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WOOLMAN AND APOCALYPSE: A REVIEW OF *JOHN WOOLMAN AND THE GOVERNMENT OF CHRIST*

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We are in the midst of a renaissance of Woolman scholarship, and now comes this wonderful book by Jon R. Kershner, devoted to examining Woolman's "comprehensive theological vision for colonial American society," performing a deep dive into the framework of "Woolman's alternative vision for the British Atlantic world." Kershner's work builds upon and augments a host of other fresh theological work that will provide a solid foundation for the next generation of scholars. Full disclosure: I blurbed the book, and was a reviewer for the press.

Quakers, especially of early generations, often produced significant spiritual reflections around the book of Revelation. A key term in Kershner's analysis is drawn from it, "Apocalypse." This is a starting point for Woolman's *Journal*. One of Woolman's earliest recollections, recounted in *Journal's* first paragraph, was Woolman separating himself from his playmates soon after he learned to read, in order to meditate upon the last chapter of the book of Revelation: "He showed me a river of water, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and the Lamb, etc." (Rev. 22:1 ff).

Kershner defines apocalyptic theology thus:

> Apocalyptic theology is constituted through a supernatural revelation disclosed to a human recipient. It describes an alternative social ordering. As such, it frames the world of human affairs within transcendent and eternal purposes and envisages the impending victory of God's reign over apostasy. The recipient of divine revelation serves as a harbinger of the age to come and participates in the eschatological unfolding through practical embodiments, which enact God's reign in human affairs (Kershner 2018, 11).

So, "apocalyptic" describes an alternative social ordering. Does it also constitute a complete overturning of an evil order? It comes through a supernatural revelation. Does this revelation need to be delivered

by angels, as it is in Revelation, or can it come through divinely-inspired dreams and other means? It participates in an eschatological unfolding. Is this the same as final judgment, or is the eschatological unfolding more general and indefinite than that? The eschatological unfolding occurs through practical embodiments. Are these practical embodiments always nonviolent, or can the magnitude of the overthrow of evil permit or require the use of any means possible, including violence? The latter seems to be the message of Revelation; the former seems to be Woolman's modus operandi (Compare Kershner 2018 to Collins 1997).

While Kershner's definition laudably includes several of the standard elements of apocalypse, including supernatural revelation to a human recipient, and eschatological unfolding, I wonder how our assessment of Woolman's apocalypticism, or lack of it, would be affected if we compared Woolman's writings to other apocalyptic texts. That would certainly include texts such as Revelation and Daniel, and a variety of non-canonical texts. Similarly, I wondered how Woolman's appropriation of such texts would compare and contrast with such text usage by other Quakers, such as George Fox.

As for the book of Daniel, the Digital Quaker Collection (DQC) does not record any hits in Woolman's corpus. So this examination confines itself to the book of Revelation.

When I read Kershner's reference to "eschatological unfolding through practical embodiments," I find myself increasingly uncertain about how apocalypticism differs from ordinary prophecy as inspired by the Hebrew prophets, Jesus, or others. In terms of "practical embodiments," a facet of Woolman's witness was his fashioning himself after the prophet Jeremiah (Birkel 2003, 43-56). I wonder whether a different term is warranted, if we should find that eighteenth-century antislavery radicals resemble Jeremiah more closely than they do John of Patmos. If that were to be the case, would it be sufficient to say that Lay and Woolman are prophets, in the mold of the Hebrew prophets enshrined in the latter part of the Hebrew canon? Or would there be a sufficient eschatological edge in their writings and witness that would entitle them to be defined more closely as apocalyptic prophets?

Woolman's use of the book of Revelation was not extensive, despite the prominent mention of chapter 22 at the beginning of his journal. DQC records only two other mentions of Revelation in the parts of Woolman's corpus that it includes, both drawn from the same passage in Woolman's "widely distributed" 1770 (the same year as the

Boston massacre,[1] and Woolman's own vision-laden near-fatal attack of pleurisy) work, "Considerations of the True Harmony of Mankind, etc." (Kershner 2018, 67). This tract is a centerpiece of Kershner's analysis. Lacking careful analysis by any preceding Quaker scholar, it is well worth such treatment from Kershner.

This perhaps can be seen as an "apocalypse of the heart," as Kershner designates the impulse that falls at the core of Woolman's writing. Kershner contends that Babylon, as envisioned by Woolman, functions as "a typological representation of the transatlantic marketplace." Was this work a gentle jeremiad, a common literary genre in English North America during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries? It does seem to me to be a kind of moral exhortation more characteristic of the prophetic corpus generally.

The phrase "merchants of the earth" or "merchants of Babylon," found in "Considerations" and deriving from Revelation, was not original with Woolman. As Jon Kershner and I ascertained in an email exchange, this probably first occurs in the 1693 Keithian tract denouncing slavery, the first antislavery publication in North America, and it was faithfully cherished by slavery opponents as a means of providing a truthful description of enslaving activity up to Woolman's lifetime and beyond.

This attention to economics in a troublesome transatlantic marketplace is certainly welcome in Kershner's work, and builds on Geoffrey Plank's research. *We* know that the maneuvers over whether and how the American colonies were to pay taxes to the motherland led to a great upheaval: the American Revolution. The Woolman of *Considerations of True Harmony* could not know exactly what the outcome of these momentous events would be, and as he died three years prior to the outbreak of revolution, he never would know exactly, but he seemed clearly to intuit that something very significant is coming soon.

