

Greg Carey. *Death, The End of History, and Beyond: Eschatology in the Bible. (Interpretation: Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Church)*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2023. 350 pages. \$34.49.

What does the Bible say about the end of time and the completion of history? What does it say about what happens after we die? These questions are of ultimate concern for Greg Carey in this engaging journey through the scriptures. This book is a deeply honest and careful analysis of the complex landscape of apocalyptic biblical literature. In this contribution to public biblical scholarship, Carey engages a broad range of eschatological perspectives arising within scripture. While Carey admittedly privileges New Testament writings, he accomplishes his goal of bringing a diversity of scriptures into conversation as he puts forth “integrated Christian theological proposals” (29). He extends hospitality to multiple viewpoints without reaching for a grand synthesis. In other words, he allows the authors of the biblical texts to come into conversation with one another rather than attempting to suppress difference. The author claims that ancient thought is both fluid and diverse.

Tremendously knowledgeable about the variety of scholarly arguments on biblical eschatology, Carey explores ancient thought as it is represented in the ancient Near East and the Mediterranean region, in the Hebrew scriptures and Judaism, and in early Christian thought in the Gospels, other traditions about Jesus, and the writings of Paul. In his treatment of Paul, for example, Carey names Paul’s letters as apocalyptic literature because they describe God’s intervention in history in the person of Jesus Christ. For Paul, the death and resurrection of Jesus signal “the beginning of the end for this current age and, looking ahead to Jesus’ return, the beginning of the beginning for the age to come” (205). Carey traces the apocalyptic themes and images that emerge in both testaments, always with an eye toward answering the question, “Why does this matter for us today?” At the same time, Carey honors the reality that contemporary readers have a very different perspective from the ancient witnesses. “Our task requires an attempt to take full account of the diverse biblical witness, to understand it in its own historical contexts, to account for the ways in which we modern people cannot conform our imaginations to ancient mindsets no matter how hard we try, and to bring our own cultural resources to the work, all of this to resource our contemporary theological imagination” (260).

Homileticians will be especially interested in Carey’s appendices, which are aimed at preaching eschatological texts and cover such topics as preaching on Advent gospel lessons, Revelation, hope, bodily resurrection, and the Holy Meal. Asking the question, “Does eschatology matter?” Carey offers insights that will guide the preacher in their assessments of eschatological texts as they construct sermons on challenging topics. For example, Carey acknowledges that while many preachers avoid preaching Revelation, it offers a distinctive witness and must be preached. Carey tends to tie Revelation’s ancient ponderings to the here and now, wondering about the implications of Revelation for sermons that deal with the climate emergency, for instance. For Carey, bodies matter. It matters what happens to our physical beings while they are alive and after they die. Thus, Carey sensitively approaches the belief that eschatology has no bearing on the present, arguing instead that Christians must not neglect the bodily needs of individuals and communities because we are too heavenly minded.

Carey fulfills his intent to “invite readers into the construction of meaning, offering suggestions more than complete theories and leaving explicit room for curiosity” (31). Rather than point us to a conclusion, the author makes space for the reader to engage in their own analysis and consider their own faith commitment. This means that Carey is tentative at times,

leaving it up to the reader to decide which proposals are most fruitful. Carey is candid about his interpretive choices, and he is clear about how his own mind has changed over time. Despite the complexity of the topic, this is an immensely readable book that will challenge long-held assumptions about eschatological perspectives while opening the possibility of fresh visions of the future that awaits creation. The reader does not come away with a grand sweeping narrative but rather a sense that these ultimate questions are best asked and answered in a community that includes a plurality of ancient voices as well as a diversity of scholars and followers of Christ.

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