THE RELEVANCE OF THE BIBLICAL VISIONS
OF THE END TIME

Hermeneutical Guidelines to the Apocalyptic Literature

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I. Two Traditions of Interpretation

The Biblical visions and descriptions of the last period of history have always caused difficulties for the church. Sometimes the problems have been solved by neglect of these Biblical texts or by a very selective use and interpretation. In other cases, the texts are interpreted just as much out of fantasy as out of Biblical foundation. The texts have been read directly into concrete situations causing great disturbance in the congregations. When the end did not come as predicted, there has followed a period of severe spiritual crisis. Much of the applications of the Biblical visions of the end time has been a history of disappointment.

We can observe this dilemma already in the Bible itself. On the one hand we find concrete descriptions of the end time, and the command to watch the signs of history and nature (Matt 24:32-35). On the other hand there are clear statements that no one knows the "day and hour" (Matt 24:36), and strict warnings "not to be confused in our thinking or upset by the claim that the Day of the Lord has come" (2 Thess 2:2).

The visions of the end time are critically analyzed in more recent theology. But the basic approaches differ considerably. Let us take two extremes:

1. There is a clear tendency in some Biblical interpretation influenced by a fundamentalist theology to lift the texts out of their historical context and to use our time as the key to interpret them.

2. There is a clear tendency in some Biblical interpretation influenced by historical critical research to let the texts remain in their historical context without any attempt to ask about their relevance today.
If one goes to scholarly research, one will find a much more detailed division of hermeneutical approaches. The discussion has mostly focused upon the Revelation of John. At least, we can separate between five basically different ways of reading the book of Revelation:

1. **The contemporary-historical**
   
   The actual historical situation of the author gives the key to understand the book. The task of the interpreter is primarily to find the historical references in Revelation. When these are found, the book of Revelation is explained.

2. **The tradition-historical**
   
   The key to understanding Revelation lies in the background of the material. Revelation does not contain so many allusions to the historical situation, it is more a collection of old motifs found in Greek or Oriental myths, and in the Jewish tradition. If one knows the kind of language used in these traditions, one is able to interpret Revelation.

3. **The historicist**
   
   Revelation has to be read in the light of the succeeding history. It gives a survey of the whole historical development from the time of the author up to the time of the interpreter. The task of the interpreter is to trace the concrete events in history that fulfilled the predictions of the book of Revelation.

4. **The eschatological**
   
   Revelation refers to the end time. It gives a detailed description of the last period of history. The task of the interpreter is both to find the inner logic in the future events and to see whether there are any signs now that the end is near.

5. **The timeless symbolical**
   
   We cannot evaluate Revelation in its relation to history. Its value is how it deals with principles that are not linked