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From its beginnings under founding editor Michael R. Weed, *Christian Studies* has sought to offer “Scholarship for the Church,” as stated in the journal’s motto since 2008. We are pleased with this volume to introduce to our readers two new Austin Graduate School of Theology faculty members, Keith Stanglin and Daniel Napier, and we look forward to their years of service to the church with us.

Christians in America face new challenges today. We are living in what David Bentley Hart has called a post-Christian world. Churches must consider how to adjust to new realities and a cultural environment that appears in some respects less hospitable to the open proclamation and practice of historic Christian faith, while in other respects offering unprecedented opportunities for authentic and powerful Christian witness. How do we communicate the gospel by word and deed to a culture that believes it has already heard and rejected it, but which may never have seen faith working through love? How do we foster authentic transformation into the image of Christ, both in ourselves and in others?

One vital function of scholarship for the church is to raise questions and promote discussion that allows churches to evaluate options for ministry and service. This aim ties together the essays on various topics contributed to this issue by AGST faculty and emeriti. Building on the analysis of Max Scheler, Michael Weed explores the phenomena of *ressentiment*, the toxic engagement of apostates with the traditions in which they were formed. Keith Stanglin asks what use followers of Thomas Campbell have for church history, and how those impressed by Campbell’s vision might need to refine the terms in which it was originally expressed. Jeffrey Peterson explores how the liturgical calendar of the ancient church might help Christians and churches live through the year in the power of the resurrected Christ. Daniel Napier considers how revivalist approaches to conversion may actually thwart true conformity to the image of Christ and reflects on what contemporary churches might learn from ancient catechetical practices. Mark Shipp discusses the challenges of appropriating especially difficult Psalms for use in the church of Jesus Christ. Allan McNicol offers a substantive review of a recent book

on the difficult question of eschatological violence and its implications for our understanding of God's nature.

While each author speaks for himself, the reader of this issue is invited to join the ongoing discussion—and the occasional charitable argument—pursued at the faculty lunch table. We offer this collection to our readers in hopes of spurring productive discussion toward the growth of faith, understanding, and discipleship.

Finally, some changes are coming soon to *Christian Studies*, and we want our readers to be a part. Please go, right now, to your computer, type **austingrad.edu/survey** in the browser window and take our *Reader Survey*! Make your wishes for the journal known!

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A Peaceable Hope: Contesting Violent Eschatology in New Testament Narratives

A Review Essay
Allan J. McNicol

And in so far as Matthew foresees vengeance on the part of God, the question that arises is whether violence might be ontologically constitutive of reality.¹

This question is typical of those which David Neville raises throughout this book. At base there is a key issue that may be framed in the following way: since several significant biblical texts depict God as expressing vengeance at the last judgment what does this say about his exact nature? In short, how do Christians understand whom we call God—or ultimate reality?

This challenging question could be framed within another, larger one: is there a yawning gap between counsel for believers to follow a nonviolent ethic and the retributive judgment exercised by the returning Son of Man? Throughout the gospel tradition Jesus' announcement of the coming of the kingdom is accompanied by the frequent word that his mission inaugurates, ultimately, a time of peace (Luke 2:14; 19:38; Matt 10:6–13). From the Sermon on the Mount to Rev 13:10 the New Testament is full of appeals for the disciples of Jesus to be humble, peaceful, and nonviolent. However, these same texts present Jesus settling accounts by showering retributive violence upon his enemies and the unfaithful at the end of the age (Matt 25:41, 46; 2 Thess 1:6–10; Rev 14:9–11; 19:11–21). If there is a gap between the ethic of nonviolence and retributive justice, what are the theological consequences?

¹ David J. Neville, *A Peaceable Hope: Contesting Violent Eschatology in New Testament Narratives* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 40.