Through the lens of religion and empire, scholars like Kershner and Plank are beginning to make clear the significance of Woolman's almost being led to visit the West Indies in 1769, and then traveling to, and dying in, the British homeland three years later, in 1772, the same year as the *Somerset* decision by Lord Mansfield,[2] widely interpreted as bringing an end to slavery in England itself (as distinct from its colonies). If, as Woolman maintained, in his own life he was "completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body" (Colossians 1:24, cited in Kershner 2018, 122), then clearly his

Jeremiah-like prophetic actions are meant to have some significance for human salvation. This does not establish a timeline for salvation history, however. Whether such prophetic actions also had apocalyptic or eschatological significance may not have been clear to Woolman as he was writing "Considerations" or trudging through the English countryside on foot. But certainly he was open to the possibility. How we push decisively to decode Woolman's actions and writings, in light of his historical context as a subject of the British empire, becomes an ongoing task for Woolman scholars. Kershner has advanced us carefully and with great erudition in this promising direction.

George Fox, like Woolman, was struck by Rev. 18:3-4 ("Come out of Babylon, my people, so that you do not take part in her sins…"). Fox saw the exodus that is the basis for the exhortation in this verse as a present event, using the present progressive tense ("So the Lords people are coming out, for her sins have reached unto heaven, and God remembred her iniquitys"), without providing an explicit contemporary analogy for Babylon, but one might well conjecture it to be the state Church of England. Woolman also used the present tense, and was similarly vague, but inasmuch as this exhortation from Revelation is set in a context decrying such oppressive acts as slavery and war, he may well have seen only a subset of Quakers as being selfless and faithful to the Lord's desires. Kershner points out that "many colonial theologians believed 'Babylon' referred to the Papacy and its destruction, not to the slave economy" (Kershner 2018, 94). There is not explicit language in Woolman limiting the faithfulness of some to only Quakers. Perhaps Mennonites, Moravians, and others would also be faithful to this divine call.

In respect to Revelation 22:1, Fox's comment was: "happy are they, that drink of this River" (of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb). In contrast to Fox's effusiveness, Woolman evokes serenity and saintly seriousness when contemplating this verse. "My mind was drawn to seek after that pure habitation which I then believed God had prepared for his servants" (Moulton 1971, 23).

Apocalyptic imagery is often associated with violence. Revelation certainly contains its share of violent imagery. Catherine Wessinger notes that "believers in Revelation's prophecies sometimes use its imagery to justify committing violence against others" (Wessinger 2014, 4). Both Fox and Woolman, selectively reading this text, strictly shun this aspect of Revelation. The imagery of a Lamb's War

may have been drawn by Quakers from Revelation (Kershner points out, that unlike Fox and Nayler, Woolman does not use the Lamb's War terminology), but no Quaker theologian with whose writings I'm acquainted has been drawn to the passages from Revelation that promise slaughter to large portions of the earth's population.[3] If Woolman, or more particularly Fox, foresee an apocalypse, it is a strictly nonviolent apocalypse.

If violent upheaval is deemed definitionally an intrinsic aspect of apocalypticism, then Quaker theologians are not apocalypticists. However momentous the transformations in the world will be, Quakers have envisioned these, and hoped for these, to be nonviolent. If such a definition were to be adopted for "apocalyptic," Kershner would have to find a different word to describe Woolman.

When one Googles the term often utilized by Kershner, "apocalypse of the heart," the top twenty results, curiously enough, all pertain to a romance novel by that title. Kershner's use of the phrase doesn't come up until the third page of results. While this may suggest simply that we need to create more weblinks to Kershner's fine work, to elevate his results in the Google rankings, it also leads me to wonder if the term is something of an oxymoron. Is the intended meaning of the term something like a "gentle violent overturning"?

Wessinger also notes that Revelation has "given rise" to a philosophy of "progressive millennialism." That term connotes "a perspective that is optimistic about human nature and the possibility of imperfect human society to improve. It is the belief that the imminent transition to the collective salvation will occur through improvement in society. The belief is that humans working in harmony with a divine … plan will create the millennial kingdom" (Wessinger 2014, 4). This may be closer to both Woolman's and Fox's takes on Revelation.

Woolman's apocalypticism, so designated under Kershner's definition of the term, was gentler and more sporadic than Fox's, but in his determined nonviolent interpretive thrust, it was similar to that of Fox and other early Quakers such as James Nayler. Generally, all were envisioning a nonviolent transformation of human society.

ENDNOTES

1. The years 1769 and 1770 also marked Philadelphia Quakers' withdrawal from non-importation agreements with their fellow colonists, because they perceived these agreements might lead toward violence, in the manner that they could be implemented. By the time that the American Revolution began six years later, their perceptions had been proven correct. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting's 1770 (Sept.) epistle warned Friends against supporting measures "inconsistent with the nature of the Gospel, and our peaceable Testimony thereto." Mekeel, *American Revolution,* 45-61, at 60.Woolman would have shared these apprehensions.
2. The decision was handed down in June, 1772, two weeks after Woolman landed in England. Woolman died in October.
3. E.g., Rev. 6:7-8; 8:6-11; 9:15; 9:18; 16:2-4.

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