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Review of Barbara Thiering, "Jesus of the Apocalypse. The Life of Jesus after the Crucifixion"

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research, as well as of interesting suggestions and proposals concerning alternative understandings of the evidence, means that, in spite of any shortcomings, Schiffman's book will be one which scholars and students will certainly want to have on their shelves.

Durham, England  

James F. MCGRATH


This latest book by Dr. Barbara Thiering is certain to attract much attention. In it, she takes up her approach to the Gospels and the Dead Sea Scrolls in her controversial book, Jesus the Man, and applies it here to the Apocalypse of John. Her thesis, as in her earlier work, is that the pesher form of exegesis, found in many of the commentaries discovered at Qumran, actually provides the key to interpreting the New Testament (pp.ix-x). Whereas the simple believers in the early church, those who had an immature faith, needed miracle stories and supernatural tales, the mature, according to Dr. Thiering, knew the truth: that the Book of Revelation, like the four Gospels, is actually written in code, and those who are initiated into this special knowledge can understand these stories for what they are, a history of the intrigues, conflicts and other experiences of the earliest church. According to Thiering, the Book of Revelation is really about how Jesus and his sons led this revolutionary movement as it moved from Palestine and spread through the Roman empire.

Thiering’s monumental thesis is expounded in a massive volume of some 462 pages. Readers familiar with either the New Testament or early Judaism will be surprised to learn that Hillel was the leader of a Jewish mission to the diaspora, complete with the baptism of Jews into a ‘new Israel’, and as such was the first ‘pope’ (he apparently even sold indulgences!) (see pp. 8,36), and that the Sadducean high priests believed themselves to be God incarnate (pp. 10f). But such minor surprises are only to break the reader in and prepare him or her for what is to come, the revelation that Jesus survived the crucifixion, and that the reader can be initiated into Thiering’s secret knowledge and learn the truth about him and his earliest followers.

The initiate learns that the ‘Restoration’ mentioned in Acts 3 is a reference to the restoration of the Herod dynasty (which is what ‘all things’ stands for in the pesher, in case you did not know). And Armageddon “meant, to the initiated, ‘a sanctuary priest who is in the unclean place, the latrine’” (p. 93). Although to most people the Apocalypse represents a bizarre world of imagery from an ancient time, to those initiated by reading Thiering’s book, the work supposedly becomes a crystal clear history of the early church.

There is really only one thing that Thiering’s thesis lacks, but unfortunately for her that one thing is proof. The need for proof, and a substantial amount of it, is something which Dr. Thiering acknowledges in her introduction (p. xiv), but unfortunately fails to provide. The book actually contains a detailed glossary of the deeper meanings of the words used in the Apocalypse (pp. 201-304), after which the reader is given a detailed pesher of the Apocalypse (pp. 305-411), where the reader will find the text of this NT document given in small snippets, each followed by an explanation of its true meaning. One thing which can be said with some certainty is that Dr. Thiering learned about exegesis from Qumran. However, at Qumran they found actual pesher commentaries for a number of books from the Hebrew Bible, whereas the only copy of the pesher of the Revelation of St. John is found in the last part of Thiering’s book, and is acknowledged as her own composition. What this commentary in fact represents is the document which Thiering would have to find in order to prove her case. As it stands, scholars of both the New Testament and early Judaism will find themselves compelled to reject Thiering’s thesis, not because she is bringing to light new and controversial insights which challenge the way people think about Jesus and early Christianity, but because she is reading things into these ancient texts without any evidential basis whatsoever. Not that Thiering is wrong to suggest that the Apocalypse itself suggests a symbolic reading (pp. xii-xiii); but as most scholars would agree, proposed interpretations of the sym-
bolts should be those suggested by the text itself, and not those formed in the imagination of the interpreter and then imposed on the text.

The introduction to this latest book by Thiering appears to give the key to understanding why she feels compelled to engage in this sort of exegesis. Her desire is to 'find' a Christianity suitable for modern man, devoid of mythology and the supernatural (pp. ix-xi). The pesher technique used at Qumran was, in her view, an attempt "to wrestle with the unbelievable parts of the Old testament" (p. x). Her whole book may thus be described as a complicated attempt at demythologization. By taking what is simply a more sophisticated version of the traditional allegorical method, she can with a simple snap of her fingers make all those inconvenient traditional tenets of the Christian faith disappear. Something tells me that Bultmann's honesty, recognizing that myth is present in the Bible and seeking to interpret it, will prove to be of greater lasting value than this attempt to pretend that the ancient authors of the New Testament were like sophisticated, modern intellectuals, and only used the language of myth and miracle in their code in order to provide some milk for the spiritually immature.

Thus, when all is said and done, it is doubtful that Dr. Thiering's work, despite its detail, will prove of lasting interest to those seriously concerned with understanding either the Dead Sea Scrolls or the New Testament. One can only hope that Thiering will soon begin to devote her erudition and concern for detail to works which are less speculative and more honest with the evidence available. But who knows, perhaps the pesher to Revelation is out there somewhere, waiting to be found, in which case Dr. Thiering would perhaps be wise to begin devoting more of her time to archaeology.

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It is worth recalling the book at a moment when the Qumran Cave 4 fragments of the Damascus Document (4Q266-273) are for first time officially presented to scholars as volume XVIII of the 'Discoveries in the Judaean Desert' series (by Joseph B. Baumgarten on the basis of transcriptions by J. T. Milik). The Damascus Document has held the attention of students of ancient Judaism since 1910. Originally discovered in the Cairo Genizah, it was published by Solomon Schechter and extensively studied and interpreted by L. Ginsberg in 1922 and Ch. Rabin in 1954. The facsimile of the text was published only once, by S. Zeitlin in 1952. A summary of the literature on the texts of CD was presented by Father J. Fitzmyer on the occasion of republication of Schechter's book in 1970. Now we have received an up-to-date version of the CD texts based on photographs in both ordinary and ultra-violent light supplied by the Cambridge University Library Photography Department.

The volume contains Prof. E. Q i m r o n 's presentation of 'The Text of CDC' (pp. 9-49). He has 'retained Schechter's page numbers but adopted the sequence proposed by J. T. Milik, who ordered the pages of the medieval manuscript according to what was suggested by the finds of Cave 4 at Qumran' (p. 6). We thus get the pages of the text in this sequence: nos. 1-8, 19-20, 15, 16, 9-14. The presentation of the transcribed text is clear and enriched by critical apparatus, in confrontation with the 4Q fragments. As established by Father Fitzmyer, about 160 emendations of the text have been proposed in the last eighty years. These, too, were taken into consideration in Prof. E. Qimron's edition.

In the second contribution to the volume Joseph M. B a u m g a r t e n describes 'The Laws of the Damascus Document in the Current Research' (pp. 51-62). Preliminary results of Baumgarten's research on the CD fragments from Cave 4 are included.