Usually the ethic of nonviolence is grounded in Jesus' decision not to respond with physical resistance against those who sent him to the cross. Since we appeal to the representation of Jesus from the whole of Scripture, can we dismiss the biblical descriptions of eschatological retribution? As I write, this is the 150th anniversary of the battle of Gettysburg. Both sides of that tragic episode appealed to the God of Abraham and Jesus as a warrant for their belligerent actions that they claimed were designed to bring peace. Is there a biblical warrant for violence by Christians? Today, most preaching presents Jesus as an ambassador of good news, not grim news.² Is this a fair representation of the biblical tradition?

Neville's Analysis

Armed with this perceived discrepancy between prescribed human moral conduct and the perceived action of the Son of Man at the eschaton, Neville spends several hundred pages examining New Testament texts seeking an answer to his question. His analysis covers three areas: (1) Matthew and Mark; (2) Luke-Acts; (3) the Gospel of John and Revelation. Noticeably absent are the contributions of Paul and the writer to the Hebrews. Despite 2 Thessalonians Neville reads Paul as a preacher of promised divine rectification that triumphs in bringing peace to the human community. Of course, for Paul, there will be a final judgment (2 Cor 5:10); but the thrust of his gospel presumes that the Father of the Lord Jesus is a God of peace.³

In the main, Neville engages fairly with the biblical texts and significant secondary literature he chooses to discuss. The texts that prove most difficult for him theologically are Matthew and Revelation. Here he presents what he believes these texts are saying. One can always take issue with the particulars of any thorough analysis. Nevertheless, I was impressed with his attempt to be balanced and would commend this book as a fair reading of what many of these biblical texts say on this topic.

Theologically, Neville does not hide the fact that he regards the exercise of eschatological (i.e. end-time) violence as problematic with reference to his

² I am grateful to Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus of Nazareth: What He Wanted, Who He Was* (trans. Linda M. Maloney: Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2012), 153 for the catchy phrase.

³ Neville, *A Peaceable Hope*, 50–52.

own understanding of God. In one particular area this discrimen is helpful in his analysis as he embraces “Proto-Mark” as the earliest source on the life of Jesus. His source position gives him some leverage to develop his view that Jesus was the ambassador of peace. He concludes that Matthew’s hard sayings on eschatological vengeance, while attributed to Jesus, could be the work of an author or editor redacting the Markan text later.⁴ However, on the whole, Neville does not avoid engaging the difficulties raised by his position.

Neville’s reading of Paul, taken with his reading of Mark, suggests that there might be a center to the message of the New Testament. This center presents Jesus as announcing that the world was in the throes of an upheaval that would conclude by inaugurating a new era of peace. This is especially indicative of Mark’s Gospel, which is a word for the church on discipleship as believers await the end. Even such terrifying language as Mark 13:24–26, signifying the breakup of the cosmos, is viewed as a precursor of believers’ salvation rather than a sign of divine judgment.⁵ In view of this coming salvation, believers are urged to renounce pursuing status, instead exercising humility, as this ethic instantiates the essence of the powerful One (God) and the Savior whom we follow.⁶

Neville suggests that similar points can be made about Luke-Acts. This section was less satisfactory, in part due to the sharp edges (the consequences of the failure of many in Israel to believe and passages such as Acts 5:1–11 and 17:31) which were not given sufficient weight in the analysis. Nonetheless, numerous passages in Luke-Acts make the point that disciples of Jesus should not respond to rejection with retaliation (e.g., Luke 9:51–56);⁷ true Christian discipleship affirms the ultimate victory of peace.

⁴ It should be observed that even on the Two Source Hypothesis strong judgment sayings of Jesus appear in significant percentages throughout Q, Mark, and Matthew and Lukan special material. In short it is very difficult to separate it at any level from the received Jesus tradition.

⁵ Neville, *A Peaceable Hope*, 73.

⁶ Cf. Gerd Theissen, *A Theory of Primitive Christian Religion* (trans. John Bowden: London: SCM Press, 1999), 75–76.

⁷ Neville, *A Peaceable Hope*, 96–98.

Finally, Neville maintains that in John's Gospel the world's judgment occurs in and by the crucifixion of Jesus.⁸ Thus, essentially this judgment has already taken place; its significance as closure is seen as John 20 ends with three announcements of peace to Jesus' own (John 20:19, 21, 26). Thus, according to Neville, the in-breaking of eschatological peace is the central strand that runs throughout the New Testament.

