

Book Review

New Testament Eschatology: Historical and Cultural Background, George Wesley Buchanan, Edwin Mellen Press, Box 450, Lewiston, NY 14092, 1993.

No one could charge G. W. Buchanan with obscurity in his treatment of a subject which many find most obscure. He drives right to the point. The point is a simple one: the New Testament, in common with other Jewish writings, expects the present age to end. The end will be signalled by a political event in the promised land. The Gentiles will be removed and the Kingdom or government of God will come to power in their place.

Buchanan has spent his long career pondering why the ordinary reader of the Bible does not have access to a key—eschatology—which would dramatically alter his perception of the goal of the faith as Jesus and the Apostles saw it.

Wishing to appear “clear rather than erudite” (though he is both), Buchanan assures us that the whole idea of the Kingdom of God as the political goal of the early disciples is reasonable “once a person accepts certain basic assumptions that were normal two thousand years ago.”

Buchanan shows how the Bible, in common with Jewish literature speaks of sin, punishment, and blessing in terms of financial metaphors. Ultimate blessing meant the restoration of the promised land at the conclusion of the last half of the last week of a Jubilee cycle, the moment when debts were fully paid and the faithful could re-enter the land, that is, inherit the Kingdom of God.

Buchanan’s third chapter illuminates the New Testament scheme of the two ages. There is a present evil age (Gal. 1:4) in which governments hostile to God are in control. But the future promises an “age to come.” Then Messiah will rule with all the faithful over the land. This very reasonable underlying philosophy of history is easy to detect in the New Testament, but little has been done by way of sermon and exposition to elucidate the concept. Buchanan brings it all into the light for us.

As for the Kingdom of God it is the term par excellence to unlock the

Biblical writings. Keeping his eye firmly on the Hebrew environment in which the New Testament came to birth, Buchanan shows us that the Kingdom of God was never an other-worldly concept and never a kingdom interiorized as “religion.” It was always a national, political, and geographical hope, and yet spiritual because it was sanctified by the presence of God in the expected Messiah. The beatitudes demonstrate that Jesus was rooted in his Jewish heritage when he promised the meek possession of the land (Matt. 5:5).

“In those days,” Buchanan concludes, “all Jews and Christians knew that redemption meant that the land was to be restored, the temple was to be re-established, the Messiah was to rule from Jerusalem, foreigners were to be driven off the land.” But for centuries of tradition, which has rewritten the realistic hopes of early Christians by turning them into a survival of the soul at death, no one would have any difficulty understanding Buchanan’s thesis. The facts are all too plain and they are marshalled in a masterly way. Some readers might wish that Buchanan would go on to discuss the huge question he raises: how Jesus could have been so mistaken (if indeed he really was) about the future. There is still time for the New Testament hope to become a reality. Buchanan does not commit himself to belief that it will, but he does the Bible-reading public a great service by telling us what in fact the early Christians and Jesus looked forward to. The book should be required reading of all freshmen in seminaries. A lively discussion would ensue. The Church would be challenged to reconsider a vast amount of its traditional teaching. This is a disturbing book, but in this writer’s opinion a dose of strong medicine that could do no end of good. There is everything to be gained by knowing what the Bible says about the future.

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