits into that background.

In Part One he attempts to clarify what apocalyptic is and to argue against the widely held view that it is basically the same as eschatology. He does not deny the presence of eschatological elements in apocalyptic but insists that there is much more to be found, aspects which are often ignored. There was plenty of eschatology in Judaism but not all eschatology is apocalyptic. For Rowland, apocalyptic's main concern is the attempt to get some insight into God's will by a direct revelation. The

heavens open, and secrets, stored up in heaven, are revealed by means of dreams and visions. Having defined apocalyptic in terms of the revelation of divine mysteries, in Part Two, he gives us the content of these mysteries. Using a quotation from Mishna Hagigah 2.1, he discusses them under four headings "what is above, what is beneath, what was before time and what will be hereafter". Most people have a curiosity about such matters, but the apocalyptic writers, compelled by their historical situation, give us some answers. One of the most interesting sections here is his discussion of the Jewish belief in an exalted angel which derives in some part from the throne theophany which is found already in Ezekiel. This angel figure seems to have been completely ignored in studies on early Christology (pp 94-113). Lest we think that this is all very other-worldly Rowland soon brings us back to earth. Despite the fact that he is trying to make eschatology only one of the aspects of apocalyptic, a constant thread running through this study is the importance of history. 'What concerns the apocalypticists is the movement of history as a whole towards its final goal, the establishment of God's kingdom.' (p 144). There seems to be a tension between the temptation to discover heavenly secrets as an end in themselves and the concern that God should bring history to a climax in this world with the perfection of creation.

In the next section he enters the controversy about where apocalyptic derives from. Here much depends on your initial definition. If you choose eschatology as the main interest you will tend to see the connection with prophecy, but if you emphasise the secret knowledge given in visions then, like von Rad, you will find the origins of apocalyptic in wisdom. But in fact apocalyptic is not a merely sectarian interest but belongs to the mainstream of Judaism and so will be found among both prophet and scribe.

What will probably be most unfamiliar to readers of this book is the chapter on the esoteric traditions of early rabbinic

Judaism in which Rowland shows, among other things, how the chariot-visions of Johanan Ben Zakkai offered to this theologian a direct experience of God which helped to support his religious conviction in a bewildering historical period. Such visions, nevertheless were regarded as dangerous.

Having provided a wider historical context, Rowland shows how early Christianity can fit into it. His purpose is not to discuss the familiar eschatological passages of the New Testament. How does Jesus fit into the other apocalyptic interests? Should he be protected from them? We like to think of the founders of Christianity as being wild-eyed visionaries, to lock them up and finally to dispose of them. Jesus must be protected from these people. Rowland shows, however, that Jesus, Peter and Paul each saw the heavens open and each received visions at the crucial moments of their lives. They too were locked up and finally silenced. But how do these visions relate to this world? Is there not a danger that this desire for an immediate knowledge of God's will, will turn away from history and end up in gnosticism? In the final chapter on the Book of Revelation, he tries to answer this question by pointing out the paradox of this book: that despite its

visionary character it is the document which emphasises most clearly the working out of the divine will on the historical plain. I wish he could have said more here about the way Jesus, as the revelation in human form of the mystery, has influenced apocalyptic form and content. He does admit that John's own understanding of the social implications of what he was writing may have been rather tenuous. Rowland's own understanding seems a good deal clearer as he ends his chapter on Revelation with these words: 'There can be no question of superficial reform which does not affect the underlying problem. Anything short of that is nothing but the attempt of man to tinker with a system which bears the marks of ultimate destruction and must, therefore, be rejected.'

The weird imagery, and the strange cosmology remains as he recognises, to challenge the exegete to face the hermeneutical task. It is to be hoped that he himself will try to respond to this challenge. But he has done the preliminary work of giving an account of apocalyptic at length and in all its dimensions. Anyone who wishes to talk about apocalyptic now will be obliged to read this fine study.

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**ROME AND ANGLICANS** by J. C. H. Aveling, D. M. Loades and H. R. McAdoo.  
*Walter de Gruyter & Co, 1982. pp 301. DM 138 (approx. £37).*

The subtitle is 'Historical and Doctrinal Aspects of Anglican/Roman Catholic Relations', edited with a postscript by Wolfgang Haase. Investigation suggests that this book is an accretion to a series begun in 1972 by Temporini and Haase and covering 'Late antiquity and heritage', with a category begun by Haase in 1978 on religion, which allows of some volumes beyond the set period of antiquity or the broad canvas of Church, the ancient traditions of Rome being kept alive in the Churches of the Latin west and Greek east. The series emanates from Tübingen, but we are unlikely to see another volume of this kind again.

It consists of three disconnected essays by British scholars, 50 pages by Dr David

Loades of Bangor on 'Relations between the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches in the 16th and 17th Centuries'; 85 pages by John Aveling of Bracknell on 'The English Clergy, Catholic and Protestant, in the 16th and 17th Centuries'; and 140 pages including four appendices by Archbishop Henry McAdoo of Dublin, Anglican Co-Chairman of the recently terminated Anglican/Roman Catholic International Commission, on 'Anglican/Roman Catholic Relations, 1717-1980: a detection of themes'; with a short editor's postscript, setting the whole – as German practice allows – in the context of middle European history. Page 287 is composed of nine lines of text and a single footnote of forty lines, and the opposite page is little