EDITORIAL

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THE REVD DR STEPHEN R HOLMES is Lecturer in Christian Doctrine at King's College, London, and a member of the leadership team of Ashford (Middlesex) Baptist Church. He has been a part of the editorial team of *The Bible in TransMission* for the last three years.

IN MY TEENAGE YEARS APOCALYPTIC VISIONS WERE COMMON ENOUGH. THE THREAT OF NUCLEAR WAR BETWEEN WEST AND EAST SEEMED REAL AND PRESSING, AND FILMMAKERS DID THEIR BEST TO PORTRAY THE EFFECTS OF SUCH A CONFLICT. Then, eleven years ago, Francis Fukuyama confidently announced the "end of history".[1] Liberal democratic politics and capitalist free-market economics had vanquished the only serious opposition, the Communist bloc, and from now on nothing interesting would happen in world affairs. No more need for war or revolution, just increasing prosperity and increasing consumption ever onward into the comfortable, if boring, twilight years of the human race. Four years ago, as the millennium approached, apocalyptic speculation came back into fashion, briefly: enough Christians believed that Christ was about to return in Israel that there were puzzled, and slightly mocking, news reports concerning the number of one-way tickets sold from American cities to Tel Aviv; the reporting of the "millennium bug" took the threat of silicon apocalypse more seriously, although it turned out to be just as false an expectation.

Two years ago, confident Islam – the great gap in Fukuyama's analysis – forced itself, in its most extreme form, into the consciousness of even the most comfortable and prosperous Western consumers: truly apocalyptic images of airliners turned into missiles were televised throughout the world, and the one remaining political/military/economic superpower on earth declared war in response. This year, the war on terrorism flared up once more, this time in Iraq, with apocalyptic language ("shock and awe"; "axis of evil") and images once again filling our screens. As recently as September, we saw pictures of a mock gas attack on parts of London that I know well; it involved tube stations that members of my church travel through on a daily basis. Suddenly, apocalyptic threats seem real again.

Andy Reed's article surveys some of the many reasons why Fukuyama's analysis proved so inadequate. Injustice, oppression and greed remain, and so people will fight to gain freedom, or just wealth and power. Nicholas Boyle addresses one key issue, globalisation, and gives a powerful defence against the common criticisms of this position, reminding us that these issues are complex, and that we should hold our opinions humbly, conscious that there are other positions possible, even for Christians. Robert Jewett and John Lawrence discuss the use of deliberately religious and apocalyptic imagery within American politics. They trace the roots of such imagery and highlight some of the problems it poses.

As Christians, it is tempting to despair when faced with such horrors, and to withdraw from the common life of the communities in which we live into an otherworldly piety, focusing on the sure hope of heavenly joys to come as a way of coping with the uncertainties of the present age. Ian Paul begins his consideration of the Book of Revelation by describing a community that had done precisely this. The original apocalyptic literature, which flourished amongst the Jewish people in the centuries before the coming of Christ, grew out of a very similar situation. When empire after empire used the Promised Land as a small chip in a diplomatic poker game, or a highway to march armies through, or a convenient place to fight each other, the old hopes and promises of a descendant of David reigning from Jerusalem seemed increasingly distant, and writers began to make sense of the events of world history by mapping them onto a heavenly war, between the powers of evil and the angels of God.

Generally, the fully apocalyptic books that were written around this time are not in the Old Testament canon (although one or two, like 2 Esdras, are in the disputed books recognised as canonical by Roman Catholics), but there are parts of the earlier books which seem to be moving towards the form as it later developed: Zechariah, parts of Daniel, Isaiah 24–27, bits of Ezekiel, etc. There are passages within New Testament books that are clearly influenced by apocalyptic traditions: Mark 13 (and parallels) and 2 Thessalonians 2 are the most obvious. In Revelation, however, we have one full-blown apocalyptic work included in the canon (although it modifies, and even subverts, the form in important ways, and there are some more complicated things to be said about the genre – again, see Ian Paul's article).

There are surprising relationships between how the use of apocalyptic language by the media in Britain today and what was going on in the original "apocalyptic" literature. For instance, the sense that the destiny of the Holy Land was key to the working out of apocalyptic scenarios has echoes across the ages. Colin Chapman is an experienced and respected Christian voice on the current difficulties in that land, and we are pleased he has been willing to give us a distillation of his wisdom. Not every Christian will agree with his particular analysis, but it is worthy of careful consideration. Andrew White writes powerfully of his personal

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1. F Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Hamish Hamilton/Penguin, 1992).

involvement in the struggle for understanding and peace, and offers a more general vision of how religion, so often identified as a source of conflict, can be instrumental in conflict resolution also, offering a useful counterbalance to the arguments in Robert Jewett and John Lawrence's contribution.

Again, the images of cataclysmic events and decisive world wars that the original apocalyptic books portrayed are at the heart of the meaning of "apocalyptic" language now. As Christopher Rowland points out, however, that is not the heart of what the original literature was about. "Apocalypse" means "revelation" or "unveiling", and apocalyptic literature looks behind the "wars and rumours of wars" to see the coming of God's kingdom on the earth. To pray as Jesus instructed his disciples, "Your kingdom come", is to pray that there may indeed be "apocalypse now", the unravelling of all the half-truths, distortions and confusions, and the revelation of the goodness and grace of God in the face of his Son. Until the Father is pleased to answer that prayer, however, we must continue to struggle with the messiness and evil of a violent and unjust world, and understand it enough to be faithful followers of, and witnesses to, Jesus in the middle of it. We hope and pray that this issue of *The Bible in TransMission* might aid Christian leaders committed to that work.

This is the last issue of *The Bible in TransMission* to bear the marks of the passion, vision and careful guidance of the Revd Dr Colin Greene. Although Colin left Bible Society for his new post at Seattle Pacific University some weeks before we went to press, he had been involved in the early discussions on how the theme might be approached and who might help us in that. When I meet church leaders around the country, many tell me of how much they value this magazine; much of that is down to Colin, who constantly had a sense of the issues that might scratch where ministers and priests were itching, and of creative, fresh and interesting ways of dealing with those issues. As an editorial team, we will miss him greatly. We are very pleased to report, however, that Colin will not be totally absent from these pages. He has agreed to write a semi-regular "Letter from America". Conscious of just how much of British church life is influenced by what goes on across the Atlantic, we have regularly featured American authors in *The Bible in TransMission*, and we look forward to publishing Colin's correspondence from Seattle. No doubt he will present the issues with his characteristic insight and vigour!