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NOT YOUR GRANDMOTHER'S APOCALYPSE: THE DE-LIBERALIZATION OF JOHN WOOLMAN

MICHAEL BIRKEL

It is, first of all, a pleasure to engage the work of Jon Kershner, who has rapidly established himself as an important scholar. In this same year that saw the appearance of his book on John Woolman, Jon Kershner also published *“To Renew the Covenant”: Religious Themes in Eighteenth-Century Quaker Abolitionism* (Brill, 2018) and co-authored the volume *Quaker Studies: An Overview, The Current State of the Field* (Brill, 2018). As we speak, a book that he has edited, *Quakers and Mysticism: Comparative and Syncretic Approaches to Spirituality* (Palgrave, 2019), is on its way to the press. Additionally, Jon Kershner has littered the countryside with important and insightful articles. It has been a delight to witness his meteoric rise as a significant voice in Quaker studies, as both author and editor.

Jon Kershner’s *John Woolman and the Government of Christ: A Colonial Quaker’s Vision for the British Atlantic World* (Oxford University Press, 2016) demonstrates acute, even delicate, care with texts and with theological ideas. The book is serious, at times a bit playful, and at other times provocative, and I have taken my cue from all these qualities in this review. Jon Kershner offers what he terms a “micro-theological” approach to an investigation of the writings of the well-known eighteenth-century antislavery, mystical, social reformer Quaker. The book considers John Woolman’s theology from five perspectives: revelation, propheticism, eschatology, perfection, and judgment—and now abide these five, but the greatest of these is apocalypticism. Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb.

The study of apocalyptic literature, worldview, and theology experienced a considerable growth in the final third of the last century, and the boom has not ceased. The insights of the study of apocalyptic material have been extended to other fields and subjects. I have, for example, been reading with benefit Todd Lawson’s recent

and enlightening book, *The Qur'an: Epic and Apocalypse* (Oneworld, 2017). Jon Kershner's study takes as its focal point the apocalyptic vision, which he proposes as the center of gravity of John Woolman's religious self-understanding. This is not, however, your grandmother's apocalypse, so a bit of context may be of use.

John J. Collins, it may be argued, has earned his reputation as the alpha, if not also omega, of scholars of ancient apocalypse, so we may reliably look to him for a brief description of apocalyptic expression. Here are three:

First, from the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, second edition:

Apocalypse, as the name of a literary genre, is derived from the Apocalypse of John, or Book of Revelation, in the New Testament. The word itself means 'revelation,' but it is reserved for revelations of a particular kind: mysterious revelations that are mediated or explained by a supernatural figure, usually an angel. They disclose a transcendent world of supernatural powers and an eschatological scenario, or view of the last things, that includes the judgment of the dead. Apocalyptic revelations are not exclusively concerned with the future. They may also be concerned with cosmology, including the geography of the heavens and the nether regions, as well as history, primordial times, and the end times. The judgment of the dead, however, is a constant and pivotal feature, since all the revelations have human destiny as their ultimate focus.¹

In the *Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, he offers this sound bite:

The belief that God has revealed the imminent end of the ongoing struggle between good and evil in history.²

In his book on the Dead Sea Scrolls, he tries his hand again at brevity:

A supernatural revelation, which reveals secrets of the heavenly world, on the one hand, and of eschatological judgment on the other.³

Elements commonly found in apocalyptic literature include cosmogony, persecution of the faithful, great upheavals, judgment and destruction of the wicked, of the world, and of other worldly beings, cosmic transformation, resurrection, pseudonymity, divine glory, an angelic revealer, and heaven and hell (sometimes with extensive tours).

Readers familiar with John Woolman may be scratching their heads a bit at this point, so here it is useful to visit Jon Kershner's apocalyptic

remix, a revisionist understanding of the classic apocalyptic views. He offers the following summary, and his reader does well to attend to the obvious as well as subtler distinctions in this definition:

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.⁴

Make no mistake. This is not just realized—or as Jon Kershner prefers, realizing—eschatology. Jon Kershner has deliberately chosen the more unsettling term “apocalypse.” Similarly, his book's intent is to unsettle conventional readings of John Woolman. Yet the revised, reloaded apocalypse of John Woolman abstains from cataclysm or precise chronologies of the end times. Jon Kershner terms it an “apocalypse of the heart” (11), although it is not consistently internalized, as the expectation of divine judgment is in the external world of human and natural events, such as the horrors of war and pox.