Those Troubling Exceptions

Nonetheless, two particular documents of the New Testament remain troublesome: Matthew and Revelation. Neville states that there is little doubt Matthew took the position that God or His agents will ultimately indulge in retributive violence against the unrighteous on the last day.⁹ First, this is evident in the many references to *Gehenna* and with much of Matthew's characteristic language such as "weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth."

Most of the Matthean parables end in a judgment sequence. This is significant because Matt 13:34–35 states that Jesus tells parables "to proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world." Lamar Cope points out that this statement is followed in Matthew by the interpretation of the parables of the weeds among the wheat and the separation of the good from the bad fish in the parable of the net.¹⁰ In other words, this outcome is part of the order of the cosmos. Such parables were designed to reveal the secrets of the end-time to those who *see and understand*.

Thus Matthew makes it clear that his understanding of the Jesus tradition is that the *parousia* of the Son of Man will occasion the separation of the righteous from the unrighteous and the exercise of retributive violence on the unfaithful (Matt 21:43–22:14; 25:31–46). Neville acknowledges this point. This teaching bothers him.¹¹

⁸ Ibid., 196–197. Neville is arguing that John 16:33, the statement of victory, must be read in light of John 12:31–32.

⁹ Ibid., 38.

¹⁰ Lamar Cope, *Matthew: A Scribe Trained for the Kingdom of Heaven*, Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series 5 (Washington: CBA, 1976) 11–29.

¹¹ Commenting on the conclusion of the parable of forgiveness (Matt 18:34–35), he states, "Indeed, the image of Jesus' heavenly Father handing over unforgiving believers to torturers is obscene." David J. Neville, "Toward a Teleology of Peace:

Neville's analysis of Revelation moves in a somewhat different direction, placing considerable emphasis on the image of the triumphant Lamb. It is clearly the most prominent Christological theme in Revelation, occurring 28 times. Central to its usage is Rev 5:9–10, where the slain Lamb (Christ)—the model of the power of suffering love—becomes the victor through his death and resurrection and is reckoned worthy of worship.¹² Neville thinks that this is a master symbol of the book, taking precedence over other symbols (some violent). This symbol speaks the last word (Rev 22:1–3). Similarly, the rider on the white horse (Rev 19:11–21), although pictured as a warlike figure, also signifies the nonviolent power of suffering love. The warrior king triumphs by the power of the cross.¹³

This is one place where Neville's conclusion may be contested. Commencing at Rev 6:1 there are sections of this book that picture Rome (Babylon) as an idolatrous power, "drunk with the blood of the saints" (Rev 18:3, 24). Rome is marked out for a visitation of divine wrath which is pictured in Rev 16:17–18:28. This occurs when an Eastern king functions as an agent of divine wrath to bring Rome down. Many indicators within the text suggest that God, as in countless places in the Old Testament prophets, is active in history, working through retributive violence between the nations to fulfill his purposes. Likewise, in Rev 19:17–21, the text suggests that the earthly political powers who raised their fist against divine rule will also suffer eschatological violence.¹⁴

I initially noted Neville's concern regarding a perceived discrepancy between the prescribed nonviolent conduct demanded of disciples vis-à-vis the expectation of the eschatological vengeance of the Son of Man on the last day. Neville's analysis of the texts confirms these tensions are evident. His response is to resort to a form of *Sachkritik* (a version of interpretation giving preference to one witness of scripture in favor of another). He construes a "hermeneutics of consent" in favor of texts that advocate a theology of

Contesting Matthew's Violent Eschatology," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 30/2 [2007]: 147.

¹² Neville, *A Peaceable Hope*, 227–235.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 235–259.

¹⁴ Even Neville himself equivocates on his reading of Rev 19:11–21 as a metaphor for the triumph of the Lamb through a shalom-oriented gospel message. Cf. *Ibid.*, 252–253.

peace. The images of retributive violence are “deconstructed” along the lines of a hermeneutics of suspicion in favor of the functioning of a “wider story” of the emergence of eschatological peace as the core message of the Bible.¹⁵

Neville suggests that this wider story constitutes a theology of *shalom*. It is anchored in the creation account of Genesis 1–3, reaches a mid-point in John 1:1–18, and concludes with the new creation in Revelation.¹⁶ These passages form the center of a group of “Treasure texts” on nonviolence that provide a kind of “master trajectory” that trumps other perspectives for interpretation that emerge in the narrative.

Admittedly, this hermeneutical approach has the advantage of steering people of faith away from some difficult theological implications. If violence can only be vanquished by greater violence, has either been overcome? This is a good question.¹⁷ Thus we come back to the initial query about the present form of the biblical narrative: “Is violence ontologically constitutive of reality?” By raising these theological questions the book has real value. But an issue remains: is Neville’s reading of the biblical story a fair construal? Or, are there more compelling ways of reading these texts?

A Preliminary Assessment

Neville’s monograph is a far cry from the arid analysis that often characterizes technical New Testament scholarship. It raises important theological issues that need to be confronted by Christians inclined to reflection. My brief response focuses on the matter of divine retributive violence. Has Neville represented it correctly?

Here, I believe the argument is somewhat equivocal. Even after several hundred pages of analysis his position is that a clear tension exists in the biblical accounts. There is a discrepancy between the gospel accounts of the earthly Jesus that construe him as a messenger of peace and “expectations of end-time vengeance on the part of the returning Jesus.”¹⁸ In terms of the

¹⁵ Neville, “A Teleology of Peace,” 158.

¹⁶ Neville, *A Peaceable Hope*, 183–191.

¹⁷ Neville, “Teleology of Peace,” 179. He states on the same page, upon reading Matthew that “one is entitled to consider whether vindictive retribution is morally superior to love that seeks to emulate the (supposed) indiscriminate goodness of God.”

¹⁸ Neville, *A Peaceable Hope*, 247.

wider biblical metanarrative, both the elements of an orientation toward peace and the exercise of eschatological violence are present. One must decide theologically between the two. Neville's interpretation of Revelation suggests that war metaphors are reused or "rebirthed" in light of peaceful, suffering witness.¹⁹ Especially because of this interpretation, he argues that violence as divine action should be discounted.

Such a position can elicit considerable support. After all, even at the end of his life, Jesus speaks words of forgiveness while he suffers on the cross. Yet I do not believe this gets the thrust of the metanarrative of the Bible quite right.

As Neville, I accept that our understanding of the God of Abraham, Moses and Jesus is mediated through the biblical story. Thus the pursuit of a hermeneutics of suspicion that transmutes the texts on retributive violence into a different understanding of the action of the Holy One is disconcerting. There is too much here to deconstruct. After the victory at Exodus Yahweh is described as a "man of war" (Exodus 15:3). Under the Judges and Monarchy battles for the survival of Israel and Judah were thought to be carried out under the auspices of Yahweh. There is even a reference to a book of the 'wars of Yahweh' (Numbers 21:14). To be sure, the prophets are insightful discerners of history and often question whether Yahweh is on Israel's side (1Kings 22:1–36). But even here they spend considerable time speaking of future days of divine wrath and vengeance that Yahweh will visit upon his people for their sins as well as the nations (Hosea 4:1–8:14; Isaiah 61:2, 63:1–6). The accounts of the appearance of divine eschatological wrath in Matthew and Revelation are far from aberrations; they are part and parcel of the fabric of the biblical story.

It appears that those who deconstruct this feature of the biblical metanarrative come close to approaching the text with a degree of reckless randomness. In the end the biblical story links terminology of the Holy One as Judge and Vindicator together. He is both a God of peace and the dispenser of eschatological vengeance.