Jon Kershner's work is provocative. Some might challenge this approach, noting, for example, that some prominent words in his study, such as “apostasy,” do not occur in John Woolman's writings. Every scholarly task of constructive systematizing out of material that is at best implicit is subject to challenges of manipulation or manufacture. It is a risk that all of us take. Rather than challenge or dispute the smaller details of this book's revisionist stance, I would prefer to focus on what I see as a broader implication of Jon Kershner's work. It can be argued that every secondary text is its own form of a primary text. We are all subject to history. If so, then what is the larger scheme of this new book?

John Woolman and the Government of Christ strikes me as a thoroughgoing de-liberalization of John Woolman. In his introduction to his great labor of love, the critical edition of *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, Phillips Moulton noted that

In the 1830's Woolman's *Journal* was criticized by orthodox Quakers for giving insufficient attention to what for them were the essentials of their faith (symbolized by such phrases as

“Christ crucified as the ground of . . .salvation” and “propitiatory sufferings and death”).⁵

British Evangelical Friend James Cropper, in the London edition of the *Journal* in 1840, sought to defend John Woolman, noting that he was an example of the power of the grace of Christ to change the human heart, producing a faith that worked by love⁶—but it seems that the die was cast. The scroll had been sealed. Evangelical and Holiness Friends did not produce major works on John Woolman. Thus the topic was left to liberals, such as Rufus Jones, Henry Cadbury, and others (including me, as to one untimely born)...until now.

Liberal interpreters tended to read John Woolman in terms of what they saw as most important. John Woolman became the forerunner of the liberal notion of social progress: society can and must change for the better, and such betterment is in the hands of human beings. Social justice, liberation, and equality became fundamental categories for reading John Woolman. Liberals read John Woolman’s spirituality from liberal perspectives. The reign of God or the social Gospel can happen on earth. They found an essentially positive appreciation for human potential, one that focused less on individual sin (although social sins such as racism and poverty were real) and more on human likeness to God, understood as a loving and accepting divinity.

Government of Christ paints a very different picture. Sin lies at the heart of this book’s message. As in the evangelical tradition, the portrayal of God does not shy away from vindictiveness. Divine wrath and punishment for sin abound—no more mister nice guy God. A truly terrible judgment threatens.

This John Woolman points the way not to the American Friends Service Committee but, as Jon Kershner suggests, to the celibate, communal society of Jerusalem founded in upstate New York by the self-appointed Public Universal Friend, Jemima Wilkinson. A bit later in time but close in locale, the rightful spiritual heir of John Woolman is Joseph Smith. Again, Jon Kershner insists on seeing John Woolman in novel, stimulating, and—to some, perhaps—even disquieting ways.

The grid that this study constructs for this new vision of John Woolman employs words seldom used by earlier scholars, or in many cases even by John Woolman himself. This grid includes apostasy, repentance and conversion, battle with sin, a belligerent God’s victory over sin and evil, the demonic, perfection that is imputed, sinlessness, and the centrality of the heart. This points toward a holiness evangelical appropriation of John Woolman.

Yet the book is more complex than that alone. Even as the theological dialect of the book hearkens to the holiness revivals of the past, it embraces the post-modern proclivities of the present. Concepts such as fluidity and empire shape the volume. The book seldom speaks of justice in a systematic way; instead, apocalyptic revelation provides the guidance for conduct. In a post-modern turn, there is no longer an emphasis on rules. Phrased in Quaker terms, there are leadings rather than testimonies. Weaving these two worldviews together is itself evidence of the creative thrust of his project.

In this new millennium we have a new John Woolman, washed in the blood of the postmodern lamb. Worthy is the lamb that was slain. “John Woolman is dead.”⁷ Long live John Woolman.

ENDNOTES

1. John J. Collins, ‘Apocalypse: An Overview’ in Lindsay Jones, Mircea Eliade, and Charles J. Adams. *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005, second edition, vol. 1, 409-414.
2. John J. Collins, Bernard McGinn, and Stephen J. Stein. *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*. New York: Continuum, 1998, vii.
3. John J. Collins, *Apocalypticism in the Dead Sea Scrolls*. London: Routledge, 2002, 150.
4. Jon R. Kershner, *John Woolman and the Government of Christ: A Colonial Quaker’s Vision for the British Atlantic World*. Oxford: 2018, 11.
5. Phillips Moulton, *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman*, Oxford: 1971, 11.
6. Moulton, *Journal*, 12.
7. Moulton, *Journal*, 186.