Usually, when we run into dead ends like this in construing theological issues it helps to frame the question in a different way. I would seek to do

¹⁹ Neville, *A Peaceable Hope*, 227.

that here. Throughout the biblical accounts God is pictured as the one who in his own time chooses to act on behalf of his own people. He may act to save his people by defeating their enemies—sometimes even through the machinations of other nations—or he may exercise retributive wrath in disciplining his people. The point is that God is active and works in history both to bless and punish. As these dynamics are operative in history the biblical metanarrative assumes that something similar will take place on the last day. This will be the time of the full verification of God’s justice and saving power.

The juxtaposition of God’s retributive wrath and saving power has posed a continual challenge to believers. I have always been struck by some observations of Gerhard Lohfink.²⁰ Speaking about the work of the prophet Hosea he observes that the bulk of the book is a series of oracles that describe God as so angry with his people that he demands a divorce. The people rightly deserve to bear his wrath and punishment. But, just when it appears they will be annihilated, divine wrath collapses into the announcement of a future transformed by love (Hosea 11:8–9). At the end of the threat of wrath there is a “nevertheless.” God’s fidelity to his people is absolute. They remain accountable, but in the end there are those who will play a part in the future order that will ultimately be set right.²¹ Construing reality in this way, I believe, comes closer to the heart of the biblical metanarrative.

Conclusion

I am grateful that David Neville has given attention to theological issues centering on the use of violence in scripture. Christians often dismiss the tension between the call of Jesus to “love our enemies” and the texts that speak of retributive judgment on the last day. We seldom pause to reflect that these different images of the first and second comings may mask some serious theological questions about how we understand the nature of God. Throughout this monograph this issue was never far from the surface. For me it is

²⁰ Gerhard Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church: Toward a Theology of the People of God* (trans. Linda M. Maloney; Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press 1999), 97–100.

²¹ Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church*, 100. He repeats almost the same point in *Jesus of Nazareth*, 163–165.

crystallized in the question, “Is it possible for peaceful ends to be realized by violent means?”²² A good question!

I have argued that the author’s response of utilizing a hermeneutics of suspicion to deconstruct violent eschatology eschews the biblical metanarrative. Yet, I understand the sentiments. Topics such as eschatological wrath have not traveled well in modernity. But if God is absolute truth, past injustices must be brought to light and dealt with in impeccable righteousness. Undoubtedly this means judgment—a judgment tempered by divine fidelity. Only then is God truly God. Perhaps we need to realize again that God takes sin seriously. It is so deeply embedded in this world that only divine action has the power to remove it. To me this is also the message of the biblical metanarrative.

In some ways this book skirts close to being compatible with the popular current movement claiming that the Bible anticipates a *telos* which ends up in universal salvation. Several years ago I addressed this wider issue in *Christian Studies*.²³ There are growing numbers of Christians who accept the position that the entire human community will ultimately attain redemption entirely on the grounds of God’s gracious nature. My critique is a reminder that such a position, while appealing, is far from a comprehensive reading of the biblical metanarrative. Divine justice, with its inseparable companion of judgment, properly construed, is an essential constituent of reality.

²²Neville, *A Peaceable Hope*, 218.

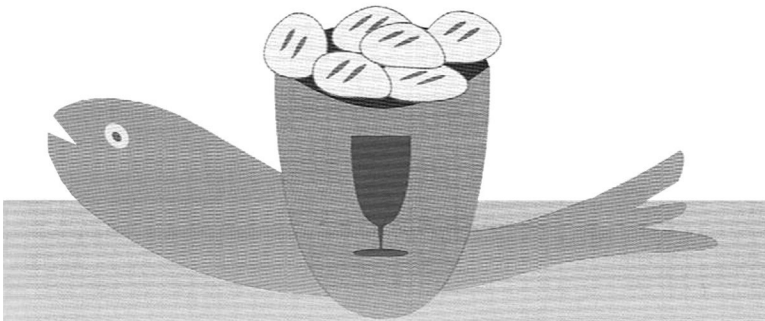
²³Allan J. McNicol “Universal Salvation and the Christian Story,” *Christian Studies* 22 (2007-2008): 37–56.

Allan J. McNicol